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FRAMING YOUTH SUICIDE IN A MULTI-MEDIATED WORLD

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BRIDGEND PROBLEM IN THE BRITISH NATIONAL PRESS

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PhD Thesis

CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

2015



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p15, Fig 1.1
p16, Fig 1.2
p17, Fig 1.3
p18, Fig 1.4
p90, Fig 4.1
p91, Fig 4.2
p94, Table 4.C
p95, Fig 4.4
p97, Fig 4.5
p97, Fig 4.6
p98, Fig 4.7
p99, Fig 4.8
p101, Fig 4.9
p103, Fig 4.10
p109, Fig 5.4
p111, Fig 5.5
p113, Fig 5.6
p116, Fig 5.7
p117, Fig 5.8
p125, Fig 5.10
p140, Fig 6.5
p140, Fig 6.6
p141, Fig 6.7
p142, Fig 6.8
p143, Fig 6.9
p159, Fig 6.15
p162, Fig 6.16
p166, Fig 6.18
p167, Fig 6.19
p174, Fig 7.4
p174, Fig 7.5
p175, Fig 7.6
p178, Fig 7.8
p179, Fig 7.9
p180, Fig 7.10
p184, Fig 7.11
p186, Fig 7.12
p186, Fig 7.13
p186, Fig 7.14
p201, Fig 7.22

p214, Fig 8.8
p216, Fig 8.9
p253, Fig 9.5
p258, Fig 9.6

Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures	5
Acknowledgements	9
Abstract	10
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction: The Bridgend suicide phenomenon of 2008 or how to raise new concern over an old condition	11
Introduction	11
1. Bridgend as a case study of suicide reporting.....	11
2. Setting the scene.....	15
3. Bridgend's youth suicide rate	16
4. Research question and aims of the thesis.....	18
5. Outline of the thesis' structure.....	20
CHAPTER TWO: Making sense of suicide in a multi-mediated world	23
Introduction	23
SECTION A	24
Understanding suicide: a personal or social affair?	24
1. Suicide as a product of psychological pain.....	24
2. Durkheim's sociological approach and the limitations of official suicide statistics.....	25
3. Imitation	27
4. The Internet and suicidal behaviour	31
5. Deprivation and the strains of modern existence.....	34
SECTION B	38
Assessing the media's role in the social problems game	38
1. A constructionist approach	38
2. Problem framing	38
3. Constructing a powerful news story/Constructing a social problem.....	42
A. A rhetorical exercise.....	42
B. The media as active constructors of social problems	48
4. Media constructions of the suicide problem.....	53
Conclusion.....	57
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology	59
Introduction	59
1. A case study design.....	59
2. Data collection and analysis.....	63
A. Collection of Bridgend-related news reports	63
B. A qualitative content analysis with quantitative components.....	69

C. Contextualising the Bridgend phenomenon.....	76
C. I. In-depth interviews	77
C. II. Consultation of statistical and policy reports	80
D. Research ethics: the road from commitment to fulfillment	81
Conclusion.....	84
CHAPTER FOUR: The road to national news prominence and the newsworthiness of the Bridgend story.....	86
Introduction	86
1. Searching for the roots of the national press' interest in Bridgend	87
A. Bridgend suicides in the national press before January 23, 2008.....	87
B. Bridgend suicides in the local press before January 23, 2008.....	88
B. I. A Wales-wide problem	88
B. II. A Bridgend problem?.....	89
2. The transition from local to national news	92
3. Newsworthiness of the overall Bridgend narrative	99
Conclusion.....	104
CHAPTER FIVE: The Internet suicide cult?	106
Introduction	106
1. Considering the potency of the 'Internet Suicide' frame in the wake of Natasha Randall's death	107
2. Suicide as a means to virtual immortality?	111
3. The <i>Mail</i> coverage and the subsequent inferential structure.....	114
4. Internet suicide as a form of cyber-deviance.....	117
5. The risk of suicide websites.....	119
A. 'They DO encourage hangings'	119
B. The <i>Telegraph's</i> moral crusade against suicide 'ghouls'	124
6. The Internet as an inherently deviant and 'corrupting' medium.....	127
7. Rebuttals, causal uncertainty and alternative frames	133
Conclusion.....	137
CHAPTER SIX: A suicide epidemic?.....	139
Introduction	139
1. The quest for deadly links.....	140
2. The dominance of the 'Suicide Contagion' frame and its overlap with 'Internet Suicide'	146
3. The 'copycat' and 'contagion' effects.....	147
A. Definitions and 'Copycat' sub-frame dominance over 'Contagion'	147
B. Transition from 'Copycat' to 'Contagion'	151
4. The Bridgend suicides as a result of irresponsible media reporting.....	154

A. The first concerns over the role of the media in the Bridgend case	154
B. '[The link] is you, the media': the 'Media Responsibility' debate expanded	157
C. Sensitive suicide reporting as perceived in the aftermath of the Bridgend experience	162
C. I. 'Excessive detail' and the role of the PCC	162
C. II. Visual sensationalism.....	165
C. III. A media panic?.....	168
5. Cultures of death	169
Conclusion.....	171
CHAPTER SEVEN: A product of Breakdown Britain?	173
Introduction	173
1. From 'Suicide Contagion' to 'Breakdown Britain': revisiting the 'suicide town' image.....	174
2. Deprivation and the strain on Bridgend youth	180
3. Suicide as a form of sensation seeking	183
4. Assessing the validity of the 'Local Deprivation' sub-frame	186
A. An average British town?.....	186
B. Bridgend of the press vs. Bridgend of statistics.....	189
5. From Bridgend to the Bridgend generation.....	194
A. The 'Social Breakdown' sub-frame.....	194
B. Pursuing the cultural goal of instant fame at all costs.....	196
C. Product of a 'sickening' modern reality.....	198
C. I. Decline of traditional institutions	199
C. II. Educational failure and materialism.....	200
C. III. Permissiveness and the failure of the welfare state.....	201
Conclusion.....	203
CHAPTER EIGHT: A mental health issue?	205
Introduction	205
1. Emotional vulnerability of youth: 'Mental Health' as a super-frame.....	207
2. From 'Emotional Vulnerability' to 'Mental Illness': 'Mental Health' as a determinant of the story's newsworthiness	212
3. Identifying and supporting distressed individuals: the prominence of 'Mental Health' in suicide prevention.....	217
4. Institutional failure.....	221
A. Mental health system deficiencies	223
B. A political failure?	225
Conclusion.....	230
CHAPTER NINE: Bridgend and beyond	234
Introduction	233

1. The press construction of the Bridgend suicides as a social problem.....	234
2. Policy responses to the Bridgend problem	244
A. ‘Talk to me’	244
B. Bridgend and future suicide reporting: an example to avoid?	246
C. Tackling the risk of Internet suicide in the post-Bridgend era.....	252
3. Lessons learnt? The long-term significance of the Bridgend case	254
4. Thesis limitations and suggestions for future research	264
Concluding remarks	265
APPENDICES.....	267
APPENDIX I: Identification system and list of sample articles	268
APPENDIX II: Protocol used for sample article analysis.....	281
APPENDIX III: Spreadsheets	284
APPENDIX IV: The road from local to national news and the formation of the Bridgend narrative.....	286
APPENDIX V: The presence of the four main frames in the post-2008 national Bridgend coverage.....	289
A. Internet Suicide (IS)	289
B. Suicide Contagion (SC)	292
C. Breakdown Britain (BB).....	295
D. Mental Health (MH)	298
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	301

List of Tables and Figures

CHAPTER ONE

Figure 1.1	Bridgend's geographical location in relation to Wales, England and the UK	15
Figure 1.2	Bridgend in relation to the other County boroughs of Wales	16
Figure 1.3	Suicides among males aged 15-24	17
Figure 1.4	Average annual rate of suicides and undetermined deaths per 100,000 population in UK & ROI 1999-2008	18

CHAPTER THREE

Figure 3.1	The stages based on which Bridgend-related press reports were collected and analysed	63
Table 3.A	National newspapers sample formation	66
Table 3.B	Composition of final newspaper sample	68

CHAPTER FOUR

Table 4.A	See Appendix IV	
Table 4.B	See Appendix IV	
Figure 4.1	<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 17, 2008: 1	90
Figure 4.2	<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 17, 2008: 6-7	91
Figure 4.3	The growing national press interest in the Bridgend suicides	93
Table 4.C	Visual prominence of Natasha Randall in original Bridgend-related reports as opposed to that of previous suicide victims	94
Figure 4.4	Natasha Randall pictured in a low-cut top alongside Liam Clarke	95
Figure 4.5	<i>Daily Express</i> , January 23, 2008: 11	97
Figure 4.6	<i>The Times</i> , January 23, 2008: 13	97
Figure 4.7	<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 23, 2008: 4-5	98
Figure 4.8	<i>The Sun</i> , January 23, 2008: 9	99
Table 4.D	See Appendix IV	
Figure 4.9	<i>The Sun</i> , February 20, 2008: 1	101
Figure 4.10	<i>Daily Express</i> , February 17, 2008: 15	103

CHAPTER FIVE

Figure 5.1	Main frame 1: Internet Suicide (IS)	105
Figure 5.2	See Appendix V	
Table 5.A	See Appendix V	
Figure 5.3	See Appendix V	
Table 5.B	The prominence of the IS frame in the original Bridgend-related news reports	108
Figure 5.4	<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 23, 2008: 1	109
Figure 5.5	<i>The Times</i> , January 24, 2008: 11	111
Figure 5.6	<i>Daily Express</i> , February 22, 2008: 33	113
Table 5.C	Negotiating the level of Internet responsibility: from 'Virtual Immortality' to 'Internet Suicide'	115
Figure 5.7	<i>The Times</i> , February 9, 2008: 24	116
Figure 5.8	<i>The Times</i> , February 21, 2008: 31	117
Figure 5.9	Signification spiral indicating the transition between different points of concern in the context of the constructed IS frame	119
Table 5.D	Bridgend-related articles in which the 'Suicide Websites' sub-frame is most prominent	121
Figure 5.10	<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , February 17, 2008: 1, 8	125
Table 5.E	Bridgend as evidence of a wider Internet problem?	128
Table 5.F	Bridgend-related articles in which the IS frame is rebutted	134

CHAPTER SIX

Figure 6.1	Main frame 2: Suicide Contagion (SC)	138
Figure 6.2	See Appendix V	
Figure 6.3	See Appendix V	

Table 6.A	See Appendix V	
Figure 6.4	See Appendix V	
Figure 6.5	<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 21, 2008: 14	140
Figure 6.6	<i>News of the World</i> , March 2, 2008: 26	140
Figure 6.7	<i>The Sunday Times</i> magazine, May 25, 2008: 46-47	141
Figure 6.8	<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 20, 2008: 4-5	142
Figure 6.9	<i>The Independent</i> , January 24, 2008: 24	143
Figure 6.10	Graph illustrating the alleged connections between all the Bridgend victims of the 2007-2009 period (Newmark, 2010)	144
Figure 6.11	The presence of the 'Copycat' sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles	149
Figure 6.12	The presence of the 'Contagion' sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles	149
Table 6.B	First appearance of the 'Copycat' and 'Contagion' sub-frames	152
Figure 6.13	The presence of the 'Media Responsibility' sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles	155
Table 6.C	First appearance of the 'Media Responsibility' sub-frame	155
Figure 6.14	The concern over media responsibility before and after the press conference of February 19, 2008	158
Figure 6.15	Assistant Chief Constable David Morris openly blaming the media during the press conference at South Wales police headquarters on February 19, 2008	159
Figure 6.16	<i>The Observer Review</i> , March 1, 2009: 8	162
Figure 6.17	Bridgend suicides between 2005 and 2010	164
Figure 6.18	<i>Daily Express</i> , February 16, 2008: 5	166
Figure 6.19	<i>The Sunday Times</i> magazine, May 25, 2008: 44-45	167
Table 6.D	The presence of the 'Cultures of Death' sub-frame in the entire Bridgend coverage	170
CHAPTER SEVEN		
Figure 7.1	Main frame 3: Breakdown Britain (BB)	172
Figure 7.2	See Appendix V	
Table 7.A	See Appendix V	
Figure 7.3	See Appendix V	
Figure 7.4	<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 23, 2008: 19	174
Figure 7.5	<i>Daily Express</i> , February 6, 2008: 1	174
Figure 7.6	<i>The Sun</i> , February 20, 2008: 4-5	175
Table 7.B	First appearance of the 'Local Deprivation' sub-frame	176
Table 7.C	Sample articles in which 'Local Deprivation' is most prominent	177
Figure 7.7	The presence of the 'Local Deprivation' sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles	177
Figure 7.8	<i>The Guardian</i> , January 26, 2008: 9	178
Figure 7.9	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 23, 2008: 23	179
Figure 7.10	<i>The Times</i> , January 25, 2008: 4	180
Figure 7.11	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 24, 2008: 20	184
Figure 7.12	<i>The Observer</i> , March 1, 2009: 6-7	186
Figure 7.13	<i>The Observer</i> , March 1, 2009: 6	186
Figure 7.14	<i>The Observer</i> , March 1, 2009: 6	186
Figure 7.15	Overall Index of Multiple Deprivation: Bridgend	190
Figure 7.16	Bridgend's annual unemployment rate in comparison to the Welsh and the UK average	191
Figure 7.17	Bridgend's workless households rate for 16 to 64-year-olds in comparison to the Welsh and the UK average	191
Figure 7.18	Bridgend's monthly claimant count rate in comparison to the Welsh and the UK average	191
Figure 7.19	Bridgend's annual out-of-work benefit claimants rate in comparison	192

	to the Welsh average	
Figure 7.20	Distribution of incidents and crimes across Bridgend's town centre	193
Table 7.D	First appearance of the 'Social Breakdown' sub-frame	195
Figure 7.21	The presence of the 'Social Breakdown' sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles	195
Table 7.E	Sample articles in which 'Social Breakdown' is most prominent	196
Figure 7.22	<i>Daily Mirror</i> , March 1, 2008: 21	201
CHAPTER EIGHT		
Figure 8.1	Main frame 4: Mental Health (MH)	204
Figure 8.2	See Appendix V	
Table 8.A	See Appendix V	
Figure 8.3	See Appendix V	
Figure 8.4	'Mental Health' frame breakdown	206
Figure 8.5	The prominence of the 'Mental Health: Emotional Vulnerability' super-frame in the entirety of the sample newspapers	207
Figure 8.6	'Mental Health: Emotional Vulnerability' super-frame	208
Table 8.B	First appearance of the 'Mental Illness' sub-frame	212
Figure 8.7	The prominence of the 'Mental Illness' sub-frame in the entirety of the sample newspapers	213
Figure 8.8	Assessing the newsworthiness of Bridgend's female victims	214
Figure 8.9	<i>Sunday Express</i> , June 22, 2008: 1	216
Table 8.C	First appearance of the 'Institutional Failure' sub-frame	222
Figure 8.10	The presence of the 'Institutional Failure' sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles	222
Figure 8.11	The highest male suicide rates by Government Office Region and local authority in Wales, 2000-2003	228
CHAPTER NINE		
Figure 9.1	The Bridgend suicide problem as framed in the national British press and the main policy responses to it	232
Figure 9.2	'Talk to Me': The National Action Plan to Reduce Suicide and Self-Harm in Wales	244
Figure 9.3	The Editors' Codebook: The handbook to the Editors' Code of Practice	248
Figure 9.4	Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the Byron Review	253
Figure 9.5	<i>The Sun</i> , September 18, 2008: 4	253
Figure 9.6	<i>People</i> magazine, May 14, 2012: 76-77	258
APPENDIX I		
Table I.A	Identification system	268
Table I.B	Newspaper articles analysed for the purposes of the current thesis	269
APPENDIX II		
Table II.A	Protocol template	281
APPENDIX III		
Figure III.1	'Primary frame' spreadsheet	284
Figure III.2	'Present frames' spreadsheet	285
APPENDIX IV		
Table 4.A	Bridgend-related suicides in the national press before January 2008	286
Table 4.B	Regional press and the transition of focus from a Wales-wide to a Bridgend problem	287
Table 4.D	The Bridgend narrative as formed by the national press between January 23, 2008 and December 31, 2009	288
APPENDIX V		
Figure 5.2	The presence of the 'Internet Suicide' frame in the entirety of the sample newspapers	289
Table 5.A	The presence of the 'Internet Suicide' frame in the Bridgend	290

	coverage by newspaper and month of interest	
Figure 5.3	The presence of the 'Internet Suicide' frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest	291
Figure 6.2	The presence of the 'Suicide Contagion' frame in the entirety of the sample articles	292
Figure 6.3	'Suicide Contagion' as the dominant frame in the entire Bridgend coverage	292
Table 6.A	The presence of the 'Suicide Contagion' frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest	293
Figure 6.4	The presence of the 'Suicide Contagion' frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest	294
Figure 7.2	The presence of the 'Breakdown Britain' frame in the entirety of the sample articles	295
Table 7.A	The presence of the 'Breakdown Britain' frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest	296
Figure 7.3	The presence of the 'Breakdown Britain' frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest	297
Figure 8.2	The presence of the 'Mental Health' frame in the entirety of the sample articles	298
Table 8.A	The presence of the 'Mental Health' frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest	299
Figure 8.3	The presence of the 'Mental Health' frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest	300

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Abstract

This thesis is a case study of suicide reporting which investigates the contribution of the British national press to the construction of the Bridgend problem. It aims to provide an insight into journalists' role in the 'social problems game' by assessing the level to which their post-2008 extensive Bridgend coverage rose concern over the issue and compelled an official response to it. To this end, the content of 451 relevant news reports was qualitatively analysed and in-depth interviews with 13 key claims-makers were conducted.

The thesis documents the evolution of the Bridgend problem over time. The elements that added to the newsworthiness of the story and resulted in its transition from the local to the national press are identified and closely examined. The analysis of the national news coverage reveals the central role of 'causality' and 'morality' in the Bridgend narrative as well as four main frames through which the local suicide problem has been made sense of: 'Internet Suicide' raises questions about online memorials glamorising suicide, pro-suicide websites and the 'dark side' of the Internet in general. 'Suicide Contagion' considers the risk of imitative suicides posed by new or traditional media. 'Breakdown Britain' attributes the Bridgend phenomenon to local deprivation and a deeper social malaise. Finally, 'Mental Health' underlines the emotional vulnerability of young people, the stigmatisation of mental illness and the deficiencies in mental health care.

Underlining the status of the Bridgend case as a point of reference, the final part of this project assesses its aftermath in terms of the immediate policy responses to it and its long-term implications. It is argued that, despite its commercial and ideological exploitation, the Bridgend situation has, even if belatedly, brought attention to the alarmingly high occurrence of youth suicides in the area, while highlighting the importance of responsible suicide coverage. The thesis concludes by suggesting that the links between suicide reporting, awareness and prevention need to be strengthened and considers the means through which this goal could be attained in the post-Leveson era.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The Bridgend suicide phenomenon of 2008 or how to raise new concern over an old condition

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of the Bridgend suicide phenomenon and lay the foundations of the research conducted for this thesis. I will, first of all, justify the selection of Bridgend as a case study of suicide reporting. I will then set the scene of the subject matter under study by providing contextual information on the social, political and economic status of the wider Bridgend area over time. Moreover, I will examine the frequency of local suicide incidents based on official statistics and in the light of the 2008 events. Building on the premise that the press played a key role in the construction of these events as a problem, I will document the research question employed to assess its level and nature of involvement in the case as well as the specific aim and objectives of the current project. The chapter will conclude with an outline of the thesis' structure.

1. Bridgend as a case study of suicide reporting

This thesis will offer an in-depth analysis of the ethical parameters of suicide reporting and the role of the press in the construction of suicide as a social problem by looking at the news coverage of the Bridgend suicides of 2008. In late January 2008, the apparent suicides of seven young people from Bridgend, South Wales, attracted national news attention. The relevant news reports examined the possibility that these unexpected deaths were somehow linked, namely that they were the result of a copycat effect or even an Internet suicide cult (de Bruxelles and Malvern, *The Times*, 2008; Salkeld and Koster, *Daily Mail*, 2008). The story remained in the news for several months since the number of youngsters inexplicably found dead in the Bridgend area kept increasing and every new death revived journalists' interest in the matter (Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, 2009). In February 2008 and whilst both officials and media professionals were trying to determine what the cause of the local suicides was, the South Wales police organised a press conference in which they accused the media of aggravating the problem through their excessive and sensational reporting (Laurance, *The Independent*, 2008). This and other similar concerns about the role of the media in the Bridgend case that were subsequently expressed by some of the victims' parents, the local MP, suicide prevention charities or the Press Complaints Commission started a wider debate on the coverage of sensitive

issues like youth suicide and media ethics in general (Hughes, *The Independent*, 2008a; Papyrus, 2008; Williams, *The Independent on Sunday*, 2008a; PCC, 2009). In response to these accusations, some journalists defended their articles by arguing that they had approached the Bridgend issue sensitively and that the severity of the excessive media attention had been absolutely justified given the severity of the problem (Clark, *Daily Express*). However, there were also others who, in the wake of the Bridgend events, admitted that the media need to be more considerate when covering suicide and to always bear in mind the risk of triggering further imitative deaths through their reports (Wilby, *The Guardian*, 2008). More recently, the Bridgend case and generally the issue of media responsibility when reporting suicide was brought up in the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press. Lord Leveson (2012a: 448) criticised journalists' treatment of the Bridgend problem, which he considered an example of 'damaging and intrusive' press reporting.

Although there is no doubt that the loss of human lives is a theme that features prominently in the news (Hanusch, 2010), not all deaths receive the same amount of media attention. As an act unexpectedly disrupting social order and having negative consequences for the people involved and society as a whole, crime, especially of a violent and fatal nature, is by definition newsworthy (Jewkes, 2011). On the same grounds, the news value of suicide could be deemed analogous to that of crime¹. However, research shows that unless suicide is the act of a public figure, is associated with crime (for instance, murder-suicide or suicide bombing) or takes place in a public space, it is largely regarded as a private matter which reporters are often reluctant to cover (Jamieson et al., 2003). This suggests that, unlike crime, media professionals do not see suicide as inherently newsworthy. Nevertheless, very few studies have elaborated on the news production process that precedes the construction of suicide stories or their influence on the public understanding of suicide as a social problem, i.e. a prevalent troublesome condition that can and should be changed (Loseke, 2003a; the definition of social problems will be further discussed in Chapter Two).

The need to address this gap in the literature, which the current thesis aspires to do by offering an in-depth analysis of the Bridgend case, becomes even more crucial if considered in the light of the risk of triggering imitative deaths through irresponsible suicide reporting. This risk has been identified by numerous suicidologists (Etzersdorfer et al., 2001; Hawton and Williams, 2001; Jamieson et al., 2003; Pirkis et al., 2007) as an

¹ Besides, suicide was considered a crime until the introduction of the 1961 Suicide Act.

actual possibility and constitutes yet another factor that differentiates suicide from crime reporting. Since vulnerable individuals' lives are at stake, it is important that further attention be paid to suicide reporting not just on a media but also on an academic level in order to determine how the preceding risk could be managed more effectively. What responsible suicide reporting consists in is often quite subjective (Jamieson et al., 2003) and this subjectivity leaves those contemplating suicide exposed to the risk of imitation. The scientific literature on the ethical parameters of suicide reporting is inadequate and this is precisely the field to which the present study aims to contribute. It is worth acknowledging that there are also scholars like Simon Cross (2008) who dismiss the 'copycat' effect of suicide reporting as a 'conceptual red herring' that takes attention away from deeper ethical questions about whether self-annihilation is indeed an act that is 'in the public interest' to cover. He argues that there is no way to know for sure what the impact of media reporting is on suicidal behaviour since the only people who can answer that question are the deceased.

Cross' (2008) view will be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow. At this stage suffice it to say that although this is a valid argument, the difficulties in exploring the potential links between suicide and the media do not negate the significance of trying to understand the nature of these links, especially when, in Bridgend-like situations, young people's lives could be at risk. Even if the evidence that suicide reporting leads to imitative deaths is, as Cross (2008) argues, inconclusive, the truth is that there is indeed no way to know for sure whether there is a link between the two. But there is no way to know for sure that there is no such link either. Cross (2008) is right to state that the issue of suicide is very complex and should not be reduced to a mere media effect. However, the argument that this thesis puts forward is that the media play a key role in the understanding and treatment of the suicide problem, which is why responsible suicide reporting is essential regardless of any risk of imitation. It will be maintained that, given its potentially fatal consequences, this risk needs to be taken seriously, not necessarily as a pure 'copycat' but mainly as a 'contagion' i.e. a trigger effect (see Chapters Two and Six); also, that, in any case, suicide reporting needs to meet certain standards in order to capture the intricacies of the issue and to contribute to suicide prevention by reaching out to those in need.

In order to obtain an insight into the construction of suicide as a media product and the ethical challenges of suicide reporting, I have chosen to study the Bridgend phenomenon since it constitutes an original case study of unique empirical value. The

high youth suicide rate of this particular area of South Wales [National Public Health Service (NPHS) for Wales, 2008] is undoubtedly a factor that makes the Bridgend case noteworthy, but the purpose of this thesis is to examine Bridgend not as a local but as a media phenomenon. To the exceptional empirical value of Bridgend as a media phenomenon attests the high amount of news attention that the issue received; also, the rather long media life of the story, which largely unfolded while the issue was still in the media spotlight with more and more names being added to the victims' list. The individual Bridgend reports were often constructed as typical 'human interest' stories, that is, stories that focused on the actions and reactions of the people involved (Jewkes, 2011); however, the significance of the overall Bridgend coverage goes far beyond these individual stories. The uniqueness of the Bridgend case primarily consists in the element of media reflexivity that it presents: as will be explained in the chapters that follow, journalists' responses to the official accusations of being part of the Bridgend problem turned the debate about the local suicides into a broader debate about media regulation and sensitive suicide reporting, the policy implications of which go as far as the Leveson (2012a) report. With regard to the study of sex crime news, Greer (2003) contrasts Benedict's (1992, cited in Greer 2003) and Meyers' (1997, cited in Greer 2003) focus on 'extraordinary' and 'ordinary' sex crime stories respectively. He maintains that, even though it is questionable whether a few high-profile cases (as in Benedict's research) represent the 'norm', there are still very important arguments to be advanced through their study. This argument is applicable to the Bridgend events, the media coverage of which is elevated to an 'extraordinary' case that is important to study in its own right to understand media attitudes towards reporting suicide. By focusing on Bridgend as a media experience, my intention is not to overlook or downplay the local suicide problem but to stress that, in our post-modern culture, the mediated world is not distinct from social reality but an integral part of it (McRobbie, 1994; Osborne, 1995). Additionally, this media focus will allow me to highlight and further explore the role of the media in the 'social problems game'; a 'game' which involves 'a set of *activities* and *players* who compete' and where 'there are *competitions* and *strategies* for winning' (Loseke, 2003a: 20; emphasis in the original; see also Chapter Two).

There are numerous studies that have looked at the clustering of suicides, i.e. the occurrence of an alarming number of suicides in close geographical and/or temporal proximity, in various areas including Scotland (Exeter and Boyle, 2007), Wales (Jones et al., 2013), the USA (Gould et al., 2014), Canada (Tousignant et al., 2005), Taiwan (Cheng

et al., 2007) and Japan (Ueda, 2014). All these studies acknowledge that the media may influence suicidal behaviour but they adopt a quantitative approach which does not adequately capture the potency of the discourse produced through the relevant suicide reports or their visual appeal. Jones et al. (2013) recognise that the 2008 Bridgend events formed a high profile news story and that the role of print media in such situations needs further scrutiny. By relying on a qualitative research design (see Chapter Three) and scrutinising the production, content and impact of all the Bridgend-related reports, this study aims to address this need and alongside the preceding studies offer a sound understanding of the dynamics and ethical dilemmas of suicide reporting.

2. Setting the scene

In order to acquire a better understanding of the Bridgend suicide phenomenon, it is important to first briefly discuss the history and demographics of this particular area of

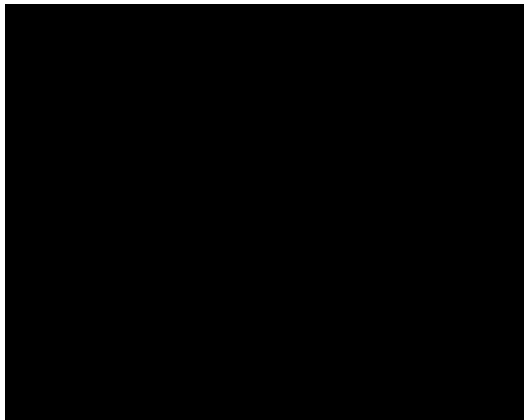


Figure 1.1: Bridgend's geographical location in relation to Wales, England and the UK (Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/2300151.stm>)

South Wales. Bridgend is a town of around 25,000 inhabitants in South Wales (Welsh Academy, 2008a; see also Figure 1.1). It was named after the medieval stone bridge built near to a ford across the river Ogmore between the villages of Nolton and Newcastle. The construction of the bridge in 1425 permitted settlement literally at 'Bridge End' and, therefore, a small market town was founded at the eastern side of it (Hontoir, 2002). The town of Bridgend should be distinguished from the County borough of the same name (Figure 1.2). This County borough, consisting of the urban districts of Bridgend, Maesteg, Porthcawl and Ogmore and Garw and the rural district of Bridgend, nowadays counts around 129,000 inhabitants (Welsh Academy, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d).

Over the years, Bridgend enjoyed a modest affluence, competing with both Cardiff and Swansea, from which it was equidistant, as to which would be Glamorgan's County town (Welsh Academy, 2008a). The industrialisation of the Welsh economy in the 19th century did not leave this particular market town unaffected. The discovery of coal in the South Wales Valleys, north of Bridgend, led to a rapid expansion in coal production from 1850 onwards. Although Bridgend itself did not actually have any coal deposits, this rise of the national coal industry inevitably had a substantial impact on its economy and so

did its subsequent decline in the second half of the 20th century (Evans, 2000; Welsh Academy, 2008e).

In the post-war years, the demand for coal was no longer as high and thus, many people working in the coal industry lost their employment. Bridgend's manufacturing base was reinforced in the 1960s with a number of companies such as Sony and Ford

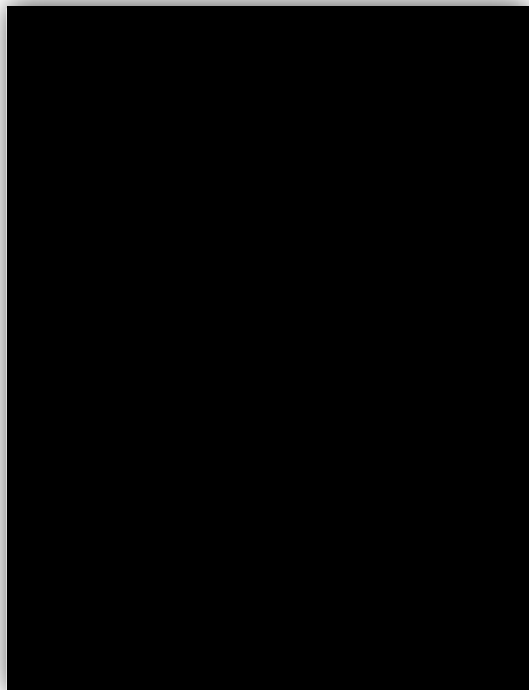


Figure 1.2: Bridgend in relation to the other County boroughs of Wales (Source: <http://www.theosophynirvana.uku.co.uk/1996wales.gif>)

setting up their plants in the area. However, factors like the rapidly changing nature of electrical and electronic engineering and the increased competition from Eastern European and Asian countries soon posed a threat to this base's viability and led to an analogous decrease in manufacturing employment in the late 20th and early 21st century (Welsh Academy, 2008e). The closure of Sony's Bridgend plant in 2005 was a major blow for the local economy (BBC News, 2005a). Other manufacturers that pulled out of Bridgend in recent years include Wrigley and Dairy Farmers of Britain,

which respectively closed their sweet-making and milk-processing factories in the area, the first in 2005 and the second in 2009 (BBC News, 2005b, 2009).

3. Bridgend's youth suicide rate

In recent years, another remarkable, yet tragic, aspect of the Bridgend life came to the fore and that was no other than the area's unusually high youth suicide rate. The issue received a lot of attention by the press and the authorities from early 2008 onwards. However, official suicide statistics indicate that this untoward local condition had been present in the Bridgend area for a much longer time (NPHS for Wales, 2008): for the ten-year period between 1996 and 2006, Bridgend had the highest suicide rate in Wales amongst young men aged between 15 and 24. In fact, the Bridgend average suicide rate for this decade was significantly higher than the Welsh one, the first one being 44.5 per 100,000 population, while the second one only 19.3 (see Figure 1.3).

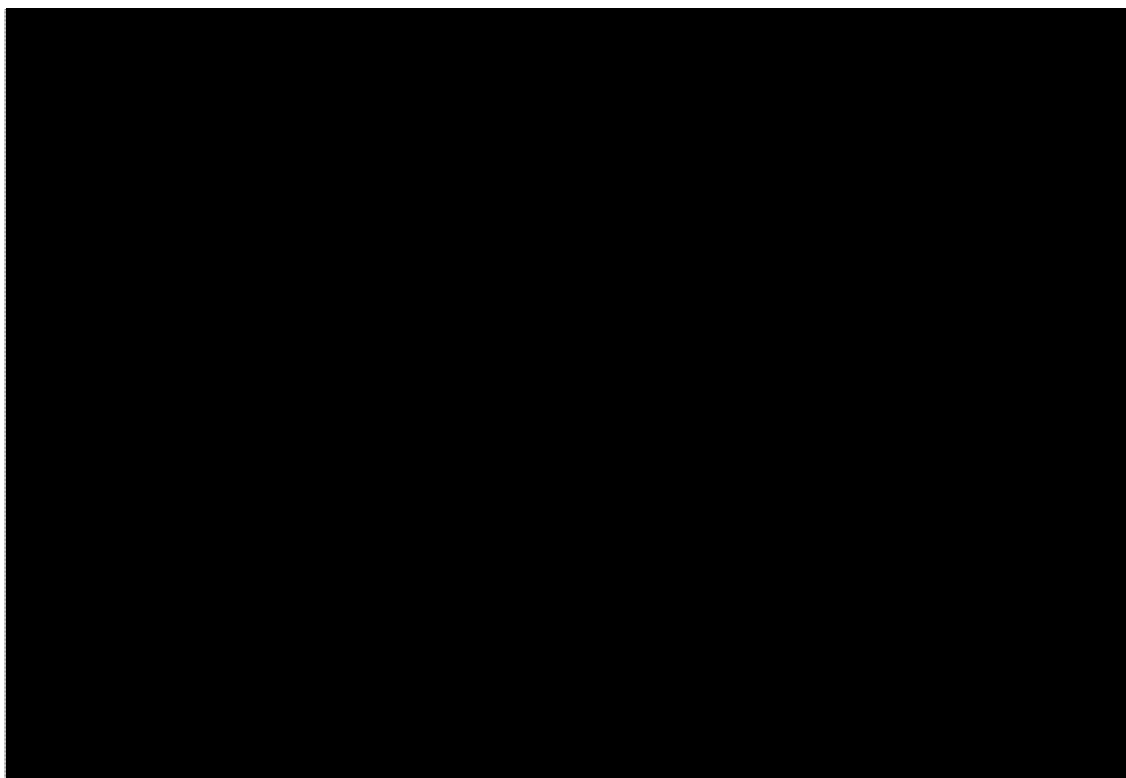


Figure 1.3: Suicides among males aged 15-24 (NPHS for Wales, 2008: 10)

Apart from Bridgend, two other areas, Neath Port Talbot (also in South Wales) and Derbighshire (North-East Wales) also had suicide rates that significantly exceeded the Welsh one (40.5 and 35.4 respectively). These were followed by Merthyr Tydfil (26.2; South Wales), Powys (25.7; Mid Wales), Caerphilly (24.1; South Wales), Blaenau Gwent (23.7; South Wales), Conwy (22.3; North Wales), Carmarthenshire (20.3; South-West Wales), Flintshire (19.6; North-East Wales), the suicide rates of which were above the Welsh average yet not as alarming as those of the three above-mentioned areas. These figures indicate that there has been an evident fluctuation in local suicide rates within Wales, but also that South Wales tends to be more vulnerable to the risk of suicide than other Welsh regions. This is an important observation to keep in mind when considering the 2008 events strictly as a 'Bridgend problem'. Moreover, in order to put the Welsh situation into perspective, it is essential to compare the Welsh rate to those of the other nations. According to the Samaritans (2010), a charity known for its contribution to suicide prevention, the average annual suicide rate for Wales between 1999 and 2008 was relatively higher than that of the UK, but at the same time lower than those of Scotland and Northern Ireland (see Figure 1.4).

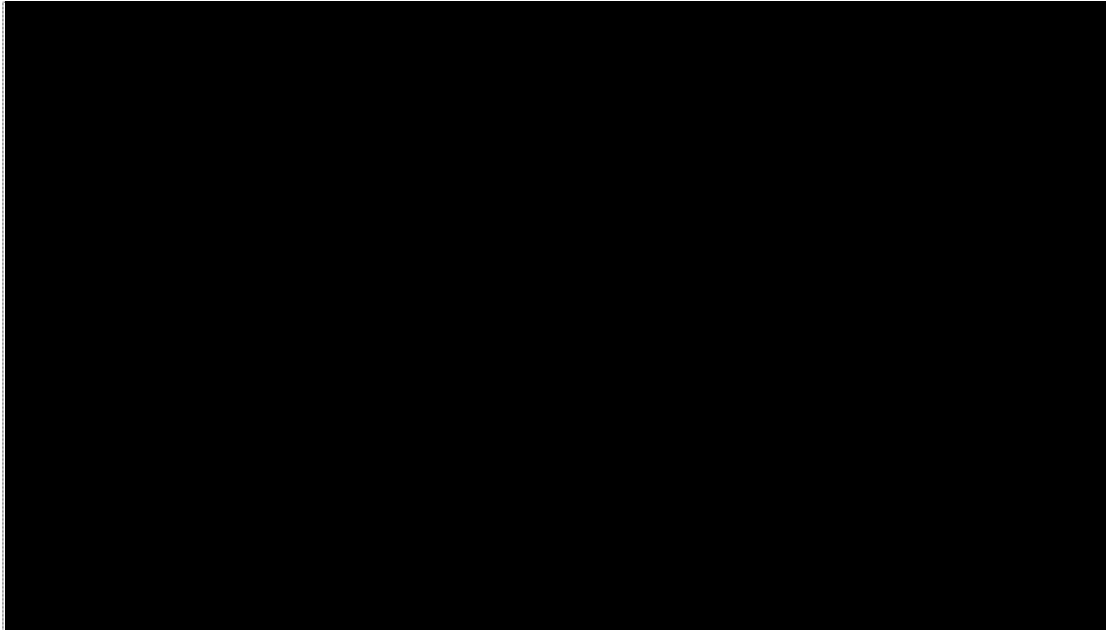


Figure 1.4: Average Annual Rate of Suicides and Undetermined Deaths per 100,000 population in UK & ROI 1999-2008 (Samaritans, 2010: 8)

Throughout this thesis I will, wherever possible, draw parallels between Bridgend and other areas in relation to their suicide and deprivation rates (see Chapter Seven) without, however, adopting a comparative research design. That is because such a multiple-case study approach would not adequately capture the intricacies of the Bridgend case, but would focus more on the ways in which this could be contrasted with other cases (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). Furthermore, such a comparative design would require that a strict focus be developed at the outset, but this would run counter to the qualitative research strategy of this study, which has largely been based on and benefited from a more open-ended approach (see also Bryman, 2012).

4. Research question and aims of the thesis

The study of these statistical reports raises a number of crucial questions: first of all, what are the potential reasons behind the high occurrence of youth suicides in the Bridgend area? Given that the local suicide rate among young males had been considerably high for a decade, why was so much attention drawn to the issue in 2008 and not earlier? Since, for the same time period, Northern Ireland and especially Scotland apparently had a much greater suicide problem than Wales, is the Bridgend problem actually as serious as it was perceived to be in 2008? Finally, to what extent are these statistics able to give an accurate view of the problem? The fact that the Bridgend issue only came to the fore in early 2008 suggests there were additional factors contributing to the public concern

around it. It is the main purpose of this thesis to demonstrate that the media's and particularly the press' involvement in the case was the first and most important one of these contributory factors.

Based on the supposition that the press played a key role in the Bridgend phenomenon of 2008, my aim in this project is to answer the following research question:

- How and why were the Bridgend suicides constructed as a social problem by the national British press?

In order to be able to answer this question, it is necessary that the various aspects composing the Bridgend matter be taken into careful consideration. To this end, I intend to document the evolution of the Bridgend issue over time from when it was still a long-standing, yet largely neglected, local condition to its rise to national news prominence and from the public concern over it to the policy implications of its construction as problematic. More specifically, I will locate the point in time when the Bridgend suicides were first identified as a newsworthy story and consider the reasons behind journalists' sudden interest in the matter. I will closely study the different stages of the corresponding claims-making process that took place in the press arena: I will discuss who acted as 'primary definers' of the Bridgend suicide problem; what frames were used to make sense of this problem and who were their key proponents/critics. Moreover, through the study of the Bridgend case, I will look into how news is produced; particularly, into how news values operate in relation to suicide and what the key elements of an appealing suicide news story are; into the ethical dilemmas media professionals are presented with when reporting suicide; finally, into how the media can nowadays influence or even trigger the process of social problem construction. Given the alleged Internet dimension of the local suicide problem, this thesis will offer an insight into how the press portray new media and itself. It will also consider the extent to which Bridgend was misrepresented by the press and whether the local situation could be regarded as a mere media panic. Finally, I will examine the policy responses to the Bridgend problem and assess the degree to which the press' construction of the latter contributed to their adoption. I will, ultimately, evaluate the role of Bridgend as a landmark story likely to influence the reporting of similar cases in the future.

By assessing the benefits and the shortcomings of the Bridgend coverage, this thesis aims to serve a dual function: on the one hand, to underline the importance of

raising public awareness over suicide and mental health problems, thereby contributing to the elimination or, at least, the alleviation of the social stigma associated with them. On the other hand, to emphasise the sensitivities related to these issues, especially when they become the centre of media attention; to clarify what sensitive (and, by contrast, insensitive) suicide reporting consists in exactly. Going one step further, research has shown that irresponsible news reporting of suicide encloses the risk of pushing vulnerable individuals over the edge (Sonneck et al., 1994; Gould, 2001). So, as aptly pointed out by Hawton and Williams (2001), any study, which, like the present one, focuses on how the issue of suicide should be addressed in the media, could actually have a positive effect in the field of suicide prevention. By shedding light on the above-mentioned issues especially on where the balance lies between using the power of the media to challenge the view of suicide as a taboo subject and preventing imitative deaths, this thesis envisages to promote responsible suicide reporting and make recommendations on how this could be achieved in the post-Leveson era. In that way, it will contribute to the development of a protection mechanism focused on the proactive minimisation of the risks related to the coverage of suicide-related news stories. For obvious reasons, I consider the potential to even indirectly provide the slightest protection to vulnerable individuals against such risks to be the most significant and morally gratifying amongst the aims that this project aspires to attain.

5. Outline of the thesis' structure

In order to offer a sound understanding of the Bridgend phenomenon, this thesis adopts the framework developed by Walklate and Petrie (2013) in their study of filicide-suicide: organised in nine chapters, it first considers the academic narrative around suicide both on a social-psychological and a media level. It then looks at the media narrative around the Bridgend problem as constructed by the local and subsequently the national press. Finally, it scrutinises the potential interconnections between these two narratives and the wider policy context of responding to Bridgend-like situations in the UK, which, in its turn, forms the relevant policy narrative.

More specifically, Chapter Two lays the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the thesis and explores two main areas: the aetiology of suicide and the so-called 'social problems game' (Loseke, 2003a). The chapter itself is divided into two respective sections and its primary aim is to highlight the intersection between them, particularly, in relation to the media's involvement in the process of explaining suicide: Section A

presents a number of psychological and social factors potentially contributing to one's decision to take his/her own life. Section B looks at the process through which a social problem is constructed and underlines the media's tendency to undertake a more and more active role in it nowadays. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the way in which news values operate with regard to suicide and a study of the key concepts suicide news stories essentially revolve around.

Chapter Three addresses the methodological issues that are pertinent to the study of the Bridgend phenomenon. The significance of Bridgend as a unique case of suicide reporting is explained here. The process of data collection is described in detail and the selection of the research method of qualitative content analysis employed for the analysis of the Bridgend-related news articles is justified. The need to contextualise the claims appearing in the corresponding articles and the process of doing so through in-depth interviews with key claims-makers and the consultation of statistical and policy reports are also discussed. Finally, the 'conspiracy of silence' surrounding suicide and its emotional cost for the people directly involved or even the researcher are considered, stressing the importance of treating the matter ethically and with utmost sensitivity.

Chapter Four looks at the roots of the 2008 increased interest of the national press in the Bridgend suicides. Both regional and national newspapers are examined for Bridgend-related articles published between 2006 and early 2008. This is in order to determine whether there had been a growing concern about the local suicides during that time, which eventually led to the extensive national news coverage of the issue in the subsequent years. The chapter continues with a close study of the story's transition from the local to the national press, which is seen as crucial to understanding how the matter reached a wider audience and acquired a 'problem' status. Lastly, the appeal of the overall Bridgend narrative, in terms not just of the way in which this was initially constructed but also of the way it evolved over time, is assessed.

Chapter Five starts the analysis of the frames employed by the national press to make sense of the Bridgend suicide problem after it came to the fore in January 2008. The first frame to be studied is that of 'Internet Suicide' (IS). The chapter presents how the potential links between suicide and the Internet came under scrutiny in the wake of the Bridgend deaths. The process of creating a signification spiral in the context of which Bridgend is linked to other apparently similar cases and portrayed as just the 'tip of the iceberg' in a broader problem of cyber-deviance is closely examined.

Chapter Six looks at the ‘Suicide Contagion’ (SC) frame, which favours a view of the individual suicide incidents in the Bridgend area as linked. Journalists’ endeavours to discover a ‘pattern’ and the risks deriving from the suggestibility of suicide are documented here. The degree to which the Bridgend problem could be regarded as a media panic is assessed. Finally, the perception of the local deaths as a result of a widespread cultural glamorisation of self-destruction is considered.

Chapter Seven studies the construction of the Bridgend phenomenon as a product of Breakdown Britain (BB). It first looks at the press portrayal of Bridgend as a deprived ‘suicide town’ and explores the links between the allegedly poor socio-economic conditions of the area and its high youth suicide rate. In its second half, the chapter examines the conception of the local suicides as a problem not of Bridgend per se, but of the ‘Bridgend generation’, particularly, of contemporary youth’s disenchantment with the ‘sickening’ modern reality.

Chapter Eight completes the analysis of the main frames used in the Bridgend coverage through the examination of the ‘Mental Health’ (MH) frame. The way in which the deceased acquire a ‘victim’ status through their construction as susceptible, impulsive and generally emotionally vulnerable is discussed. Issues like the stigma attached to suicide and the limited resources invested in mental health are addressed. The chapter concludes by considering the potential shortcomings not just of medical, but also of political authorities in the Bridgend case as well as the influence that the matter’s rise to national news prominence has had on future suicide prevention.

Chapter Nine explores the aftermath of Bridgend both in terms of the policy responses to the problem and its long-term ramifications on a local and a media level. The key findings from the preceding media analysis are brought together and further discussed in this concluding chapter in order to holistically evaluate the national press’ involvement in the construction of the Bridgend problem. Strategies introduced in the wake of the Bridgend deaths such as the Welsh suicide prevention action plan ‘Talk to Me’, the PCC’s guidelines on sensitive suicide reporting and the Byron Review on online child safety are examined and their adequacy to prevent similar situations in the future is assessed. The significance of responsible suicide coverage is pointed out and the means through which this can be achieved in the post-Leveson era are considered. It is proposed that the media have a key role to play in suicide prevention, but that, in order for Bridgend-like situations to be dealt with more effectively in the future, stronger links to mental health professionals need to be developed.

CHAPTER TWO

Making sense of suicide in a multi-mediated world

Introduction

From Michael Jackson's death to the Cumbria shootings and from war casualties in Iraq to the Foxconn suicides, the loss of human lives is a prevalent theme in the news (Kitch and Hume, 2008; Hanusch, 2010). The extensive coverage of the Bridgend suicides in 2008 is yet another example of the strong journalistic interest in death stories, let alone one with further media ramifications, given the claims expressed at the time about an 'Internet suicide cult' or insensitive reporting being responsible for the problem. The current thesis focuses primarily on the national press' accounts of these suicides, but, before their analysis, it is important to take a step back and look more closely at the context in which the Bridgend events unfolded and became a matter of concern.

This chapter will advance constructionist theory by building on Loseke's (2003b) argument that emotions and morality play a key role in social problem construction. It will be maintained that although constructionists are primarily interested in how the public 'think' and 'feel' about certain troubling conditions and the people involved ('victims' or 'victimisers'), the emotions of the latter individuals also need to be taken into consideration in the 'social problems game'. By adopting a contextual constructionist perspective, this thesis aims to promote a view of the social problem of suicide as a problem of suicidal individuals; to document the range of emotions that may lead someone to take his/her own life and the different outlets through which these are expressed in a multi-mediated world; finally, to assess the impact that the coincidence of the roles of 'victim' and 'victimiser' on the same person has on the emotional responses to the act and the moral judgements being made on it.

In order to achieve the preceding goal, I will use two different sets of literature: a) psychological and sociological research on the aetiology of suicide and b) media and social problems research. I will first look at the complex and multi-factorial nature of the suicide problem, examining different theories of suicidal behaviour and the extent to which they could offer an explanation of the Bridgend phenomenon. Particular emphasis will be placed on the risk of imitation; more specifically, on the possibility of traditional or new media causing copycat suicides and the ethical challenges of reporting suicide. Moreover, I will draw parallels between the processes of constructing successful news

stories and constructing social problems, stressing journalists' increasingly active role in the 'social problems game' and the efforts of outside claims-makers to attract the news media's attention. I will offer an insight into the news production process by looking at how news values operate in the 21st century. I will argue that the great journalistic interest in the 'dark side' of the Internet dictates that 'technology' be elevated to a cardinal news value. Finally, in order to assess the significance of the Bridgend case as a media product, the newsworthiness of suicide and the key elements of the typical suicide story will be discussed.

SECTION A

Understanding suicide: a personal or social affair?

The NPHS for Wales (2008) report, indicating Bridgend's alarmingly high youth suicide rate between 1996 and 2006, does not specifically refer to the potential causes behind it. It does, however, stress the personal, social and economic ramifications of suicide in general. Particularly, it cites another report (Price, 2007), which summarises the evidence on suicide prevention and links suicide to complex factors ranging from mental or physical illness to socio-economic deprivation and from the age and gender of the deceased to deliberate self-harm and substance misuse. The risk posed by each of these factors varies, but the report (Price, 2007) prioritises a perception of suicide as a result of personal problems, pushing vulnerable individuals over the edge. Suicide is, thus, ultimately identified as a health issue, and specifically, a mental rather than physical health one. This view is supported by the fact that both the preceding documents (Price, 2007; NPHS for Wales, 2008) are issued by a body like the National Public Health Service for Wales, but also, by Price's (2007) assertion that the provision of counselling services to those at risk is crucial for the prevention of future suicides.

1. Suicide as a product of psychological pain: Subscribing to the understanding of suicide as a personal, mental health matter, Shneidman (1996) regards the act in question as an exclusive product of what he defines as 'psychache', that is, of intolerable psychological pain. This pain derives from the frustration of vital psychological needs and may take one of the following five forms (Shneidman, 1996: 25): thwarted love, fractured control, assaulted self-image, ruptured relationships and excessive anger. From this perspective,

suicide is a psychological matter, whose study should focus primarily on what goes through one's mind before taking his/her own life.

Moreover, in his social-psychological study of suicide, Joiner (2005) maintains that anyone can acquire the ability to enact lethal self-injury by repeatedly engaging in activities that test the boundaries between life and death such as deliberate self-harm or even extreme sports. However, he recognises that this does not necessarily mean that those who develop this ability will actually want to die by suicide. Consequently, self-harm or suicide attempts do not always indicate a clear intention to end one's own life, since such behaviours, more frequent amongst impulsive youngsters and often referred to as 'para-suicide', may just constitute a cry for help (Hawton et al., 1993; Scoliers et al., 2009). Building on Shneidman's (1996) theory, Joiner (2005) also regards the desire to end one's own life as a product of psychological pain, but condenses the preceding five types of 'psychache' into two major categories: 'thwarted belongingness' and 'perceived burdensomeness'. The first refers to a state in which the individual finds it difficult to connect and is alienated from others, while the second to a feeling of being ineffective and a burden to others, especially to loved ones. As a result of these emotions, one develops a desire to die and if they are also capable of lethally harming themselves, then they are, according to Joiner's (2005) model, much more likely to be driven to suicide.

2. Durkheim's sociological approach and the limitations of official suicide statistics: In his acclaimed study on suicide, Durkheim (2002 [1897]) adopts a sociological point of view through which he presents the act in question not as an ultimately individualistic one caused by personal motives, but as the result of external social forces. He suggests that a given number of suicides are expected to occur in any society, but also that, when this number increases rapidly, this is symptomatic of a deeper social malaise. For the purposes of his research, Durkheim (2002 [1897]) distances himself from the actual suicide incidents and examines the phenomenon as a whole through official suicide statistics. His aim is to identify different suicide patterns and to assess the influence of social factors like religion, economic conditions and social structure on suicidal behaviour.

Durkheim's (2002 [1897]) findings indicate that single people are more likely to take their own lives than married ones; that Protestant countries have higher suicide rates than Catholic ones; that military personnel are much more prone to suicide than civilians; finally, that suicide rates tend to be higher in peacetime than wartime and in times of

economic upheaval than stability. Durkheim (2002 [1897]) relates the suicide phenomenon to the notion of social solidarity and more specifically attributes it to the strength or weakness of two types of social bonds: social integration and social regulation. He contends that those who are moderately integrated into social groups and whose aspirations are moderately regulated by social norms are less likely to take their own lives. Suicide is considered to be more common amongst people who are not integrated (egoistic suicide) or too integrated (altruistic suicide) as well as people who are not regulated (anomic suicide) or too regulated (fatalistic suicide). Egoistic and anomic suicides are, according to Durkheim (2002 [1897]), directly related to modernisation, a process which includes those of industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation and which results in the development of a cultural system based on individuality and materialism. Modernisation, he points out, weakens the individual's ties to traditional institutions such as family and religion and to collective life in general, thereby making it more difficult for people to find meaning in their existence and rendering them more prone to suicide.

The sociological explanation of the suicide phenomenon that Durkheim (2002 [1897]) promotes is, contrary to his assertions, not incompatible with, but apparently complementary to other psychopathological approaches like the ones mentioned earlier (Halbwachs, 1930, cited in Parsons, 1949 [1937]). Nonetheless, aside from its originality in offering an alternative view on the matter, his research presents a number of weaknesses and is often contradicted by subsequent studies. The most important of these weaknesses is its uncritical use of official statistics (Douglas, 1967; Atkinson, 1978; Simpson, 2002): by basing his study exclusively on such statistics, Durkheim (2002 [1897]) overlooks that they ultimately constitute an *ex post facto* interpretation of the victim's personal motives made by coroners, that is, by the authority the law recognises as responsible to look into all incidents of sudden death². As stated in 'Jervis', the coroner's handbook (Matthews and Foreman, 1993, cited in Linsley et al., 2001: 465; my emphasis), '[s]uicide should *never* be presumed, but must *always* be based on some evidence that the deceased intended to take his own life'. Consequently, unless the coroner is convinced beyond reasonable doubt that there was suicidal intent in that specific occasion of sudden death, he/she returns an open/undetermined or accidental

² Section 8(1) of the Coroners Act 1988 provides that coroners have the duty to hold an inquest into any death occurring within their district when there is reasonable cause to suspect (a) it has been violent or unnatural, (b) sudden and of unknown cause, or (c) it has occurred in prison or in other circumstances of legal custody.

verdict. Acknowledging the possibility that many cases of open verdicts could, in fact, be suicides, despite the lack of evidence for them to be recorded as such, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) includes both suicide and open verdict deaths in its suicide data (see 'Definition of suicide' section in ONS, 2012a: 16). The report stressing the high occurrence of suicide among Bridgend youngsters cited earlier (NPHS for Wales, 2008) also follows the ONS classification. But even if attempting to offer a more balanced view of the matter, it is important to keep in mind that the ONS analyses of suicide are confined to those who have reached or exceeded the age of fifteen and therefore provide no information on the suicides of younger individuals.

Discussing the criteria based on which coroners issue their verdicts, Surtees (1992) points out that their decisions as to which deaths need to be categorised as 'suicides' are largely influenced by their awareness of the social stigma surrounding this type of demise. More specifically, he argues that their tendency to abstain from returning a suicide verdict when there is only circumstantial evidence to this end constitutes an attempt on their part to protect the grieving family from any further pain. At the same time, Zilboorg (1936) also refers to the dark figure of suicide, particularly, to completed suicides being concealed by families due to the above-mentioned stigma or erroneously classified as 'accidental deaths', and to failed suicide attempts, going completely unreported. Underlining the plethora of such incidents slipping through the net of the suicide recording system, he concludes that statistical data cover only a minor, probably far from representative, number of cases and consequently have very little to contribute to the scientific evaluation of the problem.

3. Imitation: Moving beyond individual suicide incidents, a single death by suicide increases the risk of additional incidents and can occasionally lead to the development of a 'suicide cluster' (Johansson et al., 2006). Suicide clusters constitute the product of an imitative process in which vulnerable individuals that are somehow connected influence each other into taking their own lives (Gould, 1990). There are two main types of suicide clusters (Joiner, 1999): on the one hand, mass clusters, which involve a temporal and not spatial clustering of incidents after the media coverage of actual or fictional suicides. On the other hand, point clusters, which go beyond any media influence and involve the occurrence of an unusually high number of suicides in a small geographical region or institution and over a short period of time. Considering these definitions in relation to the Bridgend phenomenon, the issue that attracted the national press' attention was the

unusually high number of youth suicides in the Bridgend area in late 2007 - early 2008; at the same time, however, the more media attention these suicides received the more they came to be seen as a media-incited problem. Consequently, if there was a Bridgend cluster [and Jones et al. (2013) argue that this was indeed the case] this was possibly both spatio-temporally specific and media-related. It would thus fall somewhere between the point and mass cluster categories. This, once again, confirms the uniqueness of the 2008 Bridgend case and so does Jones et al.'s (2013) finding that the Bridgend suicide cluster was the only one in Wales during the 2000-2009 period. It occurred between December 2007 and February 2008 and was 'predominantly later, smaller and shorter in duration than the phenomenon that was widely reported in national and international print media' (Jones et al., 2013: 8). As already explained, it is at the heart of this thesis to explore this apparent inconsistency between the relevant local events and their media counter-parts.

With respect to imitation, Durkheim (2002 [1897]) asserts that the decision to take one's own life by copying someone else's death is, more often than not, made by already predisposed to suicide individuals, who would almost certainly end up killing themselves anyway sooner or later, irrespective of any imitative effect. For that reason, he rejects the view of contagion as an original, causal factor of suicide. However, subsequent researchers are not as eager as Durkheim (2002 [1897]) to discount the risk of copycat suicidal behaviour. Anthropologist Donald Rubinstein (1983, cited in Gladwell, 2000: 219) describes how the small community of a Micronesian island, which had not experienced a single suicide between 1955 and 1965, saw its suicide rate rising dramatically after the first incident and evolving into a 'contagious epidemic of self-destruction', as more and more young boys wanted to 'try out' hanging. He traces the roots of this epidemic to the cultural meaning attached to suicide, which, contrary to its usual pathological status in Western cultures, in South Pacific communities came to be seen as a common, expressive and ritualistic adolescent practice.

As for the way in which the suggestibility of suicide operates on a media level, pioneering sociologist David Phillips (1974) maintains that there is a link between the appearance of suicide stories in the press and the subsequent rise in suicide rates. He argues that news stories reporting the suicide of a public figure, or ultimately anyone readers can identify with, give 'permission' for more suicides to occur. Phillips (1974) is the first to refer to this kind of imitative behaviour as the 'Werther effect', after Goethe's suicidal hero in his 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which is said to have caused numerous copycat suicides across Europe and was, for that reason, banned in several

countries at the time. Subscribing to this ‘Werther effect’ theory, Sonneck et al. (1994) link the alarming increase of suicides and suicide attempts on the Viennese subway between 1984 and mid-1987 to the dramatic reporting of those incidents in the major Austrian newspapers. Just like Durkheim (2002 [1897]), they do not consider imitation an actual cause of suicide, but contend that the risk posed by the press coverage of such events primarily involves vulnerable individuals with pre-existing feelings of despair. Nonetheless, unlike him, they insist that it is precisely this coverage which triggers these individuals’ suicidal behaviour by often presenting suicide as the best or even the only way out of their problems. Looking further into this risk of imitative behaviour, Etzersdorfer et al. (2001) assert there is a correlation between regional newspaper distribution and the scale of the Werther effect, while Pirkis et al. (2006) identify a similar dose-response relationship between the intensity of suicide coverage and the number of copycat incidents that follow.

An interesting counter-argument with regard to this risk of a Werther effect, which often leads to calls for more responsible suicide reporting, is offered by Simon Cross (2008): he maintains that reducing suicide to a mere ‘copycat effect’ overlooks the plethora of psychological and sociological complexities surrounding one’s decision to end his/her own life. He regards the idea of imitative deaths as a ‘conceptual red herring’, which is not supported by conclusive evidence and which masks deeper ethical issues pertinent to the reporting of suicide. According to Cross (2008), any attempt to assess the level of media influence on suicidal behaviour is pointless because the only people that could answer this question are the deceased. For him, it is more important to address the issue of whether reporting suicide is ‘in the public interest’ or an event that merely ‘interests the public’ in a voyeuristic fashion. Instead of trying to (ir)rationalise suicide by blaming the media, it is also essential, he argues, to view this act as the product of ‘human desire to exercise free-will at even the most despairing of times’ (Cross, 2008: 7).

Although Cross’ (2008) view succeeds in highlighting the multi-factorial rather than mono-causal nature of the suicide problem, it is at the same time to a large extent problematic. Can self-annihilation always be seen as an act of free will? To return to Cross’ question, how do we know? The only people to answer this question are, once again, the deceased. Are all individuals in a position to make a conscious decision to end their lives the moment before doing so? Cross (2008: 7; my emphasis) criticises the perception of suicide as a ‘reflex ‘copycat’ action of ‘*vulnerable*’ people who (*like children?*)

easily succumb to the powerful influence of the media', but what about children and adolescents themselves? What about adults (mostly of a young age) who, as will be shown in the Bridgend case, consume so much alcohol before dying that it is impossible for the coroner to determine if there was suicidal intent? In all probability, Cross (2008) refers to actual suicides, irrespective of whether these have or have not been recorded as such. Nevertheless, this perspective overlooks the fact that the difficulty of accessing this ontological 'reality' of suicide (if there is any), which leaves the coroner, journalists, researchers and the family of the deceased with no other choice but to attempt to trace his/her intentions retrospectively, is one of the factors that render the issue of suicide so complex in the first place. The fact that this 'reality' can only acquire meaning through discourse will be further discussed in Section B in relation to the media's role in social problem construction and specifically their involvement in the construction of the suicide problem. At this stage, however, it is vital to make clear that the argument often made with regard to the inadequacy of crime statistics to serve as an objective measure of crime in society (Hope, 2013) is also applicable to suicide: the 'reality' of suicide is socially constructed *ex post facto*, but, from a pragmatic point of view, this is the only 'reality' that we have access to. It is impossible to know for sure whether the deceased wanted to die or not, whether the coroner's verdict accurately captures his/her motives or even whether the media influenced his/her final decision. Nonetheless, this indicates that there is a need for this 'dark figure' of suicide (including the possibility of a media-incited suicide) to be further explored and better understood instead of being dismissed as insignificant just because the available evidence is circumstantial.

The main problem of Cross' (2008) approach is that it does not also take into account the risk of a 'trigger' rather than a pure 'copycat' effect. There may indeed be a plethora of pre-existing and far more complex factors that contribute to one's decision to take his/her own life than suicide reporting. But if there is a possibility that identification with another suicide victim featuring prominently in the news could not necessarily cause but convince someone already contemplating suicide that this is the only solution to his/her problems, then this possibility should also be taken seriously. As a number of studies (Hawton and Williams, 2001; Jamieson et al., 2003; Liem et al., 2010) including the present thesis suggest, responsible reporting has the power to reach out to those who are (for whatever reason) at suicide risk and encourage them to seek help. According to Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2010), non-sensationalist reports about people who refrained from taking their own lives and instead developed positive coping mechanisms in

adverse circumstances could actually help decrease suicide rates. This reverse Werther effect is known as the ‘Papageno effect’, after the suicidal character in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* who is saved at the last minute by three boys and reminded that there are other alternatives to dying. Unless Cross’ (2008: 7; emphasis in the original) view of suicide as a ‘*life-affirming* event’ means that no attempt should be made to change one’s decision to end his/her life, the media’s potential to actively contribute to suicide prevention is of great importance. Cross (2008) is not against the idea of responsible suicide reporting per se, but of reporting based on guidelines that aim to prevent imitative deaths. However, such guidelines do not necessarily run counter to his argument that a more in-depth understanding of the social-psychological aetiology of suicide is needed. They are likely to clarify where the balance lies between what is ‘in the public interest’ and ‘what interests the public’ and to shed light on different aspects of the problem. The issue will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

4. The Internet and suicidal behaviour: The proliferation of new media in recent decades has offered new spaces for social interaction but also raised concerns (especially in relation to young people) about how this ‘virtual’ interaction would influence our ‘physical’ selves (Baron, 2008). Given the claims that the Bridgend suicides might have been Internet-related (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five), it is essential that this relationship between our physical and digital identities be further explored here. According to Turkle (1997, 1999), the anonymity of cyberspace allows users to engage in a serious identity play, through which they construct multiple, flexible and resilient identities. Instead of belittling our virtual experiences, it is necessary, she argues, to obtain a deep understanding of the many selves that we express online in order to enrich our physical existence and achieve personal and social transformation. Regarding the Internet’s potential to offer an escape from the constraints of the physical world (for instance, physical disabilities), Seymour and Lupton (2004) maintain that, instead of constructing entirely new personas, users often choose to reinstate their embodied selves in their online communications. Likewise, Hardey (2002a, 2002b) draws attention to the large number of websites that aim to fulfill offline needs (medical advice sites, online dating etc.); he argues that the disembodied anonymity of World Wide Web is mostly used to build trust and establish solid physical-world relationships rather than construct fantasy selves.

Moreover, Baron (2008) addresses the contemporary concern of being ‘always connected’ and surrounded by online ‘friends’ but at the same time part of ‘the lonely crowd’ (Riesman, 1950, cited in Baron, 2008) since we never come very close to others or to ourselves. Her view is that even though new technologies can be used to build ‘virtual walls’, they also provide more opportunities to communicate with each other. She concludes that our ties to those that are important to us have remained intact by the introduction of networked technologies and that in any case it is more important to look into the cultural factors underlying the ways we use these than demonise the technologies *per se*. In an analogous fashion, Ito et al. (2008) stress the positive effects of youth’s engagement with digital media. They identify two main types of engagement, friendship-driven (where young users extend their offline friendships online) and interest-driven (where young users connect with peers who share their interests even if they are not acquainted with them in the physical world). In both cases, it is acknowledged that this interaction with new forms of media and with other users, the experimentation with different forms of self-expression online and the exploration of new interests provides young people with a sense of freedom and autonomy and allows them to develop their social and technical skills.

But what if one’s engagement with new technologies involves finding information on self-harm and suicide and discussing these issues with other users? The debate about the media’s influence on suicidal behaviour has in recent years extended beyond traditional media to also include (and often focus even more) the Internet with numerous studies examining the possibility of an online Werther or Papageno effect. The links between suicide and the Internet are usually presumed to be of a negative nature (Chapple and Ziebland, 2011). Adolescent self-harmers appear to be spending more time on the Internet than other adolescents (Mitchell and Ybarra, 2007) and those who do are more likely to choose violent methods such as hanging or shooting themselves (Collings et al., 2011). Attention primarily focuses on suicide-related websites such as chat rooms, in which users openly discuss about taking their own lives or even encourage each other to that end, and the so-called ‘recipe’ sites, where they are provided with detailed instructions on how to do so. According to Biddle et al. (2008), those using Internet search engines to find suicide-related information are twice as likely to come across websites encouraging suicide rather than others focusing on suicide prevention or offering mental health support. The risk of an online Werther effect does not just involve websites explicitly promoting suicide, but also others regarded as potentially glamorising

it in an indirect way. In that sense, just like in the offline world, the typical idolisation of the victim, for example, through online tributes, could portray a romantic image of suicide, thus begetting the desire in susceptible adolescents to emulate his/her behaviour (Fiedorowicz and Chigurupati, 2009). Social interaction with other like-minded users in self-harm and suicide-related websites may have a normalising effect, discouraging those involved from disclosing their problem or seeking professional help (Whitlock et al., 2006; Smithson et al., 2011). Discussion forums are associated more with an increase in suicidal ideation (serious preoccupation with suicide) in young people than social networking sites (Dunlop et al., 2011): that is because although in both cases users are exposed to suicide-related information, the support they receive in networking sites is greater and more personal than in discussion forums. It is precisely this support which mitigates the risks of suicidal behaviour to those who receive such information. Finally, cyber-bullying is identified as another factor influencing self-destructive behaviour (Hay and Meldrum, 2010; Hinduja and Patchin, 2010).

Nevertheless, other researchers (Barak, 2007; Baker and Fortune, 2008; Eichenberg, 2008; Jones et al., 2011) counter this negative view of the Internet by emphasising the positive influence it can have on vulnerable individuals. While recognising that discussions in suicide forums may at times be of a pro-suicide nature, they argue that the supportive function of these online communities should not be overlooked. Particularly, the interaction with other users facing similar problems within such communities and the reinforcement of positive behaviours (for instance, congratulations on not self-harming or encouragement to see GPs for help) are seen as allowing the development of protective coping mechanisms. Contrary to some of the above-mentioned studies (Whitlock et al., 2006; Dunlop et al., 2011) which regard the anonymity of discussion forums as likely to increase the risk of self-harm and suicide, Eichenberg (2008), Jones et al. (2011) and Harris et al. (2009) suggest that it is actually beneficial and preferred by users. That is because this anonymity of cyberspace has the potential to mitigate destructive desires by reducing the stigma of suicide and encouraging the members of these forums to openly discuss the issue. In fact, Jones et al. (2011) found that participants thought they could gain more information from suicide forums than professional support websites. Likewise, in Harris et al.'s (2009) study, those at risk recommended that professional websites adopt a similar anonymous approach in order to foster a more honest and productive dialogue on suicide. It needs to be acknowledged that a key limitation of such studies on suicide forums is that they focus

on active users and so, their results cannot be generalised to passive users, i.e. users who read the forum's content but do not post anything (Daine et al., 2013). As far as the prominence and accessibility of suicide websites is concerned, Kemp and Collings (2011) contradict Biddle et al. (2008) by arguing that pro-suicide websites are far less visible and accessible than support websites. They make this argument based on their examination of the hyperlinks between different suicide-related websites. This method is considered more suitable to capture the complex structure of suicide-related online content and its visibility to users than the investigation of search engine results. On the other hand, studies like Biddle et al.'s (2008) which use the latter method are criticised for their reliance on jargon search terms such as 'deliberate self-harm' which are unlikely to be used by non-professionals (Harris et al., 2009). Eichenberg (2008), Kemp and Collings (2011) and Daine et al. (2013) all conclude that the positive effects of the Internet on suicidal individuals outweigh the negative and therefore the online presence of support and suicide prevention websites should be strengthened.

5. Deprivation and the strains of modern existence: Moving beyond the Internet medium per se and towards the motives of its users, the aforementioned attempts of suicidal individuals to express their feelings and establish a sense of community online needs to be viewed in the wider context of the various strains of modern existence. In order to understand what these strains consist in and how they may affect one's emotional state to the point of suicide, strain theory and cultural criminology (especially, the strand interested in the emotionality of crime and deviance) will be discussed here. Merton's (1938) strain theory seeks to explain crime (and by extension, deviance) in societies where community and social order have been replaced by alienation and disorder. He argues that although whole sections of society break the norms that traditionally hold communities together, social cohesion remains more or less intact. That is mainly due to the fact that people are to a large extent socialised into accepting the cultural goal of success in terms of wealth and status. In an attempt to explain the concentration of crime in working-class areas and in working-class and minority groups, Merton (1938) notes that the legitimate means of achieving this goal (for instance, education and employment) are not open to anyone. It is precisely this disparity (or strain) between the culturally-approved goals and the means to achieve them through legitimate channels that leads to frustration and a state of normlessness ('anomie'). Those denied the legitimate means to succeed may decide not to abandon but to 'innovate' by pursuing this goal through

illegitimate means. Alternatively, they might choose to conform ('conformity'), to replace their high success aspirations with others that are easier to attain ('ritualism'), to withdraw from society and retreat into their shells ('retreatism') or to rebel against the existing status quo ('rebellion').

Suicidal behaviour bears much clearer ties to and can be seen as the ultimate act of 'retreatism'. People who have limited resources and are therefore unable to achieve monetary success might end up viewing the pursuit of this aim as being in vain. They might decide to fully reject this goal instead and cope with the consequent frustration by abusing drugs and alcohol or by otherwise harming themselves. Their engagement in self-destructive activities could be classified as indirect suicidal behaviour (Farberow, 1980) and eventually lead them to actual suicide. This view contradicts Durkheim's (2002 [1897]) argument that poverty serves as a protective mechanism against (anomic) suicide. He contends that poor people have learnt greater self-control and therefore the range of their desires does not extend indefinitely, but is largely dependent on their resources. Nevertheless, in a highly mediatised era where the endorsement of materialistic goals and the constant comparison with peers, Facebook 'friends', celebrities and 'celetoids'³ clearly affect young people's aspirations and mental well-being (Kasser et al., 2004; Van Boven, 2005; Vogel et al., 2014), it is essential that the validity of Durkheim's argument be questioned more than ever. A number of subsequent studies (Boxer et al., 1995; Maskill et al., 2005) suggest that low socio-economic status and poverty are more likely to increase rather than decrease the propensity towards suicide. As pointed out by Stack (2000), poverty increases this risk of suicide through its association with disquieting conditions like unemployment, economic deprivation, financial uncertainty, family insecurity and psychological troubles such as those related to depression, alcoholism or drug addiction. Hall et al. (2005) and Winlow and Hall (2006) regard such disquieting conditions as a product of advanced capitalism's consumer economy and argue that the harsh reality they form leads more and more young people to engage in inter-personal or intra-personal violence. At the same time, Bernburg et al. (2009) note that youngsters living in economically disadvantaged communities face an increased suicide risk, even if they are not disadvantaged themselves, due to their association with suicidal others.

Moreover, Parnaby and Sacco (2004) assert that, in contemporary, post-industrial, mass-mediated societies of the Western world, success is no longer, or at least not exclusively, associated with financial prosperity, but mostly with the acquisition of fame.

³ A term coined by Rojek (2001) to describe individuals like reality TV stars or lottery winners who suddenly rise to great yet evanescent fame.

Building on Merton's (1938) model, they acknowledge that, the strain created by the goal-means gap could, at times, drive disadvantaged individuals to 'innovative', deviant activities. In that regard, in a culture full of talent shows like X-Factor, and of self-destructive celebrities like Amy Winehouse, Britney Spears, Whitney Houston or Heath Ledger, where fame constitutes not an inevitable corollary, but the actual meaning of success, suicide is not necessarily a type of 'retreatism'. In this celebrity-centred culture, everyone is desperately looking for some kind of recognition, but the chances for working-class people to finally get it are de facto really thin, which is why they might be willing to resort to 'innovative', deviant activities in order to do so. It is therefore possible that poor individuals and especially susceptible adolescents regard suicide as a form not of 'retreatism', but of 'innovation', that is, a means to receive, in Andy Warhol's (cited in Parnaby and Sacco, 2004) terms, their fifteen minutes of fame.

Another aspect of modern existence that needs to be taken into consideration in the study of youth suicide is boredom and the consequent search for some form of excitement. Going back to the preceding link between socio-economic deprivation and suicide, Patterson and Pegg (1999) suggest that young people living in rural, isolated and usually poor areas often experience a deep sense of monotony, marginalisation and disenchantment. This feeling increases their inclination to high-risk behaviours like drug or alcohol abuse and has a noxious influence on their mental well-being, being associated with depression and suicide. Nonetheless, although this sense of boredom and alienation is, in all probability, more intensely experienced by those living in poverty, it may also go beyond one's poor conditions of life. As mentioned earlier, Durkheim (2002 [1897]) views the changes occurring through the process of modernisation as loosening the individual's links to society, thus rendering suicide a more likely possibility. Adding a generational dimension to the problem, Eckersley (1995) sees youth suicides as an indication of how unhappy contemporary youngsters are with their lives. He traces the roots of this unhappiness to modern Western culture and particularly, to its failure to provide individuals with a sense of purpose and belonging. In order to cope with the general feeling of anxiety and frustration pervading family and social life, young people, either of poor or affluent background, are, according to Eckersley (1995), likely to resort to deviant behaviour including crimes, self-harm, anorexia, drug or alcohol abuse and suicide.

Furthermore, the literature on the role of emotions in crime and deviance is also of interest here. In his 'Seductions of crime', Katz (1988) argues that, no matter what the

deviant act involves, the key in understanding it is the process of transcendence. Its seductiveness derives from the contrast between the intolerable mundane nature of modern existence and the altered state of consciousness produced by moving closer to, flirting with, and sometimes even crossing the line between rational and emotional control, between order and havoc. Going one step further, cultural criminologist Mike Presdee (2000) describes how the pleasurable and playful defiance of accepted norms and values and resistance to the authorities, previously limited to the carnival period, have nowadays become everyday practice in the form of crime and other acts of transgression. He regards cyberspace as the principal site of this 'carnival of crime' where the boundaries of order are frequently crossed and users can easily 'enjoy in private immoral acts and emotions' (Presdee, 2000: 64). This view of the Internet as a carnivalistic space where 'anything goes' and the influence it had on the construction of the Bridgend problem will be examined in more detail in Chapter Five.

Jeff Ferrell (2004) agrees that, through features like bureaucratic rationalisation, routinisation and regulation, modernism has a dehumanising effect, thereby allowing boredom to permeate our everyday life. Even though he does not make any reference to suicide, he recognises that in their search for a remedy to their existential despair people might attempt to find excitement through illicit means by engaging voluntarily in high-risk activities, which blur the boundaries between crime and commodity, pleasure and pain or even life and death. Hayward (2002: 84) makes a similar point, arguing that youthful transgressions can be seen as a 'controlled loss of control': an attempt of young people to fight the 'hyper-banalization' of late modern societies and attain a semblance of control over their lives, which are otherwise over-controlled by external forces. From this perspective, suicide can be perceived as a form of what Lyng (1990) defines as 'edgework': a risk-taking behaviour, which, through the defiance of social order, the exploration of such boundaries and the negotiation of the 'edge' allows those involved to experience moments of transcendence and to thus restore meaning to their otherwise mundane existence. On similar lines, Ortin et al. (2012) identify sensation seeking as a key risk factor for adolescent suicide ideation and suicide attempts. This conception of suicide as 'edgework' is reminiscent of the aforementioned research by Rubinstein (1983, cited in Gladwell, 2000) in Micronesia, which found that local incidents of youth suicide reached epidemic levels after hanging came to be regarded as an expressive or even ritualistic act that many adolescents wanted to try out, without, in all probability, realising the permanent consequences of it.

Adopting a broader perspective, the following section will look into the media's role in the construction of social problems in order to ultimately assess their contribution to the construction of suicide as such.

SECTION B

Assessing the media's role in the social problems game

1. A constructionist approach: Contrary to their objectivist counterparts, constructionist sociologists are not so interested in the actual conditions constituting a social problem, but in the process through which these are 'collectively defined' as such (Blumer, 1971). The complex claims-making process resulting in the construction of social problems is known as the 'social problems game' (Loseke, 2003a). Kitsuse and Spector (1973: 415) define social problems as 'the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions'. Irrespective of whether it reflects an objective reality or not, the condition identified as problematic supposedly deserves attention and needs to be eradicated, ameliorated or otherwise changed (Kitsuse and Spector, 1973). Before this identification takes place, the problem in question is either non-existent (Best, 1995; Loseke, 2003a) or exists only in a latent, unconstructed form (Jenkins, 2001).

Proponents of strict constructionism like Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) argue that making any assumptions about objective reality when adopting a constructionist point of view equals an 'ontological gerrymandering'. However, social constructionism does not aim to devalue objective reality, but to examine how we make sense of it (Loseke, 2003a). The claims-making process through which a problem is constructed does not take place in a vacuum, which is why it should always be studied in context (Best, 1995). Besides, even strict constructionists like Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) admit that, since a culture's assumptions are embedded in its language, it is practically impossible for the social researcher to avoid making any. Consequently, as Best (1995: 348) aptly points out, '[b]y default, all constructionist analysis becomes a form of contextual constructionism'.

2. Problem framing: Goffman (1986 [1974]: 21) argues that our subjective perception of objective reality is based on the use of 'frames'. According to him, a frame is a means for its users to be able 'to locate, perceive, identify and label a seemingly infinite number of

concrete occurrences defined in its terms'. In a similar fashion, Loseke (2003a) and other social problems theorists like Best (1995, 2008) and Sasson (1995) stress the inevitable human need to make sense of what happens in the physical world by creating patterns of meaning ('frames') and, therefore, consciously or unconsciously invoking familiar contexts to explain unfamiliar social conditions.

In order to understand the world surrounding us, we are expected to use the information (especially the images) we receive, either through personal experience or, more frequently, through secondary sources like the media, to create mental pictures of the typical and categorise diverse actual objects or conditions accordingly, depending on their similarity or dissimilarity to it. As far as social problems are concerned, this typification or framing process is well-planned and crucial to what Loseke (2003a) terms the 'social problems competition'. This competition refers to the dual quest of claim-makers, firstly, to 'construct' the problem, that is, to convince the public that a particular social condition is problematic and deserves its attention more than others and, secondly, to 'own' it, that is, to overshadow any alternative claims and make their definition of the problematic condition in question the dominant one (Best, 1990).

According to Holstein and Miller (1990) and Loseke (2003b), constructionists tend to focus on 'putative conditions', but there are also 'putative people' behind these conditions that also need to be taken into consideration. The identification of a particular social condition as problematic, they argue, automatically creates two main types of people: the 'victim' (the person experiencing harm) and the 'victimiser' (the person that chooses to do harm). The claims made in the context of the 'social problems game', Loseke (2003b) maintains, promote a specific way of 'thinking' and 'feeling' about these people-categories. On the one hand, 'victims' are seen as 'innocent' and 'moral'; they apparently bear no responsibility for the caused harm, which is why they deserve sympathy and concern. On the other hand, 'victimsers' are 'immoral' people who deliberately cause harm and who are therefore worthy of condemnation and punishment (Holstein and Miller, 1990). It is evident that the notions of morality and emotion are intertwined in social problems discourse.

However, the way in which these two notions operate in relation to suicide, where the 'victim' and the 'victimiser' are the same person, requires special scrutiny. Discussing the language and ethics of self-harm, Fairbairn (1995) stresses the cultural tendency to favour a view of the deceased as 'victim' rather than 'victimiser'. But, as the study of the Bridgend phenomenon in the following chapters will show, this construction of the

deceased as absolutely innocent means that the residual causal responsibility for his/her death needs to be transferred to someone or something else in order for the ‘immoral’ act of suicide to be made sense of. The recipient of the blame in such cases could be the Internet, journalists, mental health experts not providing the appropriate treatment to vulnerable individuals while still alive and so on. At the same time, extending Loseke’s (2003b) argument to a more contextual constructionist framework, this thesis aspires to point out that the emotional and moral talk around the problem should not be limited to a discussion about the sympathy- or condemnation-worthiness of the people involved. The significance of this discourse can only be fully grasped in the context of a much wider spectrum of emotions; a spectrum which in the case of suicide also includes the ‘psychache’ of those contemplating suicide (Shneidman, 1996); the boredom and alienation of those living in economically disadvantaged areas (Patterson and Pegg, 1999); the thrill of exploring the boundaries between life and death (Ortin et al., 2012); the shame of families trying to present suicides as accidental deaths or to conceal failed suicide attempts (Zilboorg, 1936); the reluctance of coroners to issue a suicide verdict if the available evidence is inconclusive (Surtees, 1992); the skepticism of journalists about the contagion effect of suicide coverage (Jamieson et al., 2003). Such emotions may precede the claims-making process but influence to a large extent the route that this will take as well as the consequent responses to the problem. For that reason, their consideration is essential in order to deal with the identified problem more effectively.

As pointed out by Cohen (2002 [1972]), when the claims about the existence of a problem are morally tinged, building on episodes allegedly posing a threat to moral values, the social reaction to it is analogous to that following a natural catastrophe and includes: a ‘warning’ and a ‘threat’ phase, where people become aware of a potentially problematic condition, gradually developing a greater sensitisation to any cues of danger; an ‘impact’ phase, consisting in the occurrence of the disaster and the immediate unorganised response to it; an ‘inventory’ phase, involving preliminary efforts to make sense of what happened and estimate the extent of the damage caused; finally, a ‘reaction’ phase, marking the transition from emergency to institutional coping mechanisms and eventually leading either to the reinstatement of the former equilibrium or an adaptation to the changes brought about by the disaster. This disaster sequence is constant and linear, but when the perceived ‘disaster’ is deviance, Cohen (2002 [1972]) maintains, and especially, for phenomena with a longer time span involving numerous individual events, it can also operate on a circular and amplifying basis. In that case, each new episode

increases the level of the alleged threat and therefore has the potential to cause a greater social reaction including intense public disquiet, calls for action and further acts of deviance. This amplification of deviance is reflected in, but also reinforced by the creation of an exploitative culture around it, within which various stakeholders such as businessmen, politicians, religious leaders and journalists, may take advantage of the deviant's marginal status to make profit (commercial exploitation); to announce or promote a certain, usually conservative, ideology (ideological exploitation); finally, to render the targeted individual/group an object of amusement or ridicule (Cohen 2002 [1972]).

This spiraling of events and escalation of reaction often evolves to what Cohen (2002 [1972]) defines as a 'moral panic'; a phenomenon, which, according to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) presents the following key features:

- Concern over a certain condition or behaviour and its social consequences;
- Hostility towards those causing the condition in question or engaging in this behaviour, portrayed in a stereotypical manner as 'folk devils';
- Consensus that there is an actual and serious threat posed by the members of this group and their behaviour;
- Disproportion between the perceived and the actual extent of the conduct or the threat it allegedly poses, resulting from a clear exaggeration of the latter, which apparently justifies a high degree of public anxiety;
- Volatility, which consists in panics erupting out of the blue, but also, subsiding nearly as suddenly as they emerged.

To these five elements, Garland (2008: 11) adds two more, which he views as inherent in the concept of moral panic. These are:

- The moral dimension of the social reaction and
- The conception of the deviant conduct as somehow symptomatic of a deeper social malaise.

All four of the preceding scholars (Cohen, 2002 [1972]; Garland, 2008; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009) agree that the media play a central role in bringing certain supposedly problematic behaviours to the public's attention and in that way determine, to a large extent, its reaction to them, thereby frequently igniting and embodying moral panics.

Although numerous claims-makers engage in the social problems game in an attempt to win it, some are more likely to do so since not all of them are considered equally trustworthy. Depending on their social status, there is an implicit 'hierarchy of credibility' to be followed, in the context of which it is primarily up to members of a superordinate group to define how things really are, while those belonging to a subordinate one are morally obliged to accept these definitions (Becker, 1967). The way in which this 'hierarchy of credibility' influences the claims-making process is particularly visible when the subject matter is related to crime and deviance. In that sense, the claims made by officials like a judge, a politician or a police officer are much more likely to be valued as more credible than those made by a criminal (Loseke, 2003a). At the same time, the increasing use of medical language in defining social problems (Conrad and Schneider, 1992) has promoted a new conception of the latter as illnesses or disorders and consequently reinforced the credibility of medical experts or even non-expert claims-makers intentionally using medical terms to add validity to their claims (Appleton, 1995; Best, 2008). From that perspective, deviant behaviours like alcoholism, drug addiction, crime and suicide are 'symptoms' of a particular 'disease' that needs to be 'diagnosed' and properly 'treated' in order to be 'cured' (Conrad and Schneider, 1992). As will be further explained in the following section, after a social problem is constructed and a single definition of it is crystallised, the views of 'owners', that is, of successful claims-makers, become familiar or are sometimes even taken for granted by the media, the public and the policymakers (Best, 2008).

3. Constructing a powerful news story/Constructing a social problem

A. A rhetorical exercise: The 'social problems game' is a rhetorical exercise ultimately aiming to convince the public of the problematic status of a particular condition. The role of the media in this process is crucial, since they have the ability to easily bring apparently alarming issues to the fore, thus raising public awareness around them and underlining the urgent need to take action. Though it is questionable whether media professionals build on pre-existing public anxieties or actually generate them themselves, their contribution to the determination of the public agenda is indubitable. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) point out that the media expression of fear or concern about a perceived threat constitutes a moral panic in itself irrespective of whether the public will eventually be persuaded of the existence of this threat and decide to adopt appropriate measures or not; a media-centred panic, yet a moral panic all the same. Therefore, as

argued by Cohen (1963: 13) with regard to the press, '[i]t may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about'.

Being aware of the media's key role in their claims reaching a wider audience, but also of their capacity to cover only a limited number of stories, claims-makers themselves tend to 'package' their arguments in a way that the media and by extension the public are likely to find appealing. In fact, the success of their claims essentially depends on their aptitude to present their views within such a media-friendly packaging (Loseke, 2003a; Best, 2008). In that sense, as media visibility and public concern are more and more closely associated with each other in the era of 24/7 news, the process of constructing a social problem, to a large extent, overlaps with that of constructing a powerful news story. Consequently, assessing the ability of a specific issue to be elevated to a problem in the eyes of the public requires assessing its newsworthiness, ultimately examining whether it has what it takes to draw the media's interest or not.

With respect to which events are most likely to feature in the media and thus come to the public's awareness, Galtung and Ruge (1965: 70-71) are the first ones attempting to systematically identify and categorise the parameters their newsworthiness is measured against. These parameters, often referred to as 'news values', are the following eleven:

- Frequency (long time-span);
- Threshold (high level of perceived importance);
- Unambiguity (clear meaning);
- Meaningfulness (cultural proximity or other relevance);
- Consonance (events corresponding to what one expects to happen);
- Unexpectedness (unpredictable and rare events);
- Continuity (links to previously published stories);
- Composition (all news sections need to be covered at all costs, even if with events of minor significance);
- Reference to elite people/nations (their actions are apparently more consequential than those of ordinary people);
- Reference to persons (events attributed to the actions of specific individuals rather than to complex social forces);
- Reference to something negative (events with adverse consequences).

Galtung and Ruge (1965) underline the interaction between these criteria, suggesting that the more of them an event meets, the more likely it is to be selected by journalists and make the news (selection). As soon as an event is selected to become news, they argue, the elements that make it newsworthy are emphasised (distortion). They also point out that these two processes of selection and distortion are replicated several times until the event finally comes to the public's attention (replication).

Following Galtung and Ruge's (1965) model, Chibnall (1977) discusses the professional imperatives that guide journalists to the construction of law and order news. He maintains that news stories normally involve events that have just happened (immediacy) and are rather dramatic (dramatisation). Their unambiguity (simplification) and association with specific individuals (personalisation), mainly celebrities, are, once again, viewed as key to their newsworthiness. Their news value is also contingent upon the level to which they satisfy readers' voyeuristic predilections (titillation) or offer a fresh angle (novelty) on what is already known, thereby encouraging speculation. Moreover, embracing Becker's (1967) 'hierarchy of credibility' concept, Chibnall (1977) stresses journalists' attempts to appear objective by firmly grounding their stories on official/expert statements (structured access). Finally, he underlines the media's tendency to reproduce dominant or, in Gramsci's (1971) term, 'hegemonic' ideology by placing the reported events within familiar interpretative frameworks (conventionalism). In the context of these frameworks, which are equated to Lang and Lang's (1955) 'inferential structures', the events in question and all subsequent ones are, often unwittingly, filtered and shaped to fit journalists' pre-conceptions. For instance, although the 1968 London anti-Vietnam war demonstration turned out to be far more peaceful than the media expected, its press coverage was still largely focused on the few violent confrontations between the protesters and the police (Halloran et al., 1970, cited in Chibnall, 1977). In that sense, Chibnall (1977: 37) argues, '[t]he reality of the event was subordinated to considerations of the 'event as news'.

Largely consistent with the works of the above-mentioned authors (Lang and Lang, 1955; Becker, 1967; Gramsci, 1971; Chibnall, 1977) is the concept of 'primary definition', developed by Hall et al. (1978) in 'Policing the Crisis'. According to them, those who originally define a social problem establish the parameters of any debate about it. This means that, in order for any alternative definitions of the matter to be taken into account, they need to be constructed as rebuttals of the original one, ultimately taking the following form: 'this is NOT a problem of X (where X is the primary definition), but of

Y or Z'. In that respect, the primary definition of a problem usually serves as a yardstick by which the relevance of all other claims/definitions to the debate is assessed. It is therefore much more likely for the primary definers to win the competition and 'own' the problem. Adopting a neo-Marxist perspective, which similarly to Chibnall's (1977) 'structured access' imperative stresses the media's tendency to promote the definitions of those in power, Hall et al. (1978) argue that it is chiefly representatives of the state (government, police, judiciary) who act as primary definers. In their view, journalists are secondary definers whose main role is to reproduce the primary definitions of the authorities, while 'translating' institutional jargon into everyday language. Disseminated through the media, the dominant ideology is eventually perceived as natural and inherently true.

One of the few recent studies offering an updated list of news values, mainly applicable to crime and deviance stories, is that of Jewkes (2011). Her list echoes those of Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Chibnall (1977), including news values similar to theirs, namely threshold, predictability, simplification, individualism, sex, celebrity or high-status persons and proximity. Nonetheless, Jewkes' (2011) analysis advances those preceding it by taking into account a number of additional elements likely to nowadays influence journalists' approach to a particular issue. These elements are: risk, violence, children, spectacle and graphic imagery and, finally, conservative ideology and political diversion. Jewkes (2011) refers to the emphasis media place on shocking, violent incidents, often of a sexual nature, and present them as the norm rather than the exception, thus creating an impression that we are all constantly at risk of being victimised. The notions of risk, sex and violence are, in such cases, intrinsically related to each other in order to produce a greater dramatic effect and attract the public's attention. This dramatic effect is also reinforced, according to her, via the publication of photographs. Apart from shocking, these photographs provide visual evidence for the arguments made in the main text and implicitly ask viewers to perceive what is apparently in front of their eyes as true. With regard to female victims, it is worth noting that the accompanying visuals contribute to their eroticisation, since they frequently portray them in a highly sexualised or even pornographic manner (Naylor, 2001; Jewkes, 2011).

As far as children and young people are concerned, Jewkes (2011) suggests that their association with any form of deviant behaviour is, due to its moral implications, likely to attract the media's interest. In a culture which largely views children as representing the future and personifying absolute innocence, their victimisation acquires

a symbolic meaning as it apparently indicates that the adult world has failed in its duty to protect them. Likewise, the active engagement of children and especially of teenagers in aberrant activities is also regarded as symptomatic of a moral decline and generally of a deeper social malaise. The image of a society which has lost its way is, according to Jewkes (2011), very common in crime and deviance news and often used by journalists and politicians to underline the significance of tackling the alleged threat to British moral standards. They argue for the criminalisation of any individual or behaviour transgressing an essentially conservative agenda. At the same time, the perceived urgency of the situation diverts attention away from other serious and complex social problems, which a black-and-white approach cannot always explain and solve.

The interest of news media in the links between technology and criminal/deviant behaviour has not been adequately explored by the above-mentioned studies and this is a gap that the current thesis aims to address. The classic studies of Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Chibnall (1977) refer to traditional media and therefore do not reflect the complexity of the 21st century media landscape. On the other hand, Jewkes' (2011) study, which is more recent, considers the different social, cultural and political aspects of the contemporary multi-mediated world. She discusses different types of cyber-crime/cyber-deviance made possible or facilitated through the use of new media technologies on criminal/deviant behaviours. These include intellectual property violations, child pornography, sexual grooming, identity theft, cyber-terrorism, sexting and so on. However, she focuses primarily on the potentials and risks of these new technologies rather than their role in the construction of newsworthy stories. Although she cites various news articles demonstrating the evident media interest in and great public concern over the 'dark side' of the Web, she does not sufficiently consider the news value of technology per se or the process through which such Internet-related stories are produced. In the light of the news construction of the Bridgend phenomenon as an 'Internet suicide' case, this thesis will highlight the role that this Internet dimension of the problem played in the increase of the story's newsworthiness; in its transition from local to national news prominence; ultimately, in the construction of the Bridgend suicide problem. Building on the preceding studies, I will examine the interaction of technology with news values like 'unexpectedness', 'dramatisation', 'personalisation', 'simplification', 'children' and especially 'risk'. It will be argued that nowadays the 'technologisation of risk' can boost the newsworthiness of a story even further than mere 'risk' and that, due

to the frequent ‘technologisation’ of criminal/deviant behaviour by news media, ‘technology’ should be regarded as a cardinal news value in itself (Chapter Five).

At the same time, the current thesis will also contribute to the existing ‘news values’ literature by looking at the relationship between local and national press, which goes largely unnoticed in the preceding studies focusing mainly on the latter. More specifically, in situations like Bridgend, where a long-lasting troubling condition suddenly becomes national news in 2008, the study of prior local press reports on the matter can put the extensive national coverage that followed into perspective (Chapter Three). The documentation of the process of transition of the story from local to national news will offer a better understanding of the news values operating in local and national media outlets and the relativity of newsworthiness depending on the targeted audience (Chapter Four). Although parallels will be drawn, wherever possible, between the local and national press, this does not mean that a comparative design will be adopted throughout the thesis. It is the national press which, as will be argued in the ensuing chapters, played a vital role in the construction of the Bridgend problem and is therefore at the centre of the present study. Consequently, the primary purpose of the conducted local press analysis is not to compare with but to contextualise and supplement the national press analysis that will follow.

All the preceding criteria of newsworthiness operate not merely on a media but also and on a broader social problems construction level, determining what issues are likely to draw the public’s interest. Apart from raising public awareness over an allegedly existing and harmful condition, the social problems game is nowadays also meant to outrage and to amuse, that is, to entertain (Curran and Sparks, 1991, cited in McRobbie and Thornton, 1995; Cohen, 2002 [1972]; Best, 2008). As a result, there is an increasing tendency amongst claims-makers to make their claims as spectacular and exaggerated as possible in order to attract more media and, subsequently, public attention (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995; Loseke, 2003a; Best, 2008). In other words, the preceding techniques are not just used by journalists aiming to make their stories more newsworthy, but also by various stakeholders in their attempts to win the social problems game (Best, 1990; Holstein and Miller, 1990; Jenness, 1995; Loseke, 2003a).

Underlining the alleged gravity of the subject matter is of key importance in the overlapping processes of constructing a powerful news story/a social problem. Hall et al. (1978) highlight journalists’ tendency to portray the reported events as just the ‘tip of the iceberg’, that is, as part of a broader and far more serious problem. Through the method

of convergence, they draw parallels between apparently, but not always actually, similar cases, all of which are, in the context of the created signification spiral, regarded as equally threatening. The same technique of association is also largely used by other claims-makers in the social problems game. As pointed out by Best (2008), claims about an aggravating condition, for example, a crime wave or any other problem allegedly reaching epidemic levels, are very frequent as they are much more likely to draw the public's interest. That is due to the fact that they enclose a sense of urgency, suggesting that the more we neglect tackling this condition, the more it risks spiraling out of control. Additionally, both Best (1990, 2008) and Loseke (2003a) refer to the techniques of 'domain expansion' and 'piggybacking' through which claims-makers associate the condition they identify as troubling with an already established social problem in order to attach legitimacy to their claims and create a greater dramatic effect. The first technique is used to construct this condition as an unknown aspect of an existing problem and particularly, one that confirms its seriousness as well as the moral imperative to take action. On the contrary, the second does not aim to categorise this condition as part of the constructed problem, but to emphasise the analogies between the two and to present both of them as equally troublesome. By using a problem that everyone is aware of as their starting point, claims-makers place the condition in question within a familiar context and contend that since the former, familiar matter has acquired a 'problem' status, then so should the latter.

B. The media as active constructors of social problems: The media's role in the social problems game is crucial not just because they allow claims-makers to reach out to a wider audience, but also and most notably, because the news production process and particularly, editors' and journalists' decisions over what issues will be reported and how are essential in our understanding of social reality. The preceding analysis of news values has made clear that, despite their alleged professional commitment to objectivity, journalists do far more than simply record human events. According to McQuail (2005: 101), reality, as presented in the news media, is a 'selective construct made up of fragments of factual information and observation that are bound together and given meaning by a particular frame, angle of vision or perspective'. From this point of view, news reports are not just objective reflections of what actually happened, but well-constructed narratives, aiming to attract the public's interest and convince readers that this is 'the way things [really] are' (Fulton, 2005a: 230). When the subject matter is a

social problem, this power to determine the theme of the story is intrinsically related to the assignment of (causal or treatment) responsibility (Iyengar, 1989; Loseke, 2003b). Adopting a Durkheimian perspective, Katz (1987) maintains that the consumption of news stories about crime and deviance needs to be regarded as a collective, ritual experience: readers reaffirm their moral values by denouncing the reported behaviours while assuming that their emotional reactions to the latter are shared by many others in society.

The conceptualisation of news media as means through which the dominant ideology is disseminated and naturalised [Gramsci (1971); Chibnall (1977); Hall et al. (1978)] might have been preponderant in the past and still is up to a certain point. Nevertheless, given the increasing media penetration of information technologies in our everyday lives, it is necessary that this model be reconsidered. As far as the study of crime and deviance is concerned, cultural criminology stresses and aims to make sense of the fluid boundaries between an event and its representation in contemporary culture. It is argued that the construction of meaning in a media-saturated era no longer involves a linear process but a series of 'media loops' (Manning, 1998) whereby social reality recreates itself in its own image. This view is consistent with the poststructuralist argument that texts are polysemic and that their meaning is determined not by the author but by the reader who interprets the text always in relation to other texts (Derrida, 1973, 1978; Barthes, 1974, 1977a). Kristeva (1986 [1967]) defines this interaction with other texts, which is essential to the construction of meaning, as 'intertextuality'. Ferrell (1999: 397) maintains that there is nowadays a mediated 'hall of mirrors where images created and consumed by criminals, criminal subcultures, control agents, media institutions, and audiences bounce endlessly one off the other'. As a result of this process of cultural looping, media representations of crime are never mere representations but become an integral part of the reality they represent by circling back to amplify, distort and redefine the criminal experience. For that reason, contemporary criminology needs to be culturally reflexive, that is, to acknowledge that presentation and re-presentation are today inevitably intertwined and to thus pay attention to the spectacular and carnivalistic dimension of crime (Ferrell et al., 2008).

In a multi-mediated world like ours, the mimetic function of media texts (Nichols, 1981; Hall, 1997; Orgad, 2012), that is, their ability to reflect reality, has reached new levels: the boundaries between text and lived experience are now blurrier than ever. Media representations are so 'realistic' and identical to what they represent that they

appear almost unmediated, serving as proof that something *really* happened even if they actually always favour a particular ideology. This is especially evident with regard to news photographs (Hall, 2010 [1973]), an issue which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. Greer (2007: 29; emphasis in the original) argues that more and more news stories and especially the ones related to crime and deviance, are nowadays ‘selected and ‘produced’ as *media events* on the basis of their visual [...] as well as their lexical-verbal [...] potential’. Moreover, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) acknowledge that any attempt to distinguish between the spectacular and exaggerated ‘reality’ of the media and what ‘real life’ actually is is futile since social meanings are today largely impregnated with media representations. They suggest that the classic ‘moral panic’ model be updated, since audiences are now much more ‘media literate’ than in the past and do not just passively consume any news story they are presented with. At the same time, ‘folk devils’ are no longer as marginalised and alienated as they used to be: they now have the power to defend themselves and get their own viewpoints across by using their own niche and micro-media to ‘counter [...] what they perceive as the biased media of the mainstream’ (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995: 568).

In the era of online social networking, when people are ‘always on’ (Baron, 2008), the argument made by McRobbie and Thornton (1995) is more valid than ever. According to Altheide (2009a), the contemporary expansion of the media and its plurality in the inclusion of alternative perspectives create a paradox: on the one hand, the media are to a large extent responsible for promoting moral panics by exaggerating public fears that lead to calls for greater social control and public policy changes. On the other hand, the concept of ‘moral panic’ also appears in news reports, especially editorials and op-eds, and alternative media that raise questions regarding the necessity of such social control efforts. Building on the preceding views, the media analysis of the following chapters will examine the role of the national press in raising concern around the Bridgend issue and assess the level to which this reached the level of a ‘moral panic’. It will closely study the arguments and counter-arguments made in relation to the nature and appropriate responses to the local suicide problem. Most importantly, it will consider whether the diversity of opinions expressed in the media arena and the power of ‘folk devils’ to respond to their critics in a multi-mediated world could result in a ‘reflexive’ moral panic: a dynamic situation of great moral anxiety where media professionals do not just assign causal responsibility (Iyengar, 1989; Loseke, 2003a) but are equally likely to acquire a ‘folk devil’ status themselves.

With regard to their role in construction of social problems, it is evident that the media are no longer, if they ever were, mere secondary definers, simplifying and reproducing the definitions of the powerful. On the contrary, they are much more actively involved in the struggle for ideological dominance and undertake a much more prominent role in the construction of social problems. More specifically, 21st-century news media often act as 'primary definers' themselves by being the first to make claims regarding the existence of a social problem and therefore triggering the claims-making process through their coverage (Cricher, 2003; Best, 2008). By acting as primary definers, the media are able to set their own interpretative framework, which is embedded in the public consciousness as the dominant one.

When media professionals decide to take initiative and make a claim instead of merely reproducing those of the authorities, they take the risk of framing a particular condition as a problem when no one else sees it as such or, even if this condition is identified as problematic, of questioning the dominant definition of it. For instance, Greer and McLaughlin (2010) describe how *The Guardian's* reporting on Ian Tomlinson's death during the 2009 G20 Summit protests in London destabilised the initial inferential structure established by officials, triggering a shift of attention from protester to police violence. The degree to which journalists try to construct a new problem or to change the way in which an existing one is perceived because they are actually interested in serving the public good by finding a solution to it or in order to promote their agendas is debatable. However, what is important here is, once again, their tendency to be more and more actively engaged in the claims-making process. If they succeed in drawing attention to the matter, then additional claims-makers are likely to enter the social problems game, offering alternative definitions in response to the original one promoted by the media (Best, 2008).

Indicative of this increasing media trend to make claims regarding a supposedly alarming social problem and to thus influence the public agenda is the emphasis they often place on the subject of social breakdown. Newspapers like *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* run numerous stories ranging from child neglect to teenage pregnancy and from gang crime to binge drinking under the notorious 'Broken Britain' banner. High-profile cases like that of 13-year-old father Alfie Patten (Morton, *The Sun*, 2009) or of David Askew, Garry Newlove and Fiona Pilkington, who were 'tormented to death by ASBO thugs' (Patrick, *The Sun*, 2010: 11), the alleged kidnapping of Shannon Matthews (Brooke, *Daily Mail*, 2008), which eventually proved to be staged by her mother, the abuse and

subsequent death of Baby P (Shanahan, *The Sun*, 2009) and so on are often regarded as illustrative examples of, what Murray (2003) defines as, a growing ‘underclass’: a group of people, living in the margins of society, who are not just poor, but ‘depraved poor’; people who were born outside marriage and who are violent; drop-outs with no aspirations or desire to work, who rely almost exclusively on the benefit system; ultimately, people who defy the established norms and values through their very existence.

Another example of how journalists can influence the public’s perception of a social problem, which acquires significance in the Bridgend case given the ‘Internet suicide cult’ claims, is the largely negative portrayal of the Web by traditional media. Enclosing a number of unforeseeable and possibly unmanageable risks, cyberspace is seen as yet another site of the risk society (Giddens, 1998; Beck, 2000, 2006). The alleged near-ubiquity of online risks cultivates a feeling of vulnerability and distrust and often results in a public clamour against new media, especially when young people are involved (Byron, 2008; Livingstone, 2009). Stories of cyber-deviance concerning Internet crimes and other morally reproachable online misbehaviours on the verge of legality like cyber-bullying, online grooming, easily accessible extreme pornography and pro-anorexia websites feature prominently in the news and claim to raise public awareness over the unknown ‘dark side’ of the ‘virtual’. It is precisely this increased media interest in cyber-deviance which, according to Wall (2001), forms the basis of the public’s concern around the issue and which ultimately dictates that the regulatory bodies take immediate action to allay it. Through their extensive coverage, such cases of cyber-deviance acquire a ‘signal’ function (Innes, 2004; Yar, 2010), that is, they are seen as demonstrative of the Internet’s ‘sinister’ nature and specifically, as ‘warning signals’ regarding the extent and distribution of risks across the Web. They are subsequently often adduced by journalists and policymakers aiming to point out the imperative, according to them, need for more or better control over online content. It is indubitable, Wall (2001) argues, that the Web has a deviant side, but this is hardly as pervasive as the media present it to be. Likewise, Wykes (2010) points out that, when newspapers address the issue of cyber-deviance, they frequently resort to technological determinism, focusing more on the supposedly ‘corrupting’ nature of the Internet rather than the behaviour of human beings using the medium for their deviant activities. Consequently, the media are, to a large extent, responsible for a negative view of the Web, presenting it as ‘a criminogenic virtual environment – as a crime problem in and of itself’ (Wall, 2010: 100) and thus, inciting a

public fear of technology (Yar, 2010). Nevertheless, in an era when newspaper titles have embraced multi-platform and multimedia storytelling in order to keep up with the demands of the competitive 24/7 news environment, a distinction between offline and online news seems anachronistic (Allan, 2006; Hall, 2008). As argued by Curran et al. (2012), the emergence of the Web has not undermined leading news organisations, but given them the opportunity to extend their hegemony across technologies. This media convergence that blurs the boundaries between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media raises questions regarding the frequent demonisation of the Internet by journalists. The issue will be further discussed in Chapter Five.

4. Media constructions of the suicide problem: The news value of suicide is analogous to that of crime, which, as an act unexpectedly disrupting social order and having negative consequences for the people involved and society as a whole, is, by definition, noteworthy (Jewkes, 2011). Nonetheless, the fact that all suicide incidents meet the minimum level of importance required to make news does not mean that all of them do. In fact, only a small minority of them, usually the most atypical and dramatic ones, are actually reported in the print media (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009). Michel et al. (1995) argue that suicide attempts appear in the news only for celebrities and that the majority of published suicide stories refer to completed suicides, usually to young people who ended their lives by shooting or hanging themselves. The use of such suicide methods allows journalists to construct appealing, dramatic narratives. Given that they are more common among male rather than female victims, who tend to adopt less violent techniques like self-poisoning (Platt, 1992), it is no surprise that it is primarily male suicides that hit the headlines (Weimann and Fishman, 1995). Of course, by contrast, this means that if a female victim were to use such a violent method to take her life, the incident would be much more unusual and unexpected and so, it would, in all probability, receive much more media attention than any concurrent male suicide.

Coyle and MacWhannell (2002:705) identify five key concepts around which press suicide stories are built:

- Dramatising;
- Locating;
- Social impacting;
- Causal searching;
- Moral labelling.

According to them, the relevant events are presented in a visually compelling way, forming a drama that the reader is invited to look in upon or imagine. For example, the latter is often led through the eyes of the narrator towards the discovery of the victim's body, a typical scene re-enacted in suicide stories. The body, the act and the person *per se* are located within a geographical, temporal or social context. The reader is, thus, informed not just about the site where the victim took his/her life, but also about where he/she lived or worked, about his/her family and friends or even about other suicides having occurred in the same area. It is evident that such information contributes to the personalisation of the story and boosts its 'human interest' appeal. This appeal is reinforced even further through the emphasis placed on the repercussions of the suicidal act, which are usually seen as extending beyond the deceased and having a wider social impact. Referring to how people reacted to the event, particularly, to the grief and shock of relatives, acquaintances, bystanders or, generally, the local community is imperative for the construction of a successful suicide story. It is through the accounts of all these people that the victim is, in a sense, brought back to life in order for the reader to understand who he/she was and, if possible, why he/she chose to end it all so abruptly. In that way, as aptly pointed out by Coyle and MacWhannell (2002: 705), the suicide story is read like an 'unravelling mystery – a why dunnit'.

As far as causal searching is concerned, journalists are frequently criticised for presenting suicide as mono-causal by promoting simplistic explanations and focusing primarily on factors like relationship or financial problems rather than complex issues like depression and other mental illnesses (Weimann and Fishman, 1995; Frey et al., 1997; Hawton and Williams, 2001). However, Coyle and MacWhannell (2002) suggest that depression is the most common psychological factor linked to suicidal behaviour to the point where journalists almost take it for granted that, when readers are informed about the victim's mental disorder, they will infer this was the main cause of his/her suicide. In a similar fashion, looking at suicide from a Foucauldian point of view, Marsh (2010) also argues that the discourse surrounding it in official and media reports encourages its conception as tragic and pathological. The potency of this 'pathologisation' discourse, he notes, is such that it ends up being elevated to a 'truth' status and regarded as the unequivocal 'reality' of suicide; a reality originating from deeply-rooted cultural definitions of mental illness.

Rose (2005) points out the great emphasis psychiatrists nowadays place on risk calculation by regarding every patient as a potential threat to himself/herself and to

others. The transition from an asylum-based to a community-based treatment of the mentally ill has blurred the boundaries between the 'mad' and the 'normal'. This uncertainty over who these people are and what they are capable of has produced a discourse of anxiety and fear which is prevalent in and reinforced through the news media. Going back to the discussion on news values, it is precisely the notion of 'risk' (Jewkes, 2011) and especially the (often simplistic) association of mental illness with violence (Philo et al., 1996; Cross, 2010) that makes stories about 'maniacs' and 'psychopaths' newsworthy. The newsworthiness of such stories, however, primarily involves inter-personal violence. By contrast, intra-personal violence in the form of self-destructive behaviour is unlikely to attract as much media attention, being frequently seen as a personal and private rather than a social matter, let alone an ordinary one when linked to mental health problems (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002; Jamieson et al., 2003). Psychiatrists and psychologists are largely considered the primary definers of what 'mental illness' is or is not, but when cited in news reports, they necessarily accommodate a generalising 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow, 1979). Their arguments are adapted to the format and idiom of the used medium and presented as part of a narrative likely to attract the public's attention. In the case of mental illness, this 'media logic' reflects culturally grounded assumptions about what 'madness' looks like (staring eyes, dirty or torn clothes, untidy hair, speaking to oneself, seeing things that are not there etc); it often goes as far as to challenge the definitions of the psychiatric authorities in favour of what is deemed to be right in front of every reasonable person's eyes (Cross, 2010).

As far as suicide is concerned, the establishment of this pathological 'regime of truth' allows a number of assumptions to be made (Marsh, 2010). First of all, there is allegedly no reason for someone to take their life other than being mentally ill. The possibility of someone consciously deciding to terminate their life, being fully aware of the consequences, is inconceivable and any alternative understanding of suicide as a non-pathological, voluntary, fearless, noble, dignified or even heroic act is rejected not just as unlikely, but also as unethical. 'Ignoring the biological and psychopathological causes and treatments of suicidal behavior is clinically and ethically indefensible', argues psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison (1999: 255) in her study of suicide, obviously confirming its dominant view as a medical problem. Furthermore, this view suggests that a considerable number of suicides can be prevented since those mostly at risk are identifiable and usually present evident signs of distress. But even the ones who do not give any such 'warnings' and whose suicide is absolutely unexpected are often posthumously regarded

as having suffered from an underlying mental disorder, which, eventually, took its toll, leading them to the decision to end their lives in this tragic way (Marsh, 2010). In any case, the presumed pathology of suicide prevents 'sick' individuals, attempting to kill themselves, from being held accountable for their actions. On the contrary, responsibility transfers to medical professionals like psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists and suicidologists: it is primarily up to them to define what the suicide problem consists in and how it should be dealt with. At the same time, they are the first ones to take the blame for not adequately discharging their duties with regard to suicidal patients (Marsh, 2010).

When there is no evident reason for the victim's suicide, Coyle and MacWhannell (2002) note that this is reported in the press as a causal mystery. Such reports, they argue, usually involve students and, generally, promising young people, who apparently had everything to live for, but inexplicably decided to kill themselves. They are built on the notion of 'normality', supported by family and friends describing the victim as normal and happy and insisting they had no indication of him/her being suicidal. According to Coyle and MacWhannell (2002), such stories are most likely to appear in tabloid newspapers, particularly, on the front, or close to front, page and in large headlines. Aside from their dramatic and 'human interest' value, their appeal essentially consists in that, although there is no obvious reason as to why the person resorted to suicide, it is implicitly assumed there is something hidden or unknown; a secret, in whose unravelling readers are invited to participate.

As for moral labelling, Coyle and MacWhannell (2002) regard it as almost inextricably intertwined with causal searching. That is because speculation about the causes behind one's suicide allows judgements to be made about the moral character of the deceased. They suggest there is an inverse relationship between the occasional victim's moral identity and the cause of suicide. This means that the more moral, vigorous and competent the person is portrayed as, the less understandable their suicide becomes. In contrast, incidents where the victim is assumed to be of a lesser moral integrity, for instance, due to having problems with the law or to being a drug addict, are viewed as less difficult to explain. It is the moral label attributed to the person, Coyle and MacWhannell (2002) conclude, which ultimately determines the amount of media attention the event in question will receive. In that sense, the suicides of apparently 'morally perfect' victims are more likely to feature in more extensive and prominently positioned news reports than those of 'weak' or 'defective' ones.

Lastly, discussing the newsworthiness of suicide, Thom et al. (2011) underline journalists' increased interest in Internet-related cases and, particularly, their tendency to stress the possibility of a website involvement, while downplaying the suicide events per se. More specifically, they regard the Internet as constituting the 'x-factor' that renders such cases novel, exceptional and, therefore, newsworthy. They note that the media coverage of website-related suicide cases is usually rather sensational and exaggerates the Internet's ability to push vulnerable individuals towards killing themselves. The emphasis placed by news media on the potential links between suicidal behaviour and the Internet, is, according to Thom et al. (2011), such that it often ends up overshadowing and marginalising the potential role of other factors, especially, of mental well-being, in the victim's death.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out the theoretical and conceptual framework within which the subsequent analysis of the press coverage of the Bridgend phenomenon will be situated. I have argued that in our media-saturated world the influence of traditional and new media on suicidal behaviour per se and the understanding of the suicide problem needs to be further scrutinised. Adopting a contextual constructionist approach, I have looked both at different theories on the aetiology of suicide and the processes through which the latter is constructed as a media product and a social problem. More specifically, I have examined various psychological and socio-economic factors that might have an effect on one's decision to take his/her own life, focusing especially on the risk of a Werther effect posed by suicide news reports and the Internet. I have considered the limitations of official statistics, which do not necessarily reflect the actual extent of the suicide problem, and also noted that the mere presence of a certain condition is not enough for it to be identified as problematic. Moreover, I have discussed the way in which social reality is constructed, focusing primarily on the role of the media in the so-called 'social problems game'. I have drawn parallels between this game and the journalistic process of constructing an appealing story based on certain news values, viewing both as rhetorical exercises whose ultimate goal is to attract the public's attention.

Due to the great media interest in and public concern over the risks deriving from technologisation of everyday life, I have argued that technology should be elevated into a cardinal news value. Furthermore, I have maintained that in a multi-mediated era journalists do not merely challenge the definitions of the authorities, but often find their own definitions being challenged by a highly sophisticated audience; they assign causal

responsibility, but may occasionally acquire a 'folk devil' status themselves. Finally, I have suggested that emotions play a key part in the social problem construction process, but also that in the case of suicide, where the victim and the perpetrator are the same person, there is a wider emotive spectrum in place; a spectrum that goes beyond the sympathy/condemnation binary and needs to be further explored. It is now time to proceed to the discussion of the methodology employed in the current thesis and of the ethical dilemmas related to the study of suicide, even if that be on a media level. These issues will constitute the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

Chapter Two examined the key concepts, which this thesis builds on, focusing, particularly, on suicide and the way in which it is portrayed in the news media. Before looking at how these concepts apply to the Bridgend case, it is imperative to document the research methods used to do so, which will be the topic of the current chapter. I will begin by underlining the importance of as well as the sensitivities related to the study of suicide reporting. I will then move on to identify and explain the criteria based on which my sample articles were collected. In terms of their study, I will point out the significance of a mixed methods approach, yet of one that is primarily qualitative rather than quantitative. The choice of qualitative or ethnographic document analysis and in-depth interviews as the main research methods employed for the purposes of this project will be justified here and the process of their application will be described in detail. Research difficulties pertinent to accessibility and to the general perception of youth suicide as a taboo subject will be considered. Finally, the need to place and make sense of all the relevant claims within the Bridgend context and most importantly the process of doing so will also be discussed.

1. A case study design

The current project takes the research design of a case study (Yin, 2003) which primarily looks at the emergence and evolution of the Bridgend suicide problem in the British national press in the two-year period between 2008 and 2009. The case study researcher does not always aim to study cases that are extreme or extraordinary but to provide an apt context for certain research questions to be answered (Bryman, 2012). As Best (2003) points out with regard to the study of different social problems, researchers do not need to study satanic ritual abuse to advance knowledge; they can still do so by offering an in-depth analysis of their chosen topic, no matter how mundane that might be.

My selection of the Bridgend case as a research topic was based on my conviction that it constituted a matter of great importance, which deserved to be studied in its own right: its seriousness was almost self-evident, since it involved the sudden deaths of more than twenty young people in the South Wales area. As explained in Chapter One, the spatio-temporal clustering of suicides is not an unusual phenomenon and there have

been numerous studies looking at different suicide clusters around the world (Tousignant et al., 2005; Cheng et al., 2007; Exeter and Boyle, 2007; Gould et al., 2014; Ueda, 2014). As a case study of suicide clustering, the Bridgend phenomenon may indeed not be so extraordinary, but this does not mean that an in-depth analysis of the way it developed and the social factors that potentially contributed to it like that offered by Jones et al. (2013) is insignificant. This thesis will add to the examination of the local suicide problem and consider the 2008 local incidents within the wider socio-economic context of Bridgend, but only for contextual purposes. Its main focus will be the news coverage of the relevant events and the construction of the Bridgend problem by the national press and that is precisely where its originality lies. The Bridgend suicides may have been common as a case study of suicide clustering, but as a media phenomenon constitute a case study of unique empirical value. The issue was widely covered in the news. It was not a one-off case, but one whose ‘media life’ extended over several months, generating plenty of follow-up stories. Moreover, it was an exceptional case not just in terms of the way in which the local suicides were reported in the press, but most importantly in terms of the questions it raised in journalistic circles over the professional standards surrounding the reporting of such delicate situations. The element of media reflexivity and specifically the dual role of journalists as both constructors of and possible contributors to the local problem differentiated Bridgend from the average suicide story; it rendered Bridgend an empirically rich case whose analysis would offer an in-depth understanding of media responsibility in relation to suicide coverage.

It needs to be acknowledged that as a case study my project is self-contained and not concerned with generalizability (Bryman, 2012). My findings are intrinsically related to the Bridgend events appearing in the news in the 2008-2009 period, which means that it would in all probability be inappropriate to view them as directly applicable anywhere outside this specific temporal and geographical context. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that the Bridgend case constitutes a media phenomenon that goes beyond Bridgend. In the post-Leveson era, the issue of media responsibility is more pressing than ever. The discussion of the Bridgend suicides during the Leveson Inquiry attests to the broader significance of this particular case in the field of suicide reporting. The Bridgend case has clear policy implications relating to the way in which media professionals and the new press regulator will handle similar sensitive cases in the future. Consequently, the current study undoubtedly has much to contribute to future research on suicide reporting as a media practice and on social problems construction.

Due to its media focus, my thesis is not based on primary suicide research, but on a secondary-level analysis of suicide news reports; yet, the sensitivities related to suicide as a subject matter are present in it all the same. Fincham et al. (2008) underline the emotional toll that working with disturbing secondary data can often take on researchers. They argue that, despite the distance separating them from those directly affected and that they knowingly enter the research process with some expectation of what they might find, there is a high likelihood that researchers also experience a considerable amount of distress as a result of their contact with death-related material. Their argument refers to the study of suicide files in a coroner's office, but my personal encounter with the Bridgend-related articles suggests that this is also valid for suicide news stories. By saying this, it is hardly my intention to equate my experience of suicide in the context of this project to that of people who knew the victims or who were actively involved in the subsequent inquests into their deaths, for example, coroners or police officers. Such a comparison would be inappropriate, to say the least. My actual point is that the emotions surrounding suicide as a social event are so strong that they inevitably pervade any attempt to make sense of it, be it on a familial, official or academic, primary or secondary level. After all, the researcher is, as aptly pointed out by Fincham et al. (2008), also part of a late modern culture which marginalises death and denies suffering. Within this culture, suicide is considered a taboo topic. Even if deliberate and well-organised, the study of suicide reports, which usually comes down to reading about the victims' hopeless lives, their emotional turmoil and the pain of the grieving families, is, according to the aforementioned authors, likely to bring researchers before their own distress and to make them more aware of their own mortality. I consider this to be an accurate account of my engagement with the Bridgend-related articles for the purposes of this research, especially given the high number and the young age of victims, which rendered the analysis even more disturbing.

What helped me cope with the distressing nature of my research topic was my conviction that such a study of suicide reporting was absolutely necessary and that there were a lot of lessons to be learnt from the Bridgend experience. As already mentioned, journalists are nowadays not mere constructors of powerful suicide narratives aiming to sell more papers. They are much more actively involved not just in explaining, but even in causing, or, at least, triggering the problem. Researchers like Hawton and Williams (2001) and Pirkis et al. (2009) acknowledge that modification of suicide reporting could make an actual difference in the field of suicide prevention. In fact, it is argued that,

unlike other contributory factors to suicide such as socio-economic deprivation, mental health conditions or heredity, journalists' attitude towards the subject can easily change and that is precisely where the significance of suicide reporting lies (Hawton and Williams, 2001). Consequently, the value of a study on the latter, and, correspondingly, on any risks or benefits deriving from it, is not limited to a theoretical analysis of the corresponding discourse. Apart from looking more closely at how media representations of the matter can affect public understandings of and policy responses to it, such a study can also have a positive influence on distressed and susceptible individuals, whose lives are at stake. The analysis of the Bridgend coverage in this thesis aims to contribute to this end by influencing future suicide reporting; particularly, by illustrating, through the case in question, what journalists need to do, or, in most cases, to abstain from doing, so as to report suicide responsibly and therefore not to push those at risk over the edge.

The present project is, to a large extent, consistent with Cohen's (2002 [1972]) disaster analogy and, more specifically, with his 'warning-impact-reaction' model. It documents how the initial warnings about the Bridgend matter were missed only to appear much later in the national British press due to certain events of exceptional newsworthiness; how each new suicide in the area was made sense of in the context of all the preceding incidents; how this conception of the problem amplified the level of the perceived threat, consequently intensifying the degree of public concern and the calls for action; finally, how this concern translated into policy. On a horizontal level, my thesis studies the transition of the Bridgend case across the different stages of the social problems process (Best, 2008). On a vertical level, it looks at the different themes pervading this process and forming the frames through which the local suicides are explained.

In my research, I have adopted a mixed methods approach, which is primarily based on the qualitative analysis of the collected data, since this is, according to Kral et al. (2012), the most suitable to provide a substantive understanding of the complexity of suicide. Particularly, in order to examine the nature and social implications of the constructed Bridgend problem, I have employed the following research methods:

- Qualitative or ethnographic content analysis and
- In-depth interviews.

However, before justifying my choice of methods and discussing any further what each of them consists in, it is necessary to first specify the criteria which data collection was based on.

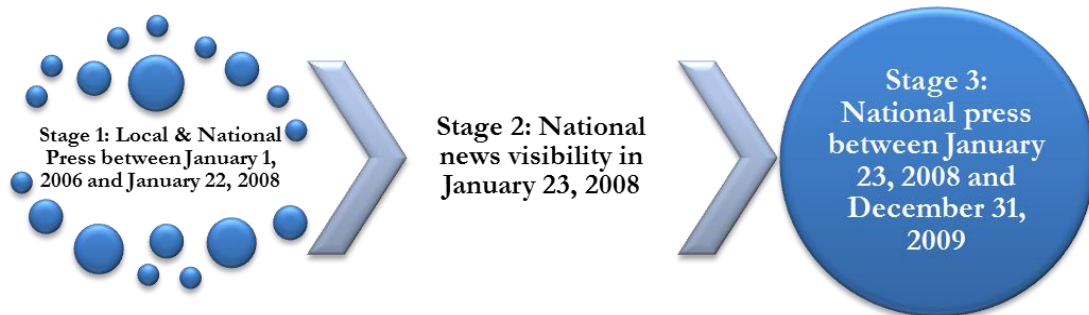


Figure 3.1: The stages based on which Bridgend-related press reports were collected and analysed

2. Data collection and analysis

A. Collection of Bridgend-related news reports: Through a preliminary search in the *Nexis UK* database for national press reports containing the terms ‘Bridgend’ and ‘suicide’, I was able to locate the date when the matter hit the headlines, which was January 23, 2008. Before that date, there was limited reference to the Bridgend problem compared to the plethora of relevant articles published after it. As shown in Figure 3.1, my press analysis revolves around that key date and is organised in three main stages: first, the two-year period before that date, marking the road to national news visibility; then, the breaking of the Bridgend story in the national British press on that date and the initial reactions to it; finally, the two-year period after that date, registering the crystallisation of the Bridgend condition’s problematic status, the constant negotiation of the meaning attached to it, the increasing mobilisation around it, the adoption of more organised responses and, eventually, the attenuation of concern over the issue and the apparent restoration of the former equilibrium. By organising my analysis around these stages, my intention is to distinguish between a pre- and a post-Bridgend era in order to trace the roots of the increased national press attention of 2008; also and most importantly, to look at whether this attention changed the way in which the issue was perceived until then and, if so, in what way. It is worth noting that stage 2, referring precisely to the moment when national news journalists became interested in the Bridgend case, is practically also part of stage 3, which focuses on the overall aftermath of its extensive coverage. However, the original press reports on the Bridgend suicides are of exceptional significance in terms of illustrating why a long-lasting local condition

was suddenly deemed newsworthy and how this condition was primarily defined. That is why stage 3 considers the original stories appearing in the national press within the entirety of the Bridgend coverage, while stage 2 studies them in their own right.

Regarding the time span of my analysis, there is a reason why this extends over the four-year period between January 1, 2006 and December 31, 2009: when the Bridgend story breaks the national news threshold in January 2008, it does not involve a single suicide, but numerous incidents having occurred in the Bridgend area since January 2007. The issue comes to the fore in 2008 and, while it is still in the press' spotlight, the suicides keep coming. From this perspective, the main Bridgend events unfold between 2007 and 2008. However, apart from these two years, I have also chosen to look at news reports from 2006 and 2009 for completion purposes. On the one hand, the study of 2006 reports seeks to examine whether there were any indications prior to the 2007-2008 events that there was a suicide problem in Bridgend which was going to attract a lot of news attention in the following years. On the other hand, that of 2009 reports aims to assess the length of the Bridgend story's media life and to look at how the matter, including any policy responses to it, is approached when the national press' interest in it is no longer as intense. Therefore, the adopted four-year time frame from 2006 to 2009 aspires to cover the full spectrum of the Bridgend problem from the first concerns about it to the established consensus over its existence and the need to do something about it, to its evolution over time and eventually its institutionalisation.

Examining the news prominence of the Bridgend case during this 4-year period will offer an insight into the fluctuating newsworthiness of the story: it will shed light not only on the elements that make the story front-page news in the first place, but also on those that allow it to maintain its newsworthiness in the months that follow and by extension those that ultimately lead to journalists' fatigue with the topic. Going back to the discussion on news values, it is essential to pay as much attention to the individual reports as to the Bridgend suicides as a recurrent news story in the national British press and that is exactly what this thesis will do in the ensuing chapters. Particularly, the way in which news values relating to the unfolding of the reported events and the links to previously published stories ['frequency' and 'continuity' (Galtung and Ruge, 1965); 'immediacy' and 'novelty' (Chibnall, 1977); 'threshold' and 'predictability' (Jewkes, 2011)] operate in the rolling Bridgend story requires special scrutiny: the construction of the Bridgend problem to a large extent involves acquiring a sound grasp of the dynamic nature of the Bridgend narrative; a narrative which, as will be explained in Chapter Four,

gradually evolves to include new events and new claims about the local suicide problem, but at the same time is grounded in events and claims that have appeared in prior reports. Based on the literature on newsworthiness and especially the newsworthiness of suicide (see Chapter Two), my initial expectations were that a potential Internet involvement would be emphasised throughout the Bridgend coverage (Thom et al., 2011) and regarded as the main cause of the local suicide problem; that every new victim would add novelty to the story (Chibnall, 1977) and generate a new round of press reports on the topic; that aside from the unpredictable suicide incidents, the Bridgend narrative would also contain an element of predictability (Jewkes, 2011), following the progress of the coroner's inquests into the individual suicide incidents and the announcement of his verdicts; that the view of the Bridgend suicides as a mental health matter would establish mental health experts as 'primary definers' of the problem, but also have a negative impact on the newsworthiness of the story (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002; Cross, 2010); finally, that journalists would not merely reproduce but also advance or even challenge the definitions provided by the authorities with regard to the Bridgend problem (Cricher, 2003; Best, 2008). The media analysis of the following chapters will reveal the level to which these initial expectations were met.

Stage 1 is largely dependent on stages 2 and 3, which ultimately constitute the main focus of this thesis. Any reference to the Bridgend suicides made either in the regional or the national papers before 2008 may be seen as a signal of the subsequent reaction to them and thus deserves to be closely examined. However, it is chiefly through its extensive national press coverage from January of that year onwards that the issue reaches a wider audience, generating far greater concern and coming to be seen as a problem. That is why my national press analysis extends over the whole period under study between January 2006 and December 2009, while its regional press counter-part is limited to the pre-2008 era. Regarding January 23, 2008 as the borderline date for the construction of the local suicide problem, I collected all the Bridgend-related news stories published in four regional and eight national newspapers during the two years prior to it. I also did the same for all the relevant articles having appeared in the latter national papers either on that or any other date in the two years succeeding it.

As far as regional titles are concerned, the main criterion for their selection has been their coverage area. I looked at all the paid-for regional papers covering the Bridgend area, which, according to the data found on the website of the Joint Industry Committee for Regional Media Research (JICREG, 2012), include, first and foremost,

the *Glamorgan Gazette*, but also, the *South Wales Echo*, the *Western Mail* and the *Wales on Sunday* newspapers, all of which are published by Media Wales Ltd. As made clear on both the Media Wales (2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d) and the JICREG (2012) websites, the *Gazette* is the main Bridgend newspaper; the *Echo* covers Cardiff and the wider South Wales Valleys area, while the *Western Mail* and the *Wales on Sunday* the entirety of Wales.

The dominance of the *Glamorgan Gazette* in Bridgend's regional press market is evident in the percentage rates of AIR⁴ for October 2007/April 2008 which show the number of adult readers within the newspaper's marketing area:

AIR% for October 2007/April 2008: *Glamorgan Gazette*: 54,9/52,85; *South Wales Echo*: 13,58/12,77; *Western Mail*: 5,21/5,02; *Wales on Sunday*: 5,34/5,23 [historical data obtained from the JICREG (2007, 2008) website].

However, though more focused on Bridgend, the *Gazette* is a weekly newspaper and so, it is, at times, de facto impossible for it to capture and report on the flow of events as they occur. Daily papers like the *Echo* and the *Western Mail* have much more potential in that respect and that is exactly why their role in the rise of the Bridgend problem to national news attention should, under no circumstances, be underestimated.

Table 3.A: National newspapers sample formation	
	Circulation in January 2008 [Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), cited in MediaGuardian, 2011a, 2011b]
Broadsheets	
<i>The Times/Sunday Times</i>	633,718/1,231,374
<i>Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph</i>	890,086/633,639
<i>The Guardian/The Observer</i>	378,394/444,951
<i>The Independent/Independent on Sunday</i>	250,641/250,641
Mid-sheets	
<i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>	2,313,908/2,330,366
<i>Daily Express/Sunday Express</i>	752,669/704,436
Tabloids	
<i>The Sun/News of the World</i>	3,209,776/3,264,676
<i>Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror</i>	1,512,559/1,366,922

⁴ AIR: Average Issue Readership.

With regard to national newspapers, I chose to look at the titles which in January 2008 had the highest circulation within the sub-market in which they operated. Particularly, I looked at four daily titles from the quality and four from the mid- and the popular market (Sparks, 1999) as well as their Sunday equivalents. Despite having the third highest circulation among daily broadsheets [Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), 2008, cited in MediaGuardian, 2011a], I regarded a newspaper with a rather specialised thematic focus and readership like the *Financial Times* as having little to offer to my research and, therefore, decided to exclude it from my sample. After this exclusion, the latter comprised of the national daily and Sunday titles shown in Table 3.A.

After defining which local and national papers would be included in my final sample and in order to locate all the Bridgend-related articles having appeared in them during the period of interest, I once again used the *NexisUK* database, this time in a more systematic way: I searched for articles containing the terms 'Bridgend' or 'South Wales' and 'suicide' having been published in the aforementioned national daily and Sunday newspapers between January 23, 2008 and December 31, 2009. I also performed the same search for the local press, particularly, for any relevant articles in *South Wales Echo*, the *Western Mail* or the *Wales on Sunday* newspapers between January 1, 2006 and January 22, 2008. *NexisUK* does not provide access to *Glamorgan Gazette* articles, which is why, as will be explained later on, these had to be traced manually on the following phase.

Despite facilitating the media analyst's work by allowing keyword search across a plethora of newspaper reports, *NexisUK* presents a main disadvantage when used for qualitative research: it does not reproduce articles as they appeared in the paper the day they were published, but only offers access to their text, while omitting any accompanying images. Nevertheless, it has already been pointed out that, in our era, journalists rely heavily on the use of visuals to construct powerful stories. It is precisely their occasional availability or non-availability which, to a large extent, determines the amount of news attention a certain story will receive (Fulton, 2005a; Greer, 2007; Jewkes, 2011). Moreover, although *NexisUK* provides the number of the page in which the corresponding report appears, it leaves the researcher completely in the dark regarding its placement on the page or the spread, its salience and the framing devices used to link it to or to separate it from the other textual or visual elements published alongside. Yet, it has been acknowledged that newspaper layout, particularly, the way in which the individual elements of the page such as headlines, text, photographs or charts are brought together into a coherent and eloquent whole (Hartley, 1982; Kress and van

Leeuwen, 1998) serve a signifying purpose. Consequently, as far as the current project is concerned, it was imperative that the analysis of the Bridgend coverage was not limited to the texts found through *NexisUK*, but that all the relevant articles were studied exactly as they had appeared in print. After having located all but the *Gazette's* Bridgend-related reports amongst the *NexisUK* results, I cross-checked my list by tracing them manually in the British Library's newspaper archives in Colindale, where copies of the original papers were held in microfilm format. The *Glamorgan Gazette* articles were also located in the same way, as archival copies of the newspaper in question were also available at the library. By acquiring access to the *Gazette's* archive, maintained in the newspaper library, I was, finally, able to complete my collection of Bridgend-related reports for the period and the newspapers of interest. Table 3.B shows the composition of the final newspaper sample studied in the context of the current project:

Table 3.B: Composition of final newspaper sample		
	Bridgend-related articles between 1/1/2006 and 22/1/2008	Bridgend-related articles between 23/1/2008 and 31/12/2009
Regional press		
<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>	46	N/a
<i>South Wales Echo</i>	19	N/a
<i>Western Mail</i>	6	N/a
<i>Wales on Sunday</i>	1	N/a
Total	72	N/a
National press		
<i>The Times/Sunday Times</i>	2/0	45/4
<i>Daily Telegraph/Sunday Telegraph</i>	2/0	23/7
<i>The Guardian/The Observer</i>	0/0	30/10
<i>The Independent/Independent on Sunday</i>	1/0	25/11
<i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>	3/0	33/4
<i>Daily Express/Sunday Express</i>	3/1	25/14
<i>The Sun/News of the World</i>	2/3	67/10
<i>Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror</i>	3/1	44/6
Total	21	358

Photocopies were made for all the sample articles which contained visuals, since these, as already mentioned, constituted an essential element of the Bridgend coverage, but were not included in *NexisUK*. With respect to these copies, it is important to note that, for convenience purposes, they were all printed on A4 paper. Consequently, whenever I discuss the size of accompanying photographs as a potential indicator of the occasional victim's newsworthiness or of the way in which the Bridgend phenomenon is

framed in the following chapters, I refer to this rather than the actual size they were originally published in. However, I regarded this size difference between the original reports and the collected copies of them not as impeding my analysis, but, on the contrary, as even enhancing it to an extent. That was because the ratio between the two was in all cases the same, and also because it allowed newspapers of different formats to be quantitatively examined in equal terms. The process of collecting Bridgend-related articles at the Colindale library lasted for the six-month period between June and November 2009. As soon as it was completed, all acquired reports were organised chronologically and according to the paper in which they had appeared. Each of them was given a unique identifier (see Appendix I). Having explained the process through which the sample articles were collected, it is now time to elaborate on the methods employed for their analysis.

B. A qualitative content analysis with quantitative components: A number of authors like Hall (1975) and Ericson et al. (2010 [1991]) point out the benefits deriving from the use of qualitative content analysis for media research. More specifically, Hall (1975) maintains that this method allows the identification and close examination of recurrent themes and patterns, without, however, regarding recurrence as the sole determinant of a news item's significance. Alternative ways in which emphasis is placed such as the article's position, tone and visuals are also of interest to qualitative content analysts, he argues. Moreover, just like the previously mentioned studies by Hartley (1982) and Kress and van Leeuwen (1998), Ericson et al. (2010 [1991]) also acknowledge the signifying power of newspaper layout. Particularly, they consider qualitative content analysis the most suitable method to pinpoint the techniques through which journalists subtly associate or juxtapose items appearing on the same or on facing pages to create new themes and meanings that go beyond the manifest content of individual stories. Additionally, referring to the study of continuing stories, whose media life extends over a long period of time, they contend that qualitative content analysis is much more capable of capturing the intertextual patterns and systematic relationships developed between the individual news items than its quantitative counter-part. This latter view was evidently of direct relevance to the Bridgend case, which was a continuing story that had stayed in the news for several months. For all the above-mentioned reasons, I viewed qualitative content analysis as having a lot to offer to my research.

In the current project, I employed the methodological framework developed by Altheide (1987, 1996), who also identifies qualitative content analysis as the most appropriate method for document-based research, while emphasising the active role of the analyst in it. Particularly, he considers the study of news items as a form of ethnography. For that reason, he uses the term ‘ethnographic content analysis’ to indicate that the researcher’s interaction with the documentary material he/she looks at also constitutes an essential part of the analysis, which should, under no circumstances, be overlooked as insignificant. In that way, he points out the reflexive and largely subjective nature of the method in question, which, however, he largely sees as adding to rather than obstructing the analysis. He stresses the flexibility which qualitative/ethnographic content analysis offers to the researcher, who can easily combine it with other methods in order to gain a more complete understanding of the research topic. The qualitative content analyst is ultimately provided with the opportunity to revisit and refine his/her initial categories or, if necessary, even to generate new ones. It is precisely this constant discovery and comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances which is, according to Altheide (1987, 1996), central to the analysis of news documents.

Having collected all the Bridgend-related reports for the newspapers and periods of interest, I proceeded with the coding of the relevant data. Ensuring that the collected data are valid and reliable is a key requirement in social research, which is, however, mostly emphasised in quantitative rather than qualitative studies. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that their data do not take the form of a standardised set of measurements but are instead polysemic (Mason, 2002). Unlike numbers, words may carry various different meanings and be interpreted in the context of other words and that is why qualitative content analysis is far more complex than quantitative content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984). The inevitably subjective nature of qualitative research has been regarded as a key weakness of case studies adopting this research strategy, but, as mentioned earlier, qualitative case study researchers do not delude themselves that their findings are generalizable to other cases (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative researchers can still establish the reliability of the generated codes by carrying out an inter-coder reliability test, which involves two or more equally capable coders who, without any prior consultation with each other, end up selecting the same code for the same unit of text (Popping, 2010). It is evident that such a test is only feasible in projects with more than

one researcher and not in doctoral ones where the data coding and analysis are conducted by a single person.

As I was working alone on this project, I adopted an approach similar to that described by an anonymous researcher in Campbell et al. (2013): I immersed myself in the relevant news reports in order to identify common themes and primarily focused on conveying to the reader my own interpretation of the data rather than coding reliability. However, I still acknowledged the importance of generating as reliable codes as possible, which is why I worked closely with my supervisors to develop the protocol that was used for the media analysis. More specifically, I first briefly went through all the national press reports that had been published on the first and second day of the Bridgend coverage, that is, on January 23 and January 24, 2008. In that way, I was able to construct a draft protocol, which I then tested against the remaining articles of January 2008 in order to attain conceptual adequacy. I subsequently provided my supervisors with copies of all the January 2008 national press reports I had collected as well as the draft protocol and negotiated any coding disagreements with them. In some cases, we discovered that the protocol was still very complicated and likely to restrict rather than facilitate the qualitative content analysis. We agreed that the number of codes needed to be reduced and therefore dropped or merged all unreliable ones. The challenge in that process was to revise the protocol in a way that would make it less confusing and ensure agreement between myself and my supervisors regarding the generated codes, but would still be sensitive to the nuances of the Bridgend coverage (Hruschka et al., 2004). In order to achieve this goal, we clarified coding definitions and, just like Campbell et al. (2013), often found it useful to create code families including several primary and secondary codes that reflected different aspects of a general theme. In that sense, as far as the framing analysis is concerned, the generated codes took into account the complexity of the Bridgend issue and adequately captured the relevant themes by distinguishing between four primary or present frames, each of which included two or more sub-frames. After a number of meetings with my supervisors, the protocol was deployed on the entirety of the collected articles. A separate electronic copy of it was created for each report. About halfway through the sample, I met once again with my supervisors and repeated the above-mentioned process for the post-January 2008 reports I had coded since our last meeting. Following Altheide's (1996) model of constant comparison and discovery, the collected data were reviewed to permit the emergence of additional codes, but also the further refinement or collapsing of the existing ones. The final version of the

employed protocol, which can be found in Appendix II, provided a detailed (both numeric and narrative) account of the collected data, condensing each of the reports under study into the following codes:

- Article identifier;
- Author;
- Date of publication;
- Page and Section;
- Length;
- Degree of relevance to the Bridgend case [whether the local suicides are considered in their own right, within a wider context or only incidentally mentioned in the report (primary, secondary or incidental relevance respectively)];
- Miscellaneous: headline, outline and key quotes that help identify the report;
- Thematic focus of the report;
- Primary and other present frames/sub-frames through which the Bridgend suicide problem is made sense of;
- Appropriate response(s) to suicide apropos the Bridgend case;
- Construction of the Bridgend area;
- Construction of the Internet medium;
- Construction of the suicidal act;
- Construction of offline suicide reporting;
- Status of dominant claims-maker(s) cited in the report;
- Accompanying visuals.

In that sense, data analysis consisted in an examination of the collected articles against the aforementioned criteria including a conceptual refinement and data coding. Particular emphasis was given to the headlines, subheadings and lead paragraphs of the articles. For the purposes of the analysis, these were considered to be determining the angle and generally outlining the 'plot', thus predisposing readers to expect a specific type of narrative and ultimately providing the entire frame of the story (van Dijk, 1991; Fulton, 2005b; Johnson-Cartee, 2005). The 'key differences' and 'extremes' within each category or news report were compared and contrasted (Altheide, 1996: 41). Finally,

spreadsheets providing an overview of data for each category were created (see Appendix III).

As far as the study of the different themes permeating the Bridgend coverage is concerned, Goffman's (1986 [1974]) work on frame analysis constituted a key point of reference. Despite not focusing on the media per se, it offers an insight into the process through which we interpret different situations in our everyday lives and therefore constituted the basis for the analysis of the frames used by journalists to make sense of the local suicide problem. Goffman (1986 [1974]) acknowledges that there is an extensive repertoire of frames embedded in our culture; a repertoire which the individual cannot change, but can always draw upon in order to construct reality. In that sense, individuals make use of this cultural stock of frames in their everyday lives in an attempt to answer the question 'What is it that's going on here?' (Goffman, 1986 [1974]: 25). Amongst these individuals, media workers follow this exact process when producing their articles: they apply and magnify the available frames in media content and then present them to their audiences (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The constructed reality is multi-dimensional since an event may be interpreted within several different frameworks without all of them necessarily being equally relevant (Goffman, 1986 [1974]; Collins, 1988). This framing process thus does not just involve examining the 'frame' placed around the 'picture', but also recognising that there are multiple layers and sizes of frames (Nylander, 2001). As a result, it is possible that a frame be replaced by another; that a large frame includes numerous smaller frames; finally, that an even larger frame is placed around the first frame. In other words, some frames are more fundamental than others and therefore specific frames are often attached to broader ones. A similar argument can be found in social movements literature in relation to the concept of 'master frame', which is defined as 'a kind of grammar for the articulation of more specific [...] framing processes' (Steinberg, 1998: 846; see also Benford and Snow, 2000).

It is precisely the sequential and hierarchical interaction between the different frames used in the Bridgend case that is at the centre of my analysis of the relevant press reports. Building on the preceding theorists, I acknowledged the different aspects of the Bridgend problem discussed in the pertinent stories. I assessed the emphasis placed on each of these aspects by closely examining the content of the reports and especially their headlines, sub-headings and lead paragraphs, their length and the accompanying visuals. In that way, I distinguished between primary and present frames (both large frames with the first being more prominent than the second); between main and sub-frames (the

second being smaller, more specific frames constituting a key component of the first); finally, between the main frames and a 'super-frame' (the second overlaying the first). As far as the latter distinction is concerned, the identified 'super-frame' is as large as the above-mentioned 'master frame' without, however, always being as prominent. As will be explained in more detail in Chapter Eight, this super-frame forms the basis on which all the main frames are developed and made sense of. Each of the main frames prioritises a different view of the Bridgend problem, but this larger super-frame brings these views together and allows more convincing arguments to be made: it reflects dominant cultural beliefs about the emotional vulnerability of young people and the links between suicide and mental illness (Cross, 2010; Marsh, 2010).

Though highly qualitative, my media analysis involved a certain amount of quantification, thus breaking the qualitative/quantitative divide. The numeric data collected were used to evaluate the prominence and correspondingly the newsworthiness of the Bridgend story as a news product but also that of specific frames and victims. Three main criteria were of interest here: the length of the relevant reports, the frequency with which certain frames appeared in them and the size of the accompanying visuals. These data were included in the protocols, but it was essentially the subsequently created spreadsheets which allowed a more thorough comparison across different news items and newspapers. The article's length was considered an indicator of the significance its author, and, by extension, the paper in which it was published, attributed to the matter covered or to a specific angle of it (Sorenson et al., 1998; Paulsen, 2003; Riffe et al., 2005). Consequently, the longer the word length of the report, the more prominent the Bridgend story was. The main events forming the Bridgend narrative as constructed by the press were identified and incorporated in the above-mentioned spreadsheets. In that way, I was able to compare the number and length of reports published after each of these events across different newspapers and to thus ascertain which of them were extensively covered and which were downplayed or completely neglected.

Apart from text length, visuals, be it photographs of the deceased, maps of Bridgend or graphs, were also regarded as indicators of salience and newsworthiness, firstly, in terms of their inclusion in the corresponding report and, secondly, in terms of their size (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998; Jones and Wardle, 2008). If, for the same Bridgend event, one newspaper published an article with a photo and another one of equal length but without any accompanying visuals, then I would consider the first to be placing more emphasis on the issue than the second. I would also draw the same

conclusion if both news reports included photos, but those published in the first paper were of a larger size than those in the second. Just like a lengthy text and, more often than not, in combination with one, a large image would, therefore, be seen as underlining the importance of the depicted event or person and encouraging a particular understanding of the situation.

With regard to the frames promoted and generally the messages communicated, either explicitly or implicitly, through the accompanying pictures, I conducted a qualitative visual analysis, which was not separate from the broader content analysis, but formed an integral part of it. Both Barthes (1977b) and Hall (2010 [1973]) point out that, although news photographs appear to be accurate representations of reality and thus, devoid of any connotative meaning, they do, in fact, serve an ideological function: they use signs and messages viewers are already familiar with; they are read within the dominant ideology, which is, in that way, solidified to the point of naturalisation. ‘The image’, Hall (2010 [1973]: 132) writes, ‘loses its motivation. It appears, ‘naturally’, to have selected itself’. Moreover, Barthes (1977b: 24) argues that, apart from the symbolic meaning attached to individual photographs, these may acquire a new one through ‘syntax’, that is, by being brought together to form a sequence. In that case, he maintains, the fragments of the sequence are of secondary importance, since the communicated message ultimately derives from the interaction between them. Huxford (2001: 65) describes how the press uses different sequences of photographs to connote a temporal succession or to create visual metaphors through juxtaposition and associate people and events when there is no actual relevance between them. ‘[I]n seeking to supply ‘visual evidence’, he concludes, ‘journalists routinely create, through symbolism, photographic validation that they do not possess’. The codes of connotation they employ are often not noticed by readers, who come to perceive the constructed message as common sense (Jones and Wardle, 2008).

In the study of the Bridgend-related reports, I examined the way in which images were used by journalists to ascribe meaning to the numerous local suicide incidents. Particularly, I looked at how these images interacted with each other to establish links between the Bridgend events and show the evolution of the local suicide problem over time. I also considered their relationship with the headline and the main body of the report to determine the level to which they supported the arguments made in the text or contradicted them by encouraging an alternative interpretation of the matter. Finally, the

interaction of these visual elements with other news items of the same or the facing page was also taken into account.

C. Contextualising the Bridgend phenomenon: The perspective I have adopted throughout my research is a contextual and not a strict constructionist one, firstly, because strict constructionism is impossible to achieve (Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993; Best, 1995) and, secondly and most importantly, for ethical reasons. I strongly believe that a neglect of the bigger picture in the case of a matter as sensitive as youth suicide would be unethical. It may indeed be the case that social reality can only be perceived through discourse, but this does not necessarily suggest there is nothing beyond that. Despite the increased media attention of 2008, statistical evidence (NPHS for Wales, 2008) indicates that youth suicides had been particularly high in the Bridgend area for a long time. In a similar fashion, it is questionable whether the media interest in Bridgend eventually subsided because there were no more suicides or because these were no longer seen as newsworthy. Alongside the content of the Bridgend reports per se, these were issues that also needed to be considered, even if just for background purposes. The consideration of such contextual issues actually enriched the analysis by permitting a more critical, holistic and grounded in the Bridgend reality view of the pertinent news coverage. The means I employed to make sure that, regardless of its media focus, my analysis would not overlook the significance of the Bridgend context were the following:

- I. In-depth interviews with key claims-makers;
- II. Consultation of statistical and policy reports.

The contextualisation of the claims appearing in the relevant Bridgend reports through the use of additional sources of data allowed the triangulation of the findings from the media analysis, thereby ensuring their validity. Qualitative researchers can only achieve the validity of their interpretations through continuous reflexivity and self-scrutiny (Pyett, 2003). By interviewing key stakeholders and studying pertinent statistical and policy documents, I was able to cross-check the data produced against those of the newspaper analysis; to explore the themes I had identified as dominant in the Bridgend coverage in more depth, but also to shed light on issues that were only briefly addressed in the news reports despite being of key importance in understanding the local suicide problem. Based on the constructionist perspective I adopted, I acknowledged the different narratives that had been constructed around the Bridgend issue by different sources. My main purpose as a qualitative researcher in this case was not necessarily to

argue that one of the constructed narratives was more valid than the rest, since two different narratives may indeed have been equally valid understandings of the complex Bridgend phenomenon. My intention was instead to bring together but at the same time go beyond the individual narratives by highlighting any patterns or inconsistencies that emerge. Pyett (2003) argues that the ultimate way for qualitative researchers to test the validity of their findings is through real-world checks, but, as he explains, these are rarely possible. Apart from triangulation and in order to gain further confidence in my interpretation of the data, I presented these firstly to my supervisors and secondly to two different academic audiences in the 'Understanding Britain' and the 'British Society of Criminology' conferences I attended in 2012. The reaction of the audience to my data analysis in all these cases was very positive and this reassured me that the findings of my research were valid.

Pyett (2003) notes that theoretical insights offered through the researcher's interpretation of the collected data should not merely be of academic interest, but also somehow benefit the participants or their community. A similar point was made by one of my interviewees, journalist Zach Newmark (interviewed on June 18, 2010), who mentioned that he was considering arranging a screening of his documentary *Cluster* for the Bridgend residents he had interviewed or even the entire Bridgend community and hear their comments. In an attempt to validate my data analysis in the 'real world' and, if possible, also benefit the Bridgend community through my research, I contacted the Bridgend county borough council hoping to arrange an interview with its chief executive and discuss the possibility of presenting my findings in a public event in Bridgend. However, this idea did not materialise as I never received a response to my interview request. From my perspective, this lack of response was part of a wider difficulty I was facing as a researcher to find participants; a difficulty I regarded as being directly related to the sensitivity of the subject matter. The issue will be further discussed in the following sub-section.

C. I. In-depth interviews: Through in-depth interviews, I sought to acquire a better understanding, firstly, of what life is like for Bridgend youngsters and the reasons that could potentially drive them to suicide; secondly, of the process of news production and the way news values operated in relation to the Bridgend case; thirdly, of the regime of press regulation and what sensitive suicide reporting consists in. I approached numerous of the people and organisations who had been actively involved in the claims-making

process around the Bridgend deaths. The first contact was, in the majority of cases, made by e-mail, or, in some, over the telephone or in person. On all occasions, the focus and aim of my research were explained and potential interviewees were assured that this was an academic piece of work which treated the Bridgend problem and, generally, the matter of youth suicide with utmost sensitivity. I was initially disappointed by the small number of positive responses to my interview requests. Nonetheless, as my media analysis progressed, providing me with an insight into the main issues and concerns involved in the Bridgend case, I came to perceive this occasionally evident reluctance to discuss the local suicide problem precisely as an indication of the social stigma attached to it as well as of the scepticism deriving from the 2008 experience. From this perspective, even unsuccessful attempts to obtain the desired interviews were of contextual value for my project.

Those who agreed to participate in my research, though a minority, operated, to a large extent, in different arenas, something which shed light on the different aspects of the Bridgend problem, but also, on the different stages of the process through which this was constructed and dealt with. Jupp (1989) has underlined the significance of ‘gatekeepers’, that is, of people controlling research access, when the subject under study is considered sensitive. In the case of youth suicide prevention charity Papyrus and the PCC, my initial contact with a single interviewee resulted in a ‘snowball’ referral effect, similar to that described by Maguire (2008), which allowed me to gain access to several other individuals within these organisations. Had a certain relationship of trust not been previously established with the aforementioned interviewees, acting, in these occasions, as gatekeepers, it is doubtful whether these individuals would have been as keen to be interviewed. My research finally included thirteen in-depth interviews with the following people:

- Madeleine Moon, Bridgend MP (interview conducted on March 10, 2010);
- PCC representatives:
 - William Gore, the PCC’s Public Affairs Director (interview conducted on May 21, 2010);
 - Scott Langham, the PCC’s Head of Complaints (interview conducted on June 8, 2010);
 - Eve Salomon, Commissioner of the PCC and Independent Chair of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) [interview conducted on June 9, 2010];

- Darren Matthews, the Bridgend Samaritans director at the time when the local suicide problem became national news (interview conducted on July 8, 2011);
- Papyrus representatives:
 - Rosemary Vaux, Press Officer of youth suicide prevention charity Papyrus (interview conducted on May 18, 2010);
 - Paul Kelly, Papyrus Trustee (interview conducted on May 19, 2010);
- Dr Arthur Cassidy, social psychologist specialising in suicide clusters and youth suicide prevention (interview conducted on May 13, 2010);
- Media professionals:
 - Stephen Pritchard, Readers' Editor of *The Observer*, who had repeatedly commented on the risks deriving from irresponsible suicide reporting in the wake of the Bridgend deaths (interview conducted on June 23, 2011);
 - Carole Cadwalladr (2009), author of an extensive *Observer* feature on the Bridgend phenomenon entitled 'How Bridgend was damned by distortion' (interview conducted on July 5, 2011);
 - Ed Caesar (2008), author of a Bridgend-related multi-page feature in *The Sunday Times magazine* under the title 'Death Valleys' (interview conducted on June 23, 2011);
 - Zack Newmark, creator of the documentary 'Cluster', which considered the potential connections between individual Bridgend victims (interview conducted on June 18, 2010);
 - Tony Bonnici, who had published several Bridgend-related news stories in the *Daily Express* and the *News of the World* (interview conducted on June 22, 2011).

Accessibility and convenience played a key role at this particular stage of research, not just in terms of who was willing and available to be interviewed, but also, in terms of the way in which these interviews were finally conducted. Out of the thirteen interviews, only three were conducted in person (Madeleine Moon, William Gore and Stephen Pritchard). One was conducted via e-mail (Carole Cadwalladr) and the remaining nine by telephone, particularly, through Skype.

All interviews were semi-structured, revolving around a main thematic axis, particularly, interviewees' involvement in the Bridgend case, but also allowing the researcher to deviate from it, if necessary, and ask them to elaborate on other issues

brought up in the course of the interview. These additional or complementary issues formed an integral part of my analysis. My approach placed great emphasis on flexibility in the interviewing process and bore great parallels to the one described by Beardsworth and Keil (1992: 261-262):

‘[T]he interview programme was not based upon a set of relatively rigid pre-determined questions and prompts. Rather, the open-ended, discursive nature of the interviews permitted an iterative process of refinement, whereby lines of thought identified by earlier interviewees could be taken up and presented to later interviewees.’

This ‘iterative process of refinement’ did not solely result in the development of a more targeted interview framework. It was also consistent with the method of ethnographic content analysis employed in the study of the collected press reports, which was similarly based on a constant comparison and discovery of the emerging themes and frames (Altheide, 1987, 1996). As far as the themes and frames emerging from the interviews themselves are concerned, these were identified, as soon as the process of interviewing was completed, through the detailed examination and analysis of the corresponding transcripts. They were then compared and contrasted to the ones featuring in the Bridgend-related articles under study. In that way, with the latter always constituting the core of my research, I was able to contextualise the press construction of the local suicide problem; more specifically, to consider additional claims made by interviewees, either reinforcing or contradicting the ones appearing in the newspapers; ultimately, to obtain a better understanding of why the Bridgend matter was at the time portrayed the way it was, including what it could have alternatively been portrayed as and why it was not.

C. II. Consultation of statistical and policy reports: In order to have a clearer grasp of the conditions in which Bridgend’s suicide problem manifested itself and to evaluate not just its actual extent, but also and most notably, the press’ and the authorities’ reaction to it, a number of official reports were taken into account. As to which reports needed to be considered, the selection was far from arbitrary and largely based on the analysis of the relevant Bridgend stories. Particularly, I only looked at reports that were either explicitly mentioned in the articles under examination or, were, at least, of direct relevance to what was being discussed in them. The value of each of the official reports taken into consideration in the context of the current study will be further discussed and

better understood alongside the analysis of the pertinent news items in the respective following chapters. At this stage, it suffices to say that these reports included:

- Official suicide statistics for the wider Bridgend area;
- Local deprivation figures;
- Reports on drug and alcohol abuse by Bridgend youngsters;
- Reviews of the quality of mental health support services available to suicidal individuals;
- Suicide prevention initiatives and action plans;
- Reviews of online risks and Internet safety strategies;
- Official Hansard reports on suicide prevention, press standards and Internet regulation;
- Ministry of Justice statements, explanatory notes and circulars on suicide-related legislation;
- PCC adjudications and codes of practice for responsible suicide reporting;
- The Leveson report, transcripts of hearings from the corresponding inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press and germane voluntary sector submissions to it.

D. Research ethics: the road from commitment to fulfillment: This research has been designed and carried out in accordance with the British Sociological Association's (BSA) [2002] statement of ethical practice. The statement has provided me with useful guidance in relation to the collection and analysis of my data and especially to my responsibilities towards my interviewees. The sensitivities, difficulties and ethical dilemmas associated with the study of suicide have been widely discussed in this chapter. Nonetheless, as far as research ethics are concerned, I do consider it necessary to make one final note here. The constructionist perspective I adopted involved studying the Bridgend issue through the relevant news reports and interviews with dominant claims-makers. It therefore did not present the ethical challenges it would have presented had an objectivist approach been adopted instead. Nonetheless, even if examining the local suicide phenomenon 'from a distance', this is still to a large extent a project about Bridgend and specifically about the people of Bridgend. Despite not being directly involved in my research, I felt that the acknowledged by the BSA (2002: 2) responsibility of every social researcher 'to safeguard the proper interests of those involved in or affected by [his/her] work'

included those individuals as well. Given the pain of the grieving families and the risks related to the intense press coverage of the story, adopting an ethical approach that would not in any way add to the problem was a key priority throughout my thesis. Besides, my project was in itself of an ethical purpose: through the close examination of any shortcomings in the Bridgend case, it aimed to have a positive effect towards the opposite direction, that is, towards ensuring responsible suicide reporting and even contributing to future suicide prevention.

Just like in suicide reporting, in suicide-related research, which can at times also be disturbing for the affected parties, this commitment to sensitivity does not always materialise. That is not necessarily because the researcher (or journalist) in question deliberately violates it and consciously decides to address the matter in an inconsiderate and, thus, morally reprehensible manner. It is because the balance between sensitivity and insensitivity in such a delicate issue is rather fragile due to the fact that it is frequently quite subjective (Pritchard, *The Observer*, 2008; PCC, 2009a). In that sense, as will be further explained in the main analysis of the following chapters, it is occasionally possible that the author himself/herself deems to have delivered an appropriate piece of work, while recipients of the final product suggest that this is not the case. In order to avoid or, at least, minimise the risk of even unintentionally treating the issue of youth suicide irresponsibly, I made sure my doctoral dissertation did not solely acknowledge the significance of guidelines for the reporting of suicide by journalists, but to a large extent also abided by them. The decision to do so was a conscious one and, from the researcher's point of view, the most ethical one to make, since such guidelines allowed the development of a much more subject-specific ethical research framework than the one provided by the BSA's (2002) statement of ethical practice. Besides, the BSA (2002: 1) itself recognises that its statement 'does not [...] provide a set of recipes for resolving ethical choices or dilemmas', but it is up to the researcher to make those choices on an individual basis depending on the nature and requirements of his/her study. Moreover, I found academic sources on research ethics like Israel and Hay (2006) and DuBois (2006) to be equally broad and not adequately reflecting the intricacies of suicide-related research. The fact that I considered non-academic sources like media guidelines on responsible suicide reporting more relevant to my project should not, however, be interpreted as an indictment on the social sciences, but more as an attempt to break the academic/non-academic divide when this is likely to benefit the study. Social research does not take place in a vacuum; it aims to promote the well-being of society (Israel and

Hay, 2006) and in order to do so it often needs to extend beyond the confines of the academic world. In the case of suicide, this goal of beneficence, which is at the heart of social research, involves raising awareness around the problem and contributing to suicide prevention; a goal which, as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters, can only be effectively achieved through responsible suicide reporting. Suicide reporters and researchers committed to not just avoiding harm but also doing good through their work are likely to be presented with similar ethical dilemmas when addressing the issue of suicide. The responsibility and pursued goal are in both cases the same. The academic guidelines on ethical practice, which are intentionally open to interpretation, were for the purposes of this thesis complemented by more specific media guidelines on appropriate suicide coverage so as to ensure that a sensitive and rather complex research topic like the Bridgend suicides would be approached in the most ethical way possible.

Despite their media rather than academic focus, the guidelines issued by various organisations such as the PCC (2009a) and especially the Samaritans (2008) were of great assistance in the composition of this thesis by providing useful, practical information on how to write about suicide sensitively. Particular attention was paid to not sensationalising, romanticising or otherwise trivialising the Bridgend events; to omitting any unnecessary information about the local incidents and, most importantly, excessive details about the suicide method; to avoiding simplistic explanations and stressing the complexity of suicide as a social problem. Moreover, with regard to the phraseology used to describe the act of suicide, I purposely abstained at all times from referring to it as an act being ‘committed’. As pointed out by Fairbairn (1995), the expression ‘to commit suicide’, though deeply embedded in the English language, is inapt, since the verb ‘to commit’ is typically used in relation to crimes, for example, ‘to commit murder’. This expression, he argues, which is a remnant of the time before the introduction of the 1961 Suicide Act, when suicide was still a crime, encloses a moral judgement. It loads the notion of suicide with negative and criminal connotations, thereby implicitly encouraging its view as a wrongful and reprehensible act. Contributing, even indirectly, to the perpetuation of the social stigma attached to suicide runs counter to the objectives of this project. That is the reason why, throughout this thesis, I opted for the use of more descriptive, morally neutral terms such as ‘to kill oneself’ or ‘to take one’s own life’ to refer to suicide.

Finally, as far as the people associated with the Bridgend events are concerned, I considered it appropriate to make a distinction in the way I referred, on the one hand, to key claims-makers like politicians, police officers or journalists, and, on the other hand, to victims and their families. More specifically, the first are always mentioned by name, given that they are often actively engaged in the public arena, which is why they were involved in the Bridgend case in the first place. On the contrary, the names of the second are mentioned and their photographs, published in the news articles under study, are reproduced in this thesis only when it is absolutely necessary for the comprehension of the arguments made in the main text. The rationale behind the above-mentioned distinction was to examine how the Bridgend deaths came to be regarded as a problem, but, at the same time, to respect the privacy of the latter individuals. It was very important to keep in mind that the suicides in question had not just affected the lives of the deceased, but also, the ones of those who had been left behind. In other words, it was imperative to allow these individuals, who had suddenly and unintentionally found themselves in the spotlight, adequate space to cope with their losses and overcome their grief.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have laid out the methodological framework within which the current research was conducted. I have, first of all, pointed out that, as a case study of suicide reporting, the latter is not concerned with generalisability, although its findings can still provide an insight into a number of important issues, raised in the wake of the post-2008 Bridgend events. Moreover, I have stressed the emotional toll that suicide takes on the directly involved individuals and even on those researching it. Acknowledging the sensitivities related to suicide, I have explained why a mixed-methods, yet primarily qualitative, approach was necessary to capture the complexity of the Bridgend phenomenon.

With regard to the Bridgend-related reports, the process through which these were collected and analysed was described in detail and the selection of qualitative (or ethnographic) as the main research method was justified. Additionally, the importance of studying the construction of the Bridgend problem without neglecting the context in which this came to be viewed as such was also recognised. My attempts to contextualise the claims appearing in the relevant articles by conducting a series of in-depth interviews with key claims-makers and consulting various statistical and policy reports were documented. Finally, the means employed to ensure that this project would treat the

Bridgend issue and, generally, the subject of suicide in an appropriate manner, were discussed.

The following chapter will look at the way in which local and national papers had approached the Bridgend matter, if at all, before January 2008 and the elements that made it front-page news at that specific point in time.

CHAPTER FOUR

The road to national news prominence and the newsworthiness of the Bridgend story

‘[...] Bridgend hit the headlines only when the 13th victim, Natasha Randall, was linked to one of the boys by a photograph. She was a pretty girl who, as every report said, had her ‘whole life ahead of her’. Until then it wasn’t much of a story.’

(Philip Irwin, *The Guardian*, G2, February 19, 2008: 3)

‘[Bridgend] was a story impossible to ignore; impossible to understand.’

(Carole Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, March 1, 2009)

Introduction

The fact that Bridgend’s youth suicide rate had been considerably high long before the media took notice (NPHS for Wales, 2008) suggests the issue’s newsworthiness is not given. On the contrary, there is apparently something special about the way the 2008 suicides are perceived, which differentiates them from all the previously unreported ones and retrospectively puts those into perspective. Following Walklate and Petrie’s (2013) model, after the discussion of the relevant academic literature and methodology in Chapters Two and Three respectively, I will proceed with examining the process through which the media narrative on the Bridgend issue was constructed. In Chapter Four, my aim is to assess the value of the Bridgend phenomenon as a news product based on the individual events per se and most importantly on the way these events are put together into a single story and made sense of by journalists. To this end and with the national press coverage of the suicides still constituting the main focus of this thesis, the road to it and particularly the transition from local to national newspapers needs to come under scrutiny, since it is indicative of how the story’s newsworthiness increases over time.

First of all, the Bridgend-related suicide reports appearing in the regional or the national press prior to the intense coverage of 2008 will be analysed. A closer look at the point when the local suicides are first seen as a social rather than an individual problem and at the circumstances which contribute to this change of perspective will offer an insight into the roots of the belated national press’ interest in Bridgend. Moreover, this analysis will explain how local newspapers influence the subsequent framing process in the national press, which will be further studied in the following chapters. Moving from

local to national coverage, the elements which make this, previously neglected, suicide story front-page news will be identified and closely examined. Finally, Bridgend's (dis)similarities to the average suicide story and, generally, the role of media professionals in increasing its newsworthiness by emphasising certain aspects of it, while downplaying others, will also be discussed.

1. Searching for the roots of the national press' interest in Bridgend

A. Bridgend suicides in the national press before January 23, 2008: Before January 2008, one could, as argued by local journalist Kerry-Lynne Doyle (cited in Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, 2009), easily go from one year to the next without coming across any Bridgend-related stories in national newspapers. Even when local suicides make national news, they tend to be presented as individual tragedies, that is, they are not seen as directly linked to that particular location since, given the victims' personal issues, the same outcome (suicide) could have taken place elsewhere. The *LexisNexis* search for Bridgend-related suicide news stories published in the national newspapers under study between 2006 and January 22, 2008, i.e. until the day before the extensive press coverage starts, returns 21 articles, which largely report on individual suicides resulting from mental distress due to various reasons (see Table 4.A in Appendix IV).

There are two noteworthy exceptions to the 'individual pathology' rule, apparently bearing links to the post-2008 Bridgend problem, even if slight ones: the first one involves two articles about Neil Powell, who took his own life in Maesteg⁵, South Wales on July 14, 2005 with his inconsolable parents following suit a day after (de Bruxelles, *The Times*, 2006; No author, *Daily Mail*, 2006a). The articles, published on April 1, 2006, report on the inquest held into these sudden deaths, in the context of which the Bridgend coroner, Philip Walters, argued that Neil's case was part of a widespread national problem and expressed his concern over the unexplained rise in the number of suicides amongst young males. The coroner's view is only briefly mentioned towards the end of the articles, which suggests that it is not considered an essential element of the story. But even if that be the case, this view is still remarkable since it constitutes the only acknowledgement of the Bridgend issue in the national press before the media outbreak of 2008. Even more importantly, it comes from an official who has, by law, the duty to investigate all incidents of sudden death [Article 8 (1) of the Coroners Act 1988] and who

⁵ Maesteg is a town in Bridgend County Borough.

is, therefore, generally seen as a credible source of information when the subject is suicide.

Though not involving a young but a middle-aged victim, nor being presented in the context of a wider local suicide problem, the second exception still bears ties to the post-2008 construction of the Bridgend problem and, particularly, to its view as Internet-related. Reports on the inquest held into the death of 40-year-old Glen Hughes from Bridgend, who killed himself in late November 2005 using a method he had learnt about online, appear in three different national newspapers on the same day [June 8, 2006 – specifically, the *Daily Express* (Parkinson, 2006), the *Daily Mirror* (No author, 2006b) and the *Sun* (Coles, 2006)]. Aside from the victim's personal problems, the risks from suicide websites are also discussed in the reports: the victim's brother, Tyrone (cited in Parkinson, 2006), openly criticises the Internet for rendering suicide-related information easily accessible to vulnerable individuals. In his turn, the Bridgend Coroner, Philip Walters (quoted in Coles, 2006: 26), describes suicide websites as 'perfectly legal', yet 'undesirable', while Dr Marcus Roberts of mental health charity Mind and a Home Office spokesman (both cited in Parkinson, 2006) also underline the risks they pose as well as the legal implications of any attempt to criminalise them. In that way, the extraordinary suicide case of Glen Hughes establishes a first, even if faint, connection between suicide and the Internet within a Bridgend context. This connection, which comes back to the national press' spotlight in the wake of the 2008 events, will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

B. Bridgend suicides in the local press before January 23, 2008

In the pre-January 2008 period, local newspapers are far more interested in suicides occurring in Bridgend and the surrounding areas than national ones. They publish over three times as many reports on the subject as the latter (71 and 21 reports respectively). The significance of these 71 regional press reports, however, does not just lie in confirming, in quantitative terms, the emphasis placed by local journalists on the Bridgend issue, but also in gradually homogenising the individual incidents, thus laying the foundations for the subsequent construction of the Bridgend suicide problem.

B. I. A Wales-wide problem: A number of 2006-2007 articles refer to the soaring Welsh youth suicide rate, which was, at the time, five times higher than the English one among 11 to 17-year-olds (Blake, *Western Mail*, 2006; James, *South Wales Echo*, 2006; Jones, *South Wales Echo*, 2006; Wightwick, *Western Mail*, 2007). A spokesman for the Bridgend

Samaritans (cited in Jones, *South Wales Echo*, 2006) argues that this suicide rate might, in fact, be even higher, since coroners tend to issue an open or misadventure instead of a suicide verdict unless absolutely certain about the victim's intention to die. He admits that the suicide rate among young people in Wales is a source of great concern and underlines the increased vulnerability of young males, who have a propensity to keep problems to themselves and are, thus, hard to reach.

This alarming suicide rate is often attributed to the low quality of the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) available in Wales. Alun Thomas (quoted in Rhys, *Western Mail*, 2007: 4), deputy chief executive of mental health organisation Hafal, views CAMHS as nothing but a 'Cinderella service', which leaves hopeless local youngsters exposed to the risk of suicide. In a similar fashion, the 2006-2007 annual review of the Children's Commissioner for Wales (CCfW), cited in the same report, establishes a link between the high youth suicide rate in Wales and the lack of a national suicide prevention strategy and also describes the provided mental health services as being 'patchy', 'inadequate' and 'in crisis' (Rhys, *Western Mail*, 2007: 4; for the original source, see CCfW, 2007: 2, 26).

B. II. A Bridgend problem? The preceding Wales-wide perspective is largely absent from the *Glamorgan Gazette*, which is, from the very beginning, much more interested than the other regional newspapers under study in assessing the extent of the problem in the wider Bridgend area (see Table 4.B in Appendix IV). The first clear links to Bridgend appear in a *Gazette* report of June 29, 2006, which presents its County borough as having the eighth worst suicide rate among the 600 council areas in the UK (No author, 2006c). Clinical director for mental health services at the Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board Tegwyn Williams, cited in the report, associates this alarming rate with the socio-economic status of the area, especially with deprivation, unemployment and the strong local drug market.

From August 2007 onwards, anxiety grows even further with a number of officials voicing their concerns over the numerous youth suicides in the Bridgend County and the potential connections between them coming under police investigation. In a *South Wales Echo* article of August 15, 2007 (Wright, 2007a), the Bridgend coroner, Philip Walters, is quoted saying that over the past eleven months, that is, since September 2006, he had dealt with almost one suicide case a week. Bridgend Acting Chief Inspector Jay Winslade-Gregory, also cited in the article, suggests there might be an underlying pattern between the individual incidents, which, he admits, the authorities still fail to see. He appeals to

anyone having information about the causes of the problem to come forward, stressing the imperative need to prevent the occurrence of future deaths. Coming from authoritative sources ranked high in the 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967), such expressions of disquiet and uncertainty along with claims regarding a suicide pattern create an inferential structure (Lang and Lang, 1955), which determines the subsequent understanding of the Bridgend situation. This structure emphasises the mystery aspect of the problem and thus encourages speculation over its actual nature.

The fourfold 'acknowledgement-concern-causal uncertainty-search for links' model constructed is followed in several ensuing articles and reinforced with every new name added to the list of local suicide victims. David Dilling's case, which did not receive as much attention as those of other victims when first reported in February 2007, comes back to the local press' spotlight in late September 2007 due to the inquiry into his death. Its potential links not just to the suicide of his friend, Dale Crole, but also to those of numerous other local youngsters are re-examined: for the first time, the *Echo* (Wright, 2007b) gives a rough estimate of the total number of victims having taken their lives under similar circumstances (at least twelve since the beginning of 2007), concluding that suicide has become a growing and alarming trend among young men in the Bridgend area. At the same time, David Dilling's stepfather, Norman Claypole, quoted in the *Gazette* (Doyle, 2007: 7), is the first to openly blame Bridgend itself for its high youth

suicide rate. 'It's a depressing place and I wish there was somewhere for them [local youngsters] to go', he argues. '[...] There is nothing for them to do up here. That's why they get into trouble [...]'. Such claims regarding the allegedly hopeless reality of Bridgend and its potential contribution to the local youth suicide problem will be further discussed in Chapter Seven.

The local press' view of the Bridgend problem as a potential 'suicide contagion' that affects many local youngsters, and thus demands urgent action, becomes in mid-January 2008 more prominent than ever before. It is the

Echo and not the *Gazette* which this time gives the issue the most attention: on January



Figure 4.1: *South Wales Echo*, January 17, 2008: 1

17, 2008, that is, a week prior to Bridgend making national news, it dedicates its front page as well as an inside double-page spread (pages 6-7) and part of its editorial to it, explicitly referring to Bridgend as ‘the suicide capital of the UK’ [Norman, *South Wales Echo*, 2008: 6 and *South Wales Echo*, 2008: 32 respectively). The headlines of Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show there is a great emphasis placed on the discovery of the reason behind all these sudden deaths. ‘*Why* are so many of *our* youngsters killing themselves?’ is the question prioritised in Norman’s (2008: 6; my emphasis) article and, as the following chapters’ analysis will indicate, the one pervading the subsequent national press coverage of the Bridgend phenomenon. This question not only acknowledges the suicide risk vulnerable young people are exposed to, but also suggests, through the use of the possessive adjective ‘our’, that it is ‘our’ problem and, therefore, that it is up to ‘us’, i.e. either the local community or the adult world in general, to care about and tackle it. It is ultimately a question which no one, apart from the deceased, can answer with certainty and which, depending on how it is answered by different claims-makers, leads to a different understanding of what the problem is and of what needs to be done to prevent future incidents.

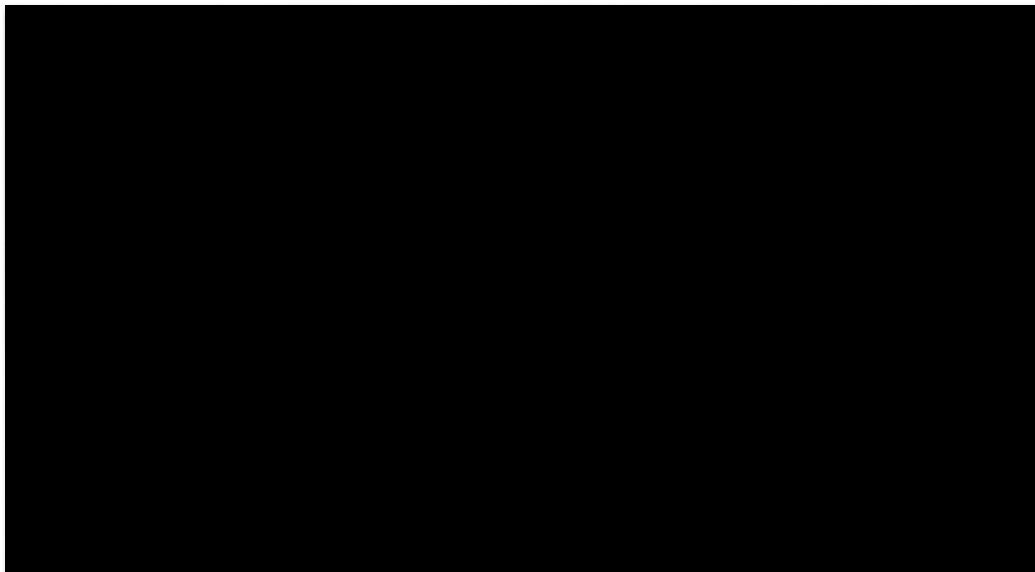


Figure 4.2: *South Wales Echo*, January 17, 2008: 6-7

The author’s endeavour to link together as many victims as possible and present them as following an alleged suicide pattern is manifest in the *Echo* article in question (Norman, 2008). Thomas Davies is identified as central figure here and his friendly ties with four other victims, namely Dale Crole, David Dilling, Liam Clarke and Zachery Barnes are highlighted. At the same time, the most recent victim, Gareth Morgan is also associated with the others, but mostly on a visual level. The article’s text does not specify

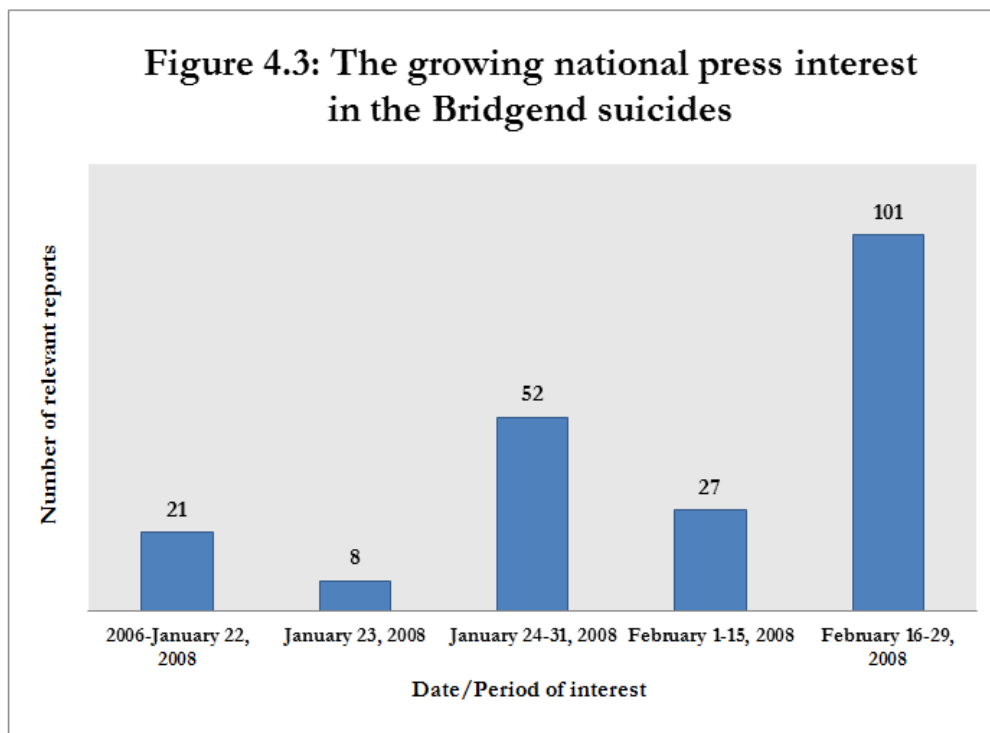
whether he personally knew any of the aforementioned youngsters. Nevertheless, the placement of his photograph in-between those of four other reportedly acquainted suicide victims in the photo strip featuring on the top-right corner of page 7 (see Figure 4.2) leaves readers with little doubt about his death being somehow connected to those of the rest. This view is consistent with the works of Hall (2010 [1973]), Barthes (1977b), Huxford (2001) and Jones and Wardle (2008) on the ideological and, more specifically, the naturalisation function served by news photographs. As Barthes (1977b: 24) would argue, this 'syntax', i.e. the placement of victims' pictures next to each other connotes a sequence of events (individual suicide incidents), which acquire meaning at the 'suprasegmental level of [their] concatenation'. In other words, more than the individual suicide stories per se, it is the increasing number of young victims and the apparent similarities between their deaths which are at the core of the Bridgend narrative, constructing the local phenomenon in question as an exceptional tragedy. As will be pointed out in the following chapters, the exact same head-shot photos along with those of subsequent victims often appear in analogous photo strips in Bridgend-related national press articles after January 2008.

2. The transition from local to national news

The apparently limited national press interest in the issue of the Bridgend suicides between January 1, 2006 and January 22, 2008 is replaced by a plethora of primary news stories, editorials and comments on the topic in the first months of 2008. In quantitative terms, compared to the 21 articles of the preceding two-year period, the national press' attention to the topic increased astonishingly in the remainder of January 2008 (60 articles, in which the issue is, at least incidentally, mentioned) and peaked in February 2008 (128 articles in total), especially in its second half (see Figure 4.3).

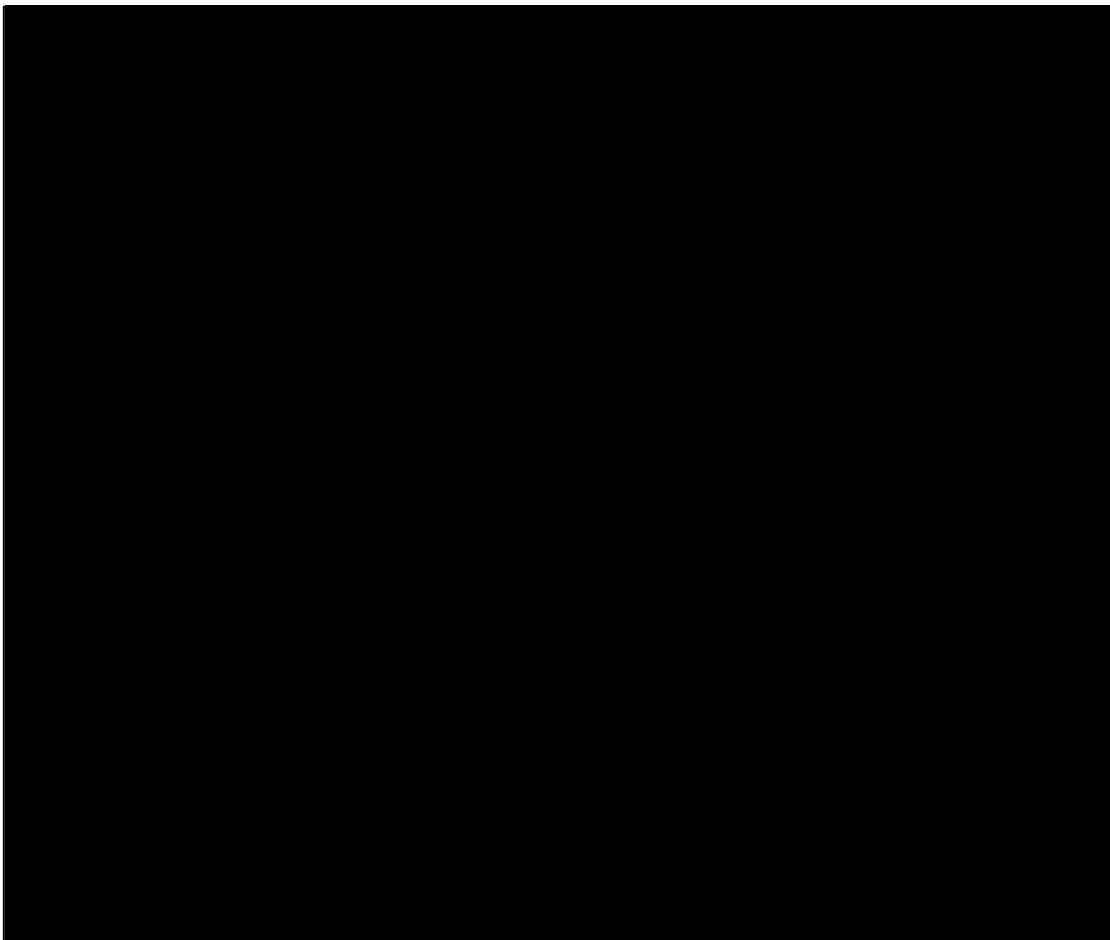
The transition of the Bridgend story from local to national newspapers marks an increase in its perceived newsworthiness and overall significance and brings the issue to the attention of a wider audience, thus supporting its 'social problem' status. Going back to the different views on when a problem is constructed (Best, 1995; Jenkins, 2001; Loseke, 2003a), it could be argued that, until the national press actually took notice and underlined the broader ramifications of the Bridgend situation in 2008, the problem did not exist or existed only in a latent, unconstructed form. The key date for the 'discovery' of the Bridgend problem by national newspapers is, as already mentioned, January 23, 2008, when seven out of the eight newspapers under study simultaneously run detailed and visually compelling stories on the topic, with only *The Independent* joining the scene

one day later. The placement of these articles in the body of the newspaper is in this case of particular importance, since it indicates the salience and newsworthiness (Riffe et al., 2005) attributed to the Bridgend story by each of these news institutions. On January 23, 2008, only the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* value the Bridgend suicides as an issue newsworthy enough to be placed on their front pages: the *Mail* clearly takes the lead by devoting its entire front along with an inside double-page spread (pages 4 and 5) to Bridgend, while the *Telegraph*'s piece, which is not as prominent, consists in a page 3 article, placed above the fold. The position of the original Bridgend stories is even less prominent in the other five newspapers. Particularly, the matter is only addressed in full or half-page inside reports placed towards the middle section of that date's papers, which suggests that the latter do not consider it as noteworthy as the former two.



It is the media's agenda-setting role and their ability to influence the social problems game by raising concern over specific issues (Cohen, 1963; Best, 2008) which matters the most here. Irrespective of whether some of the preceding newspapers appear to be more interested in the Bridgend case than others, at this initial stage of its national coverage there is an evident consensus amongst press representatives that the local suicides constitute a problem: an alarming matter which needs to be debated on a national level and dealt with immediately, especially since young people's lives are apparently at stake.

Had they not been presented the way they were in January 2008, the Bridgend events might not have turned into a powerful and long-lasting media story. It is likely that they would never have made national news or that they would have evolved differently. Although it is impossible to examine the subsequent reports outside the inferential structure set by the original ones, the latter can and should also be taken into account in their own right. For the purposes of clarity in my analysis, I make, wherever possible, a distinction between the perceived newsworthiness of the original Bridgend story and that of the Bridgend narrative as a whole. The first will be considered in the current section, while the second in the next one. Despite the evident overlap between the two, I expect such a distinction to offer an insight into why the lasting for over a decade, yet previously neglected, Bridgend issue became national news at that specific point in time and not sooner.



With regard to the events composing the original Bridgend narrative, it is the death of yet another young person in the area, let alone of a pretty young girl like Natasha Randall, which triggers the national press coverage. Natasha's suicide on January 17, 2008 is the incident, which the original Bridgend-related news reports in all eight sample

newspapers primarily focus on, since she is the latest and therefore, the most newsworthy victim at that time. However, her newsworthiness goes beyond her death being quite recent and also relates to her being the first female in a list of young males

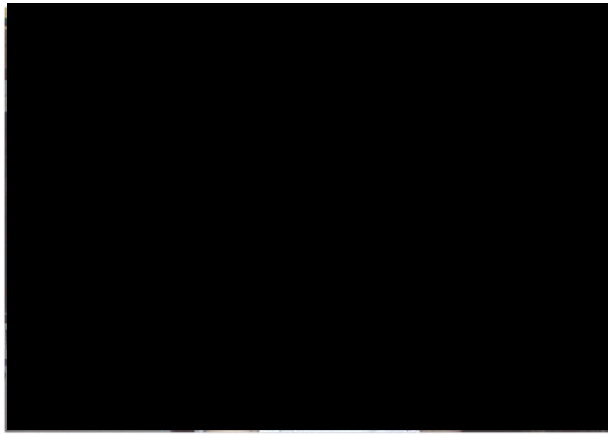


Figure 4.4: Natasha Randall pictured in a low-cut top alongside Liam Clarke (*Daily Mail*, January 23, 2008: 5; *Daily Express*, January 23, 2008: 11; *The Times*, January 23, 2008: 13)

having been found hanged in the South Wales region: suicidal behaviour research (Hawton et al., 1993) indicates that young women tend to attempt suicide in order to get attention (para-suicide) without actually intending to die; but even if they do intend to kill themselves, they are more likely to do so using a less violent method than hanging such as self-poisoning (Platt, 1992).

Natasha's violent death by hanging is rather unusual and thus, more noteworthy in media terms. At the same time, Natasha's sex appeal also needs to be taken into consideration when discussing her news value as opposed to that of the previous male victims. As shown in the photos accompanying the original reports, Natasha had been a vivacious and photogenic young girl, whose unexpected and dramatic death was apparently too important and emotionally charged an event for national press journalists to overlook. It is probably no coincidence that the two largest photos in these reports, appearing in the *Mail* and the *Express* (see Table 4.C as well as Figure 4.4), depict her wearing a low-cut blouse and partying (alongside Liam Clarke), since such photos have the potential to titillate readers (Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2011).

The death of Natasha Randall is also acknowledged as the trigger for the national press' sudden interest in the Bridgend suicides by several of my interviewees. Particularly, the former Bridgend Samaritans director, Darren Matthews, argues that the suicide of a young and attractive girl like her presented journalists with the prospect of constructing a dramatic and enigmatic narrative in a way that the preceding male suicides in the area did not:

'[...] [T]he reason why they [local suicides] didn't come to the [national] media's attention is [...] that they [the victims] were all males. [...] Before that point [pre-January 2008], it wasn't difficult to see [...] the high number of deaths occurring, but it is only when you get a young female who hangs herself that, all of a sudden, the public and the press start taking notice. [...] I think that the media latched onto the young female [Natasha Randall], who died in January [2008], and they made this sort of story

there. [...] [T]hey were trying to paint the picture of a good-looking young girl, who had everything to live for, [so] why is she dead?’

(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

A similar point is made by Carole Cadwalladr of *The Observer*, who also underlines journalists’ increased interest in grim stories where photogenic young girls are involved:

‘If Natasha [Randall] had been male or not very pretty, I [...] doubt [Bridgend] would have received as much coverage. News editors like to put photos of pretty girls on their pages; and tragic, doomed pretty girls so much the better.’

(Carole Cadwalladr, interviewed on July 5, 2011)

Nevertheless, more than the emotional appeal of Natasha Randall’s suicide case per se, it is the way in which her death is made sense of, that is, its association with those of the previous six male victims and its view not as an isolated incident, but as part of a wider and far graver suicide problem that boosts the newsworthiness of the original Bridgend story even further. Tony Bonnici of the *Daily Express* attributes the national press’ sudden attention to the Bridgend issue to the emergence of a suicide pattern, which brings incidents previously regarded as one-off tragedies into perspective:

‘It was a quite unusual series of events and, once there were seven of them [suicide victims] that were [linked together], people saw that there was more to it than just a simple one-off tragedy. A pattern started to emerge.’

(Tony Bonnici, interviewed on June 22, 2011)

At the same time, the local MP Madeleine Moon traces the roots of the matter’s rise to national news visibility back to the publicly expressed concerns of the Bridgend coroner Philip Walters over the rising youth suicide rates in the area. She accuses journalists of intentionally misrepresenting the Bridgend situation from the start in order to construct a more dramatic story, while she also recognises the contribution of an exceptionally newsworthy suicide victim like Natasha Randall to this end:

‘Basically, you had a statement from a coroner, who, at the inquest of a young man who died, made the statement that Bridgend was the ‘suicide capital of the UK’ [...]. It was published in a local paper [...] and that was then sold on to the nationals and it became the story. At the time, Bridgend did not have the highest rates in Wales [...] but, hey, you don’t need to spoil the story by introducing facts! [A]t the same time, a young girl took her life; a very dramatically pretty young girl [Natasha Randall]’

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

The statistics, which the above-mentioned claim about Bridgend not having the highest suicide rate in Wales at the time of its elevation to national news status is based on, are not specified by the MP. Nonetheless, this claim is apparently inconsistent with previous statements of hers, appearing in the local press (see Doyle, *Glamorgan Gazette*, 2008; Norman, *South Wales Echo*, 2008), according to which Bridgend's suicide rate for young males was the highest in the UK. Moreover, the local press article featuring the coroner's view of Bridgend as the 'suicide capital of the UK' is not specified in the local MP's aforementioned statement either. However, from the preceding regional press analysis, it is clear she refers to the extensive *South Wales Echo* article of January 17, 2008, which reports on the inquest into Thomas Davies' death, pointing out its possible connections to those of previous suicide victims (Norman, 2008).

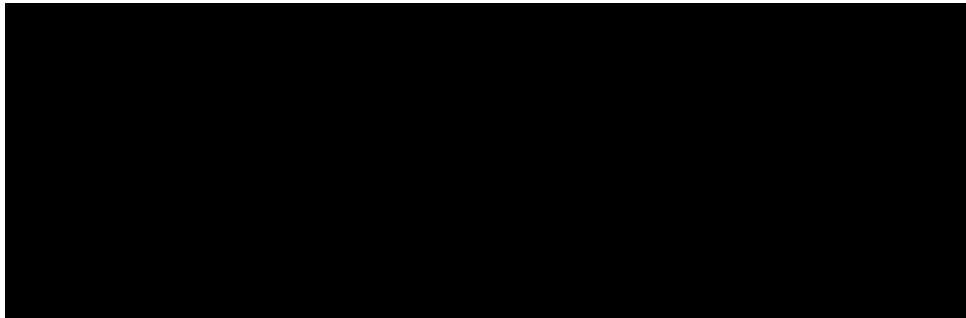


Figure 4.5: *Daily Express*, January 23, 2008: 11

I have already described how the potential links between the individual victims receive more and more attention in the local press and how their photos are often placed

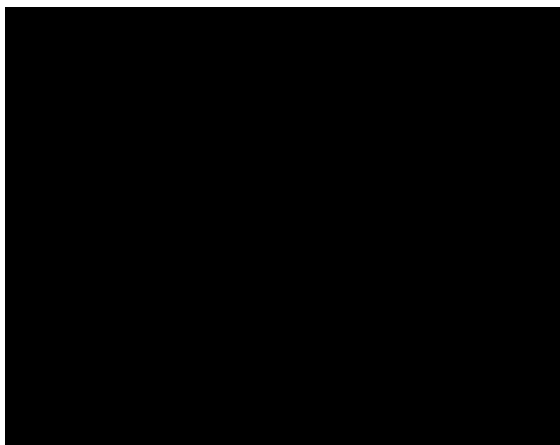


Figure 4.6: *The Times*, January 23, 2008: 13

next to each other, implicitly creating the impression of a local suicide contagion. A similar technique is also used in the original national press reports, which present Natasha Randall as being friends with Liam Clarke and connect her, through him, to five more male suicide victims. The only difference, however, in this case is that, unlike the friendly connections between the other victims,

those between Natasha and Liam are not solely based on claims, but also supported by visual evidence. Figure 4.4, shown in Figures 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7 in the context of the actual

national press reports in which it appears on January 23, 2008, is the only picture in the entire Bridgend coverage depicting two suicide victims together (Natasha Randall and Liam Clarke). Explicitly indicating how close the two victims had been when alive, this common photo of theirs suggests their suicides could also be connected in some way. Correspondingly, the association of these two suicides renders the possibility of additional connections to and between the other five victims, whose photos are placed next to those of Liam and Natasha and who reportedly died under apparently similar circumstances to theirs, more plausible. In that sense, apart from the sex aspect of it, the elevated newsworthiness of Natasha Randall's suicide also consists in that she bears much more evident (in this case, visually confirmed) ties to a previous suicide victim than the rest. Due to these ties, Natasha's tragedy is considered much more suitable to support a powerful 'suicide epidemic' story. This is yet another reason why journalists encouraging such a view of the Bridgend phenomenon prioritise it over those of other victims.

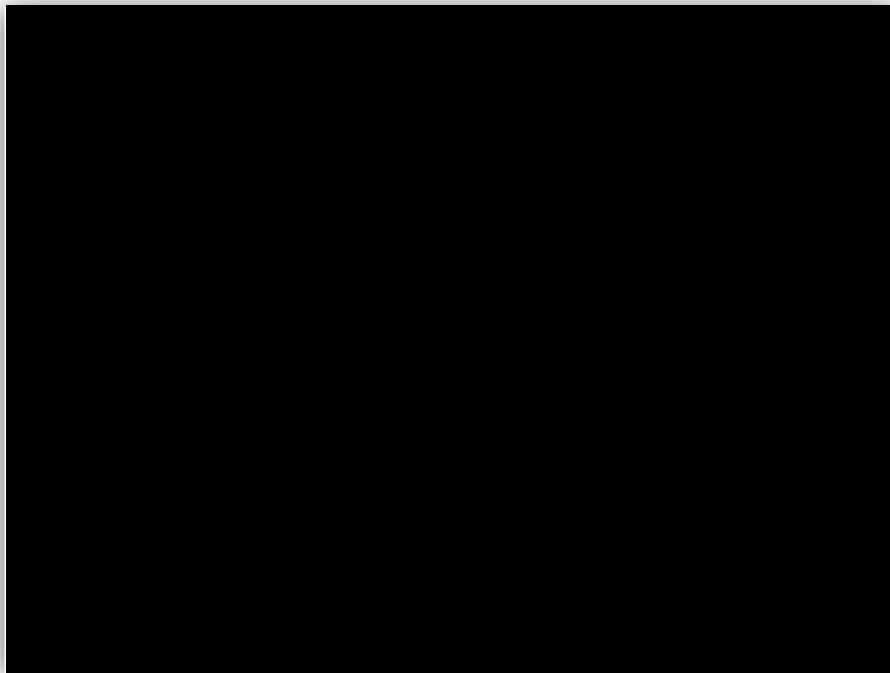


Figure 4.7: *Daily Mail*, January 23, 2008: 4-5

Furthermore, the search for links between the individual victims brought attention to the ambivalent information on Natasha Randall's profile on a social networking site, which allowed journalists to present the Bridgend suicides as the product of an 'Internet suicide cult'. Three weeks before killing herself, Natasha had posted a message on a Bebo memorial group dedicated to Liam Clarke, which said: 'RIP Clarky boy!! gonna miss ya!

always remember the gd times! love ya x - *Me too!* (Pilditch, *Daily Express*, 2008: 10; my emphasis). A commonsensical reading of this '*Me too*' by reporters at the time suggested that, through this message, Natasha was insinuating her intention to put an end to her life, just like her friend had done. This post in combination with the numerous tributes left on her Web page after her death raised concerns about the Internet's involvement in the case. The introduction of an, absent from the preceding local press coverage, Internet dimension rendered this 'suicide epidemic' story even more exceptional and thus, more newsworthy. The potency, formation and evolution of this 'Internet suicide' frame over time will be further studied in Chapter Five. However, what is worth keeping in mind at this point is that the newspaper giving the Bridgend issue the most prominence on the first day of its coverage, i.e. the *Mail*, is also the one emphasising more than any of the others the possibility of an Internet link between the victims. This is, of course, hardly a coincidence, but underlines the increased newsworthiness of this Internet angle, to which the Bridgend story largely owes its January 2008 breaking to national news attention.

3. Newsworthiness of the overall Bridgend narrative

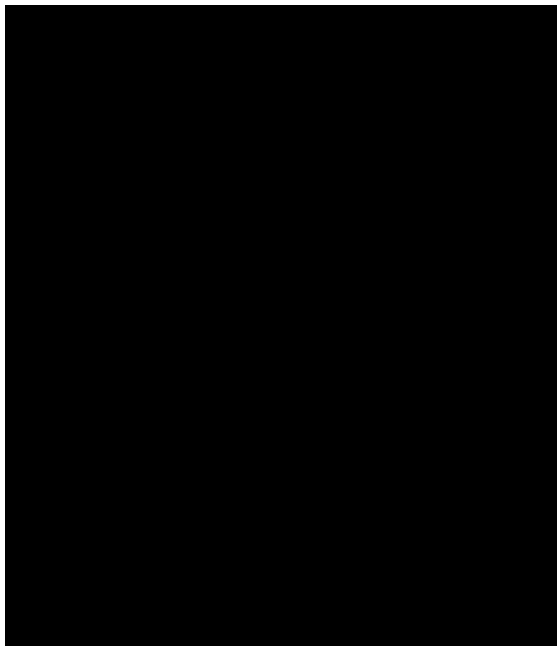


Figure 4.8: *The Sun*, January 23, 2008: 9

Coyle and MacWhannell (2002) identify 'causal searching' and 'morality' as two central themes in the construction of suicide news stories and Bridgend is no exception to this rule. Ever since its elevation to national news or, even in prior local press reports on each of the individual suicide incidents in the area, the Bridgend story is essentially focused on why these youngsters decided to take their own lives. At the same time, this search for their potential motives is inseparable from moral labelling, since, as Coyle and MacWhannell (2002) point

out, these motives are seen as reflecting, and, therefore, allow judgements to be made about, the moral character of the deceased. All seven victims depicted in the original Bridgend reports of January 23, 2008 (January 24, 2008 for *The Independent*) and especially, the latest female one (Natasha Randall), are photogenic young people, apparently lively

and carefree, having everything to live for and no reason to kill themselves (see Figure 4.8). Due to these features, they, at least initially, acquire an ‘innocent victim’ status, which dictates a view of their suicides as ‘tragedies’.

On a factual basis, the abrupt and tragic loss of not one or two, but seven young lives, let alone via the use of a violent suicide method such as hanging, constructs in itself a dramatic and emotionally-charged story. Nonetheless, it is the causal mystery over the numerous youth suicide incidents occurring in close geographical and temporal proximity to each other which distinguishes Bridgend from the average suicide story and becomes the axis around which the Bridgend narrative is built. That is because the Bridgend enigma does not just involve a one-off incident. In fact, it is not even limited to the seven cases that triggered the national press’ attention in January 2008, but extends to several other similar suicides taking place in the area during the following months (see Table 4.D in Appendix IV). Consequently, moving beyond its initial coverage, Bridgend, to a great extent, owes its exceptionality and news value to the fact that it is a recurring story about a local suicide cluster, which comes back to the fore and is reconsidered with every new victim seemingly fitting the alleged ‘pattern’ in terms of his or her age, method and location of death. Of course, not all the subsequent cases are as significant nor do they receive the same amount of attention as the original seven, but, as Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Jewkes (2011) would argue, the former add continuity to the Bridgend story, which is why they do not need to meet as high a threshold of newsworthiness as the latter to make national news. According to Carole Cadwalladr of *The Observer*, it is precisely this ongoing nature of the Bridgend phenomenon, still unfolding while in the press’ spotlight, as well as the appeal to parental fears and originality of the ‘suicide cluster’ topic which primarily make the corresponding media story so powerful:

‘I think that the way it played out as a ‘rolling news story’ was what really fuelled [media attention]. If it had been a past, historic event, the news crews would have come into town, done their pieces, and then left. But it was the fact that it was ongoing, that no-one knew ‘who would be next’. That it seemed as if the whole town was threatened by a mysterious but deadly suicide virus. I think that it played to parents’ insecurities and fears. [...] [I]t was the first time most people had probably heard of a suicide cluster so it had that appearance of newness which caused people to sit up and take notice.’

(Carole Cadwalladr, interviewed on July 5, 2011)

In the light of the increasing suicide toll, the notions of ‘causality’ and ‘morality’, found at the core of the Bridgend story, go one step further, extending beyond the already completed suicides to the risk of future ones. Aside from the victims’ personal

issues and moral character, the discovery of the cause behind the Bridgend suicides is directly related to the moral responsibility to prevent more vulnerable and impressionable youngsters from taking their own lives in the future. As will be made clearer in the subsequent chapters, despite the general uncertainty about the nature of the Bridgend problem, there is an underlying assumption in the press that these young people died for

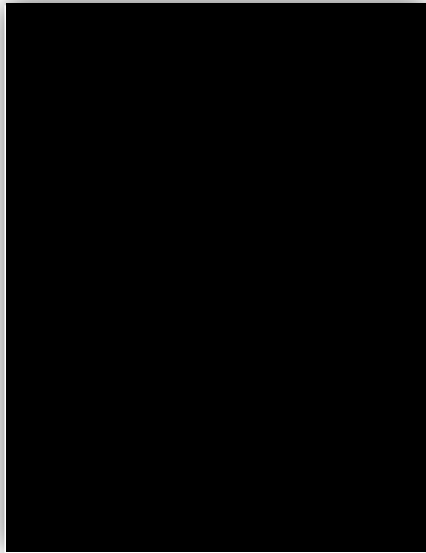


Figure 4.9: *The Sun*, February 20, 2008: 1

a reason and therefore, that someone (or something) is to blame. It is exactly this assumption that pervades all the different frames through which the Bridgend phenomenon is made sense of. Although the available evidence is circumstantial and the causal searching often reduced to pure speculation, every new name added to the list of local suicide victims stresses the urgent need for answers (see, for example, the *Sun*'s front page in Figure 4.9). In their attempt to unravel the mystery, journalists offer various explanations, through which they aim to

determine how the Bridgend issue should be understood and responded to. In that sense, the categorisation of the Bridgend deaths as a problem of one cause rather than another (e.g. of the Internet rather than local deprivation or institutional failure) assigns not just causal, but also treatment responsibility (Iyengar, 1989), since it directly influences any discussion about the kind of action required to avert future incidents.

As the suicides keep occurring in the region in the midst of the national press' attention, the human implications of the matter become more and more manifest. This renders the dramatic effect and, by extension, the newsworthiness of the original Bridgend story even greater. Just like Cadwalladr in the preceding statement, the readers' editor of *The Observer*, Stephen Pritchard, sees the Bridgend case as representing parents' worst nightmare. He emphasises the large number of victims and bereaved families and acknowledges the story's human dimension as the main reason behind its success:

'[Bridgend] is a quintessentially human story; a tragedy among young people and lots of affected families. It is one of those stories that you feel readers can identify with, because they themselves have families and they wouldn't want their children to go through this sort of thing. So, it touches lots of buttons in a human interest way.'

(Stephen Pritchard, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

This human dimension of the Bridgend story is emphasised through the extensive publication of victims' photos, visually proving that the deceased could be anyone's children and thus inciting readers' compassion for the grieving families. Pointing out the importance of visuals in the construction of a powerful news story, journalist Carole Cadwalladr maintains that the Bridgend issue would not have attracted so much press attention had the pictures of the victims not been so appealing. She also associates the intensity of the Bridgend coverage with convenience and particularly, with the fact that journalists searching for visuals to accompany their texts often had to look no further than the, free from any privacy restrictions, victims' profiles in social networking sites:

'A news story without a photo is not really a news story. Photographs of the victims, especially happy smiling photographs of attractive young people, made [Bridgend] a far bigger news story than it would have been otherwise. And [...] the fact that these were easily available [online], certainly fuelled the coverage.'

(Carole Cadwalladr, interviewed on July 5, 2011)

In a similar fashion, Tony Bonnici of the *Daily Express* argues that, via the use of personal information and photographs they found online, journalists were able to personalise the Bridgend problem and to thus build a much more engaging narrative around it:

'If anything, by using [the material found in victims' online profiles], by putting a face [to the names], they become real people. They are not just statistics. [...] The fact that we did have access to that [material], I think, [...] makes [Bridgend] a much more powerful story.'

(Tony Bonnici, interviewed on June 22, 2011)

Last but not least, the shock value and consequent newsworthiness of the Bridgend story is also seen as linked to the disproportionality between the large number of local suicide incidents and the apparently limited spatio-temporal range within which they occur. More specifically, as will be further discussed in Chapters Six and Seven, these incidents are often presented as happening in a single town, when they, in fact, extend over a much wider region. According to Stephen Pritchard of *The Observer*, journalists' frequent confusion between the town of Bridgend and the County by the same name is far from random, but serves a dramatic purpose:

'[S]uddenly there appeared to be a great number [of suicides] and that was [...] a complete misunderstanding of the geographical nature of Bridgend. If you say 'Bridgend', we think of a town, but, in fact, the Bridgend phenomenon [...] was in a very much larger area, which happens to be the Bridgend metropolitan area. So, whenever the media talked about [...] the rate of extraordinary suicide in Bridgend, it

was talking about a very large area; it wasn't just talking about a town. [...] I do think [that this confusion between the town and the County of Bridgend was, in some cases, intentional and served as a means for journalists to achieve a greater dramatic effect].'

(Stephen Pritchard, interviewed on June 23, 2011)



Figure 4.10: *Daily Express*, February 17, 2008:15

This ambiguity over the extent of the problem, adding to the emotional appeal of the Bridgend narrative, does not just involve the suicide location, but also the time when each of the deaths occurred. On a visual level, it is not always clear that all these deaths span over a year. On the contrary, the placement of the previously neglected 2007 youngsters' photos next to those of Natasha Randall and of subsequent suicide victims, occasionally with no mention of their date of death in the accompanying caption (see Figures 4.8 and 4.10), can easily give readers the impression that they all took their lives simultaneously or, at least, within a very short time period from one another. Such an impression, once again, boosts the shock factor of the story and underlines the human consequences of the local suicide problem, thus reinforcing the calls for urgent action. Aside from visuals, but still in regard to the apparently excessive number of suicides in the area, Darren Matthews of the Samaritans notes journalists' propensity to expand the alleged age range of the victims in order to include as many of them as possible in their stories about the Bridgend cluster. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that this expansion is not without limits, since local incidents deviating from the supposed 'pattern', either

because they occur outside the Bridgend County or because the victim is of an older age, often go unreported, even though it is likely that they are also part of the same cluster:

‘What tended to happen was that there was a narrow age range; and once a death occurred just outside that age range, then [journalists] would expand the age range. So, it was like we started off by looking at deaths perhaps of people 15 to 24 years old and then, all of a sudden, becomes 15 to 26, then 15 to 27...But with victims over 30, they weren’t that interested, and so, those deaths went unreported. There were certain younger deaths as well that were just outside the Bridgend County and so, they went unreported as well. But it could be argued that they were part of that cluster as well.’

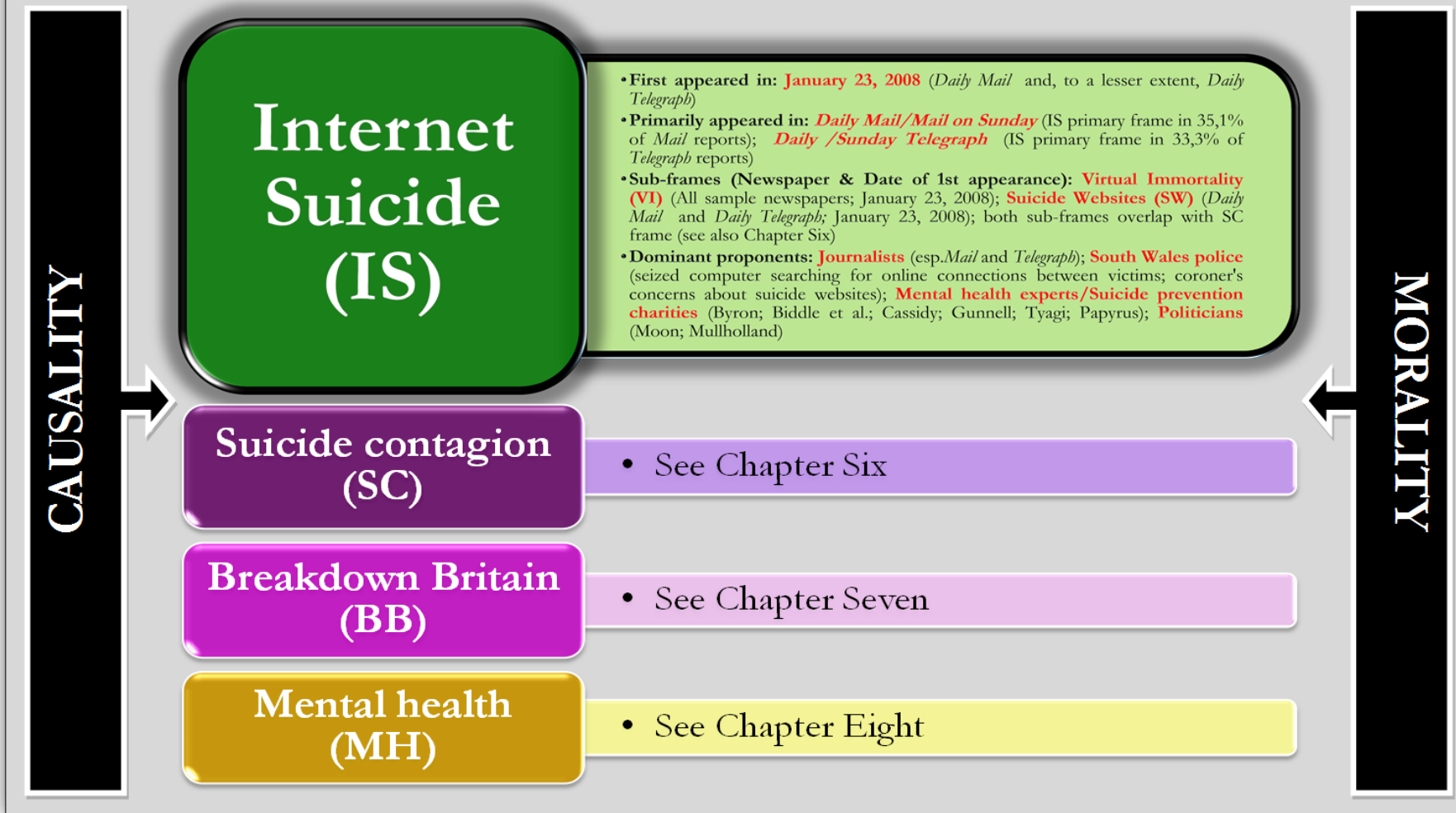
(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the course of the Bridgend matter from the regional to the national press as a journalistic exercise on how to increase the appeal of a news story. Particularly, I have documented the gradual shift in the matter’s coverage from a Wales-wide to a Bridgend-specific perspective and the attempts of reporters to present the local suicide incidents as part of a wider and far more serious phenomenon, which eventually attracts the national press’ attention on January 23, 2008. The elements that boost the issue’s newsworthiness to the point where national newspapers finally take notice have been considered and the role of the constructed narrative in the perception of the Bridgend problem has been assessed.

The question of why so many young people suddenly chose to end their lives in the area pervades the entire Bridgend coverage and is the one that everyone discussing the matter, from the local coroner and the MP to journalists and the victims’ families, attempts to answer. Though sometimes based on pure speculation, the claims made by and through the media aim to convince the public and the competent authorities that Bridgend has a suicide problem, but also and most importantly, to determine its nature and, correspondingly, the appropriate responses to it. In the context of this rhetorical play known as the ‘social problems game’ (Loseke, 2003a), which takes place in the national press, the local suicides are made sense of within four main frames: Internet Suicide (IS), Suicide Contagion (SC), Breakdown Britain (BB) and Mental Health (MH). Each of these frames will be analysed in detail in the following chapters. Given that the most extensive and prominent original report on Bridgend is the *Daily Mail* one stressing the supposed online links between the victims, the IS frame will be the first to be examined, constituting the focal point of Chapter Five.

Figure 5.1
Main frame 1: Internet Suicide (IS)



CHAPTER FIVE

The Internet suicide cult?

‘Most parents don’t understand what [their children] are doing or what they are talking about. [...] He did go on Bebo and apparently had a page. He must have discussed his other friends dying on there because it had upset him. But I have no idea how to get on these sites or what the kids are talking about.’

(Melanie Davies on her son’s suicide, quoted in Craig and Leach, *The Sunday Telegraph*, January 27, 2008: 22)

‘The truth is that the internet has left so many of us in the dark – both parents and children. [...] In bedrooms all over the western world, children and adults today are isolated from reality, worshipping at the altar of the internet, which gives out its soft radiance, a mysterious wonderful monster lurking like some ancient god.’

(Emerson, *Daily Mail*, January 24, 2008: 14)

Introduction

The anonymous and transnational nature of cyberspace has given users the opportunity to ‘extend’ themselves online: they can create digital selves which are not merely fantasy ones, but have the potential to enrich their physical existence by allowing them to build meaningful relationships and to develop their social skills (Turkle, 1997, 1999; Seymour and Lupton, 2004; Baron, 2008; Ito et al., 2008). However, this engagement with new media also has a ‘dark side’, the consequences of which are still debated. The Internet has not just opened up prospective criminals’ horizons (Jewkes, 2007), but also blurred the (offline) boundaries between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’; it has permitted interested individuals to construct and manage deviant, yet acceptable to like-minded users, identities (DiMarco, 2003; Jewkes and Sharp, 2003) and to live out their deepest fantasies online, for example bdsm webcam or virtual paedophilia. In the light of the aforementioned close interaction between our virtual and physical selves, this online experimentation with deviant activities has created a climate of anxiety (Wykes, 2010; Yar, 2010) which features prominently in and is often exaggerated by the news media. Emphasis is often placed on the risks that inappropriate online material poses to young and unsuspecting individuals who come in contact with it (Wall, 2001, 2010; Livingstone, 2009).

This chapter will look at the construction of the 2008 Bridgend deaths by the national British press as the product of an ‘Internet suicide cult’ and, by extension, of the ‘dark side’ of cyberspace. Particularly, it will study the way in which the IS frame is initially employed by journalists to explain the growing number of local youth suicide victims, but also to create an exceptional and appealing story. The conception of the relevant events within the wider climate of concern over the influence of the Internet on young people will be closely examined. More

specifically, the transition of this concern from memorial websites potentially glamorising suicide to pro-suicide websites and eventually to the Internet in general in the entire Bridgend coverage will be documented. At the same time, the key proponents of the IS frame will be identified and the strengths and weaknesses of their claims, communicated through the press, will be considered. Finally, the causal uncertainty surrounding the Bridgend phenomenon and the contribution of rebutting arguments to the construction of alternative frames will be discussed.

1. Considering the potency of the 'Internet Suicide' frame in the wake of Natasha Randall's death

The pre-existing climate of anxiety over the 'dark side' of the Internet and its possibly detrimental effect on young people (Byron, 2008; Livingstone, 2009) provided the familial context within which the Bridgend suicides were, at least initially, made sense of. Table 5.B, which provides an overview of the first-ever primary news stories on Bridgend since the issue came to national news visibility, shows there is a consensus amongst journalists that the Internet somehow played part in the suicides. Although the level of the medium's potential responsibility is still negotiated at this initial stage, just the possibility of an Internet link is, despite the lack of evidence, too newsworthy to be left out of the headline, the subheadings or, at least, the lead paragraph of the relevant reports. It is the information placed in such prominent positions which mainly determines the angle and provides the frame of the story (van Dijk, 1991; Fulton, 2005b; Johnson-Cartee, 2005). In that sense, it is obvious that, when the Bridgend problem hits the national press in late January 2008, its conception outside this IS frame is almost impossible.

With regard to the potency of the frame in question, as the preceding local newspaper analysis has revealed, without its Internet dimension, the Bridgend phenomenon is usually seen as a tragedy with consequences limited to the specific geographical area where the deaths took place. In contrast, a potential Internet link increases the story's significance and news value by placing emphasis on what Jewkes (2011) identifies as the 'risk' factor. It is precisely this 'technologisation' of risk that adds to the newsworthiness of the Bridgend story; a story that appeals to readers' common sense, supposedly confirming what is already known: cyberspace encloses a variety of risks, which are often difficult to foresee and manage. Typical of our risk society (Giddens, 1998; Beck, 2000, 2006), this awareness of the unawareness of the whole range of online risks as well as of the inability to fully ensure children's and young people's online safety causes great disquiet to parents. Therefore, it would come as no surprise if it was proven that the Internet is to blame for the suicides, especially since the police and victims' relatives also seem to take this possibility into account.

Table 5.B: The prominence of the IS frame in the original Bridgend-related news reports

January 23, 2008

<i>Newspaper</i>	Section	Length	Headline	Subheading(s)	Lead
<i>The Times</i>	News; Pg.13	718 words	'Natasha, 17, is the seventh victim in town hit by series of copycat suicides'	▪ 'Alert to parents over social network websites' ▪ 'Online tributes may encourage other teens'	'Natasha Randall was 17, had a large circle of friends and was studying childcare when, without any indication that she was unhappy, she hanged herself in her bedroom.'
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	NEWS; Pg.3	786 words	'Seven suicides blamed on internet craze'	▪ 'Young friends from same town driven by desire for a memorial website, say police' ▪ 'FOCUS: DANGERS OF THE NETWORKING SITES'	'A SUICIDE craze sweeping a social networking website could have been behind the deaths of seven young people in one town, detectives fear.'
<i>The Guardian</i>	National; Pg.8	555 words	'Police suspect internet link to suicides'	▪ 'Seven young people found dead in last 12 months' ▪ 'Mother urges parents to monitor computer use'	'Police in south Wales are investigating the possibility of an internet "suicide chain" after the apparent copycat deaths of seven young people over the past year.'
<i>Daily Mail</i>	Pg.1 (contd. in pgs.4-5)	1945 words	'THE INTERNET SUICIDE CULT?'/ 'They lived and died online'	▪ 'Chilling links between seven youngsters found hanged in same town' ▪ 'In just 12 months, seven tragedies in one small town' ▪ 'Wild child who surfed her way to suicide'	'A SMALL town has been rocked by the copycat suicides of seven young people.'
<i>Daily Express</i>	Pgs.10-11	924 words	'Seven die in suicide 'craze''	▪ 'Fears of death cult with links to web chat sites'	'A BIZARRE teenage suicide cult was blamed yesterday for the copycat deaths of seven young people from the same town.'
<i>The Sun</i>	Pg.9	540 words	'BEBO MATES 'IN SUICIDE CHAIN''	▪ 'Net link as 7 die, 2 survive' ▪ 'CULTURE OF SILENCE'	'SEVEN young people from the same town have killed themselves in an apparent "chain" of copycat suicides.'
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	Pg.19	588 words	'SUICIDE TOWN'	▪ 'Parents' anguish as seven young friends all hang themselves in space of one year' ▪ 'Mystery of the lost generation'	'TROUBLED teenager Natasha Randall sent a chilling internet message to her friend Liam Clarke after he killed himself.'
January 24, 2008					
<i>The Independent</i>	HOME; Pg.24	975 words	'The web linking seven young people who chose to take their own lives'	▪ N/a	'The small Welsh community of Bridgend appears an unremarkable place.'

The reasons behind the increased newsworthiness of Natasha Randall's death and its centrality in the constructed Bridgend narrative have been considered in Chapter

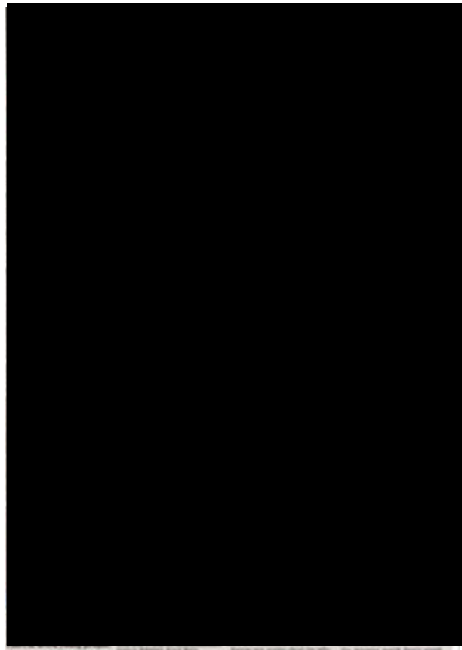


Figure 5.4: *Daily Mail*, January 23, 2008: 1

Four, but what is important to further discuss here is her role in the development of the IS frame. The basis for the IS perception of the Bridgend events was the ambiguous farewell message Natasha Randall had posted on Liam Clarke's memorial page on Bebo, which was, in the wake of her suicide, interpreted as an indication of her intention to kill herself. Left there for everyone to read (journalists included), this message linked her death to his and then both of them to five more that had occurred in 2007, but gone unreported in the national press at the time. All seven cases involved inexplicably found hanged in the wider Bridgend area young people, who had allegedly been friends or acquainted with each other and users of social networking sites like Bebo, Facebook or MySpace. As the evident similarities between them come to the fore through their retrospective examination, the Bridgend story starts to be viewed as far more than an ensemble of individual tragedies. In that way, Natasha's suicide defines the theme of the story, which is not the suicides per se, but the search for potential connections between them, let alone online ones. It underlines the seriousness of the local suicide problem, but also adds an Internet aspect to it, thus providing a hint as to who (or what) might be to blame (Iyengar, 1989) and expanding the range of people involved from Bridgend youngsters to potentially all young and vulnerable individuals with Internet access. It is only through the prism of this key event and the way it is made sense of that all the other suicides and generally, the nature of the Bridgend suicide problem are elucidated. And front-page headlines like the one shown in Figure 5.4 leave little room for alternative interpretations as to what this problem is about.

The appeal of this portrayal of the Bridgend suicides as Internet-related is a recurrent theme in my interviews, which is identified as a major contributory factor to the matter's national news prominence in January 2008:

‘The three words right there make it a headline right off the bat: ‘Internet suicide cult’ is a headline! I think, no matter where you are in the world, if somebody is going around saying ‘Internet suicide cult’, they will be in the papers somewhere.’

(Journalist Zach Newmark, interviewed on June 18, 2010)

‘[The Internet] was the reason why in 2008, [Bridgend] could be taken as a story in a way that in [the past] it could not and that is what made the difference. You have a story that comes out at the same time as the death of a young girl [Natasha Randall] who is very attractive; she has a site to which she said things; you can put the two together and it is more of a story.’

(Bridgend MP Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

Discussing the origins and allure of this Internet-centred approach to the Bridgend phenomenon, journalist Carole Cadwalladr stresses the crucial role of local news agency Wales News, which was the first to suggest the existence of an Internet link between the victims, thereby bringing the story to the national press’ attention:

‘In terms of the reporting of the story, I think it was the first Wales News agency story that triggered the media interest. News agencies make their money selling stories, so the more sensational a story, the more outlets they will sell it to, the more money they stand to make. The first report linked the death of Natasha Randall to an ‘Internet suicide cult’ and inevitably this attracted the interest of the national media. As far as I know, there was never any evidence of an Internet cult. Wales News refused to comment on who their source was for the information; it seems like it was pure speculation. But it put that very first story right on the radar of every news organisation in Britain.’

(Carole Cadwalladr, interviewed on July 5, 2011)

At the same time, the former Bridgend Samaritans director, Darren Matthews, does not explicitly mention Wales News, but similarly describes how a local journalist came up with the inaccurate, yet newsworthy, story of an ‘Internet suicide cult’, which he then sold to the *Daily Mail*:

‘[T]he [Bridgend] story came about because a journalist in Wales put together a dossier, which portrayed the story in a particular way, which wasn’t the exact truth. Then, he sold that to the *Daily Mail* and then, there is that first headline there, ‘The Internet Suicide Cult’, which talks about the Internet suicide, the cult, the pact and then, it made out that they [the victims] all knew each other, which wasn’t the case.’

(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

Given the significance it attributed from the first day to the Bridgend events and the exceptional emphasis it placed on the Internet factor, the *Mail*'s initial coverage deserves special scrutiny. Particularly, the degree of its influence on the subsequent reporting of other newspapers on the matter needs to be assessed. However, in order to acquire a better insight into any such influence, it is important to first study the content of the original IS frame across the entirety of the sample newspapers and evaluate the level of convergence or divergence between them.

2. Suicide as a means to virtual immortality?

Due to the lack of conclusive evidence as to the level of Internet involvement, not all newspapers are equally eager to assign responsibility from the very beginning, which is why the content of the IS frame each of them puts forward to explain the Bridgend deaths varies from one to another. Nonetheless, the Internet aspect identified in all the original reports as a potential contributory factor to the problem is the risk of

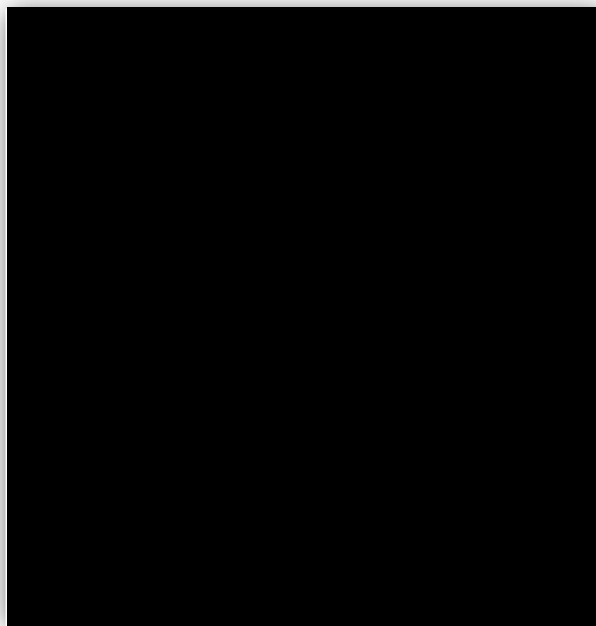


Figure 5.5: Within a week from Natasha Randall's death, more than 3,000 people had visited her Bebo website to pay tribute. Some of the messages left on her 'memorial wall' are pictured here above the headline (*The Times*, January 24, 2008: 11)

glamorising suicide through online memorialisation. Particularly, it is suggested that young and vulnerable individuals may consider suicide a means to achieve 'virtual immortality' (Harris, *Daily Mail*, 2008: 5) by acquiring their own memorial website, even if posthumously. This 'Virtual Immortality' (VI) sub-frame is in itself an extension of a wider SC frame (see Chapter Six), with which the IS frame overlaps at this specific point. It is also occasionally considered within a broader

generational context involving contemporary youth's pursuit of instant fame at all costs, in which case VI becomes part of BB (see Chapter Seven). When Bridgend becomes national news, six out of the eight sample newspapers prioritise this sub-frame and it is only the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* which go beyond online memorials, associating the local suicide problem with other cyber-risks within a major IS frame.

The role of the authorities and other experts in assessing the possibility of an Internet link among the Bridgend victims has been crucial. With Natasha Randall always occupying the most prominent position (see Chapter Four and especially Table 4.C), the individual cases of the seven youngsters, whose deaths were allegedly connected, were homogenised and seen as forming a ‘suicide chain’, either online or offline. Since some of them were acquainted and also communicated with each other through social networking sites, the police decided to further investigate this scenario. As part of the investigation following Natasha’s suicide and acknowledging the Internet medium’s popularity amongst the young, they seized her computer to examine whether any connections to previous victims could be established through online communications such as e-mails, chat rooms and social networking sites (Coles, *The Sun*, 2008a). At the same time, in an effort to be proactive, they reportedly warned parents to keep a close eye on their children and also monitor their online activities (Britten and Savill, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008a; Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008a). In that sense, it was this initial police mobilisation which primarily defined what the problem was and determined the news agenda. Because of Natasha Randall’s message on Liam Clarke’s memorial page on Bebo and the innumerable tributes that appeared online after her death (Figure 5.5), attention focused on the potential involvement of such sites in their deaths. The South Wales police expressed concerns about the extent to which suicide could be romanticised through them, contending that teenagers ‘may think it’s cool to have a memorial website’ and that suicide ‘may even be a way of achieving prestige among their peer groups’ (de Bruxelles and Malvern, *The Times*, 2008: 13).

Apart from police officers, who are generally seen as a credible source when the subject matter is the disruption of social order (Hall et al., 1978; McLaughlin, 2007), the aforementioned possibility was also supported by members of the scientific community, also ranking high in the so-called ‘hierarchy of credibility’ (Becker, 1967) such as (mental) health experts. Discussion centred on the suggestibility of suicide or the so-called ‘Werther effect’ (Phillips, 1974), which normally refers to the potential influence of traditional media portrayals of suicide on vulnerable individuals, but, on this occasion, extended to include that of online memorials. With regard to the Bridgend case, Professor of Epidemiology David Gunnell (cited in de Bruxelles and Malvern, *The Times*, 2008: 13), maintained that the suicides might have been the result of an online Werther effect. ‘Young people are more likely to see and read items concerning suicide on the internet than they are in newspapers’, he stated. ‘One can extrapolate from wider

research on responses to newspaper reporting that a medium like Bebo will have an impact on suicidal behaviour in young people'. Theorists like Baron (2008) note the impact that new technologies have on the use of language, especially by young people.

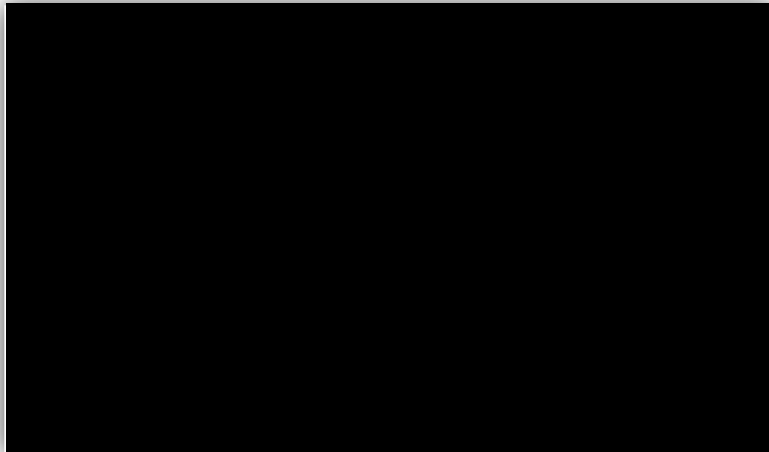


Figure 5.6: *Daily Express*, February 22, 2008: 33

Social psychologist Arthur Cassidy, cited in Caesar (*The Sunday Times magazine*, 2008: 49) argued at a later stage of the Bridgend coverage that online discussions about 'catching the bus', 'catching a balloon' or 'having a laugh up

there' could easily promote a romanticised image of suicide. Such inconsiderate use of language online might, according to him, encourage imitative action offline by preventing users from realising the tragic and permanent consequences of killing themselves. In an attempt to limit this risk of an online Werther effect, the owner of memorial website Gonetoosoon.co.uk, Terry George, decided in February 2008 that all messages dedicated to Bridgend victims be removed from it (Bonnici, *Daily Express*, 2008a; Figure 5.6).

Despite regarding online tributes as an acceptable means for younger generations to express their grief, Darren Matthews of the Samaritans also admits that the positive portrayal of suicide in some of them is inappropriate, since it favours an erroneous understanding of the problem in question:

'[Online tributes] are just like a book of condolence that the older generations would use, so people are 'signing' electronically, if you like, on a memorial page; but [...] some of the messages that were left [in the Bridgend case] could be seen to be glamorising what has happened and painting a false picture of suicide.'

(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

In his turn, Paul Kelly of Papyrus agrees that the enticement of receiving posthumous attention in memorial websites may egg impressionable youngsters to suicide. He also stresses how upsetting visitors' comments in these sites can, at times, be for the victims' families:

'[In memorial sites,] there is a tendency to glorify the person [victim] and sensationalise the whole event [suicide] and the result can be possibly that other youngsters might [...] think 'Here is somebody who is getting fame on the Internet worldwide', especially if there are pictures and photographs that are published, and this could be a trigger for them to do the same thing. [...] Although everyone appreciates perhaps the logic, which is very good and kindly, behind them, [...] [y]ou do get occasionally some highly offensive [comments], which is extremely distressing to the parents and people concerned.'

(Paul Kelly, interviewed on May 19, 2010)

In all these cases, online memorialisation is considered with respect to the risk of further suicides. However, what is important to note is that, within this VI sub-frame, the Internet medium is not seen as blameworthy per se: according to experts (Casey, cited in Midgley, *The Times*, 2008; Samaritans, 2008), the same Werther effect can, as easily manifest itself offline through newspaper reports or public eulogies presenting suicide in a positive light. The possibility of such an effect going beyond any Internet influence and the way in which it was made sense of in the Bridgend articles under study will be more closely examined in Chapter Six. After discussing the features of the IS frame shared by all the original reports, it is now time to look at how the *Mail's* approach differed from those of the other newspapers and evaluate its impact on the prominence and perception of the Internet risk in the entire Bridgend coverage.

3. The *Mail* coverage and the subsequent inferential structure

Apropos the initial conception of the Bridgend deaths as 'Internet suicides', the competitiveness of the media environment, brought up in the course of my interviews, also needs to be taken into account. This is an environment where all newspapers are after interesting stories, but only few of them get to break the high-profile ones, while the rest feel the need to follow suit by subsequently also reporting on them in an attempt to keep up with their rivals. Both the Bridgend MP Madeleine Moon and journalist Ed Caesar admit that the 'Internet suicide cult' story was so newsworthy that, as soon as it appeared in one paper, it was impossible for others to overlook:

'What will happen is, one newspaper will carry a story and the others will jump on it because you feed the machine! So, one paper came up with the idea of 'this was a death, where a computer was removed from the house' and there were questions as to why they would be removing a computer. The police were doing it to see if there were any links and that then took off the story of the Internet death cult.'

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010; my emphasis)

[Natasha Randall] had a Bebo page, which seemed to be full of hints about what was going on. Quite a lot of these kids had social networking sites, where they talked a lot about these things, leaving condolence bricks to their friends who had died. So, I think people just caught on to the fact that it was quite a dark and interesting story and the press obviously jumped on it. And as soon as one did, everyone else did.'

(Ed Caesar, interviewed on June 23, 2011; my emphasis)

These statements portray newspapers as being always on the alert for and ready to 'jump on' an intriguing story one after the other in order to increase their sales. This suggests that, regardless of the possibility of a suicide contagion, a story about such a contagion, let alone one spreading through the Internet, can be equally 'contagious' in journalistic circles. Both my above-mentioned interviewees agree that there is one newspaper taking the lead in this construction of the Bridgend deaths as Internet-related, while the rest of them follow. Neither of the two mentions this newspaper by name, but the *Daily Mail's* front (Figure 5.4) and inside double-page spread (Figure 4.7) of January 23, 2008, dedicated to Bridgend's alleged 'Internet suicide cult', leave little doubt that this is the one they both refer to.

Table 5.C
Negotiating the level of Internet responsibility: from VI to IS

January 23, 2008: National news prominence

IS frame in the form of VI sub-frame in six out of the eight sample newspapers

Independent IS frame only in the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* (no articles from these two newspapers included in this Table)

1 st week of Bridgend coverage (January 24-29, 2008)	▪ 'Fashionable website where teenage suicides are a cause for celebration' (<i>The Times</i> , January 24, 2008: 11)
	▪ 'The lethal 'glamour' factor' (<i>The Times</i> , January 25, 2008: 5)
	▪ 'Scramble to curb suicide websites' (<i>The Times</i> , January 26, 2008: 1-2)
	▪ 'Suicide: a teen's way to instant fame' (<i>The Sunday Times</i> , January 27, 2008: 10)
	▪ 'Why did they die so young? Police re-examine files on 13 tragedies' (<i>The Guardian</i> , January 26, 2008: 9)
	▪ 'Let's not tell our children there's a place called 'Suicide Town'' (<i>The Observer</i> , January 27, 2008: 13)
	▪ 'Suicide 'axis' crosses Welsh valleys' (<i>The Observer</i> , January 27, 2008: 17)
	▪ 'When teenagers lose touch with reality' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 24, 2008: 43)
	▪ 'Just upstairs, and horribly at risk' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 27, 2008: 42-43)
	▪ 'Suicide is 'cool' says death cult gang's pal' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 24, 2008: 17)
	▪ 'Linked by Web of despair' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 26, 2008: 15)
	▪ 'End of my dreams' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , January 27, 2008: 9)
	▪ 'Sick sites' 'glamour' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 24, 2008: 19)

The original *Daily Mail* piece owes its appeal to the fact that it constructs the Bridgend problem as an extensive, human-centred and visually compelling story, which is based on the commonsensical assumption that the Internet is, once again, to blame and,

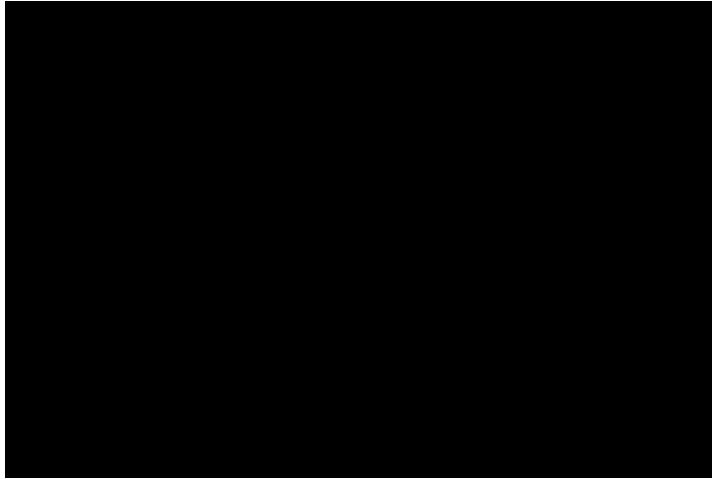


Figure 5.7: *The Times*, February 9, 2008: 24

thus, adds to the pre-existing anxiety over online child safety. In terms of the rise of the story to national news, it is fair to say the *Mail* 'owns' the Bridgend (Internet suicide) problem. While other newspapers are still either not that interested in the Bridgend case or too uncertain and

circumspect in assigning responsibility, the *Mail* runs a front-page story entitled 'The Internet Suicide Cult?' (Salkeld and Koster, 2008a). By doing so, it establishes the primary definition (Hall et al., 1978) of the Bridgend problem, which dictates the subsequent news agenda on the subject. In the days after January 23, 2008, more and more newspapers start scrutinising the potential links between the Internet and suicide, expanding their perspective beyond online tributes to also include other aspects of cyberspace likely to influence suicidal behaviour (see Table 5.C). This, of course, does not mean that all the other newspapers subscribe to the *Mail's* anti-Internet approach. In fact, left-wing broadsheets are very critical of it (see Wilby, *The Guardian*, 2008; Williams, *The Independent on Sunday*, 2008a). Nonetheless, the potency of the constructed IS frame is such that they all feel the need to respond to it, even if it is just in order to rebut it (e.g. *there is no Internet suicide cult in Bridgend* because the victim did not spend so much time online or because someone or something else is to blame; see Figures 5.7 and 5.8 as well as section 7). In other words, the *Mail's* take on the Bridgend suicides is so influential that it establishes the Internet factor as a yardstick against which the relevance or irrelevance of all ensuing understandings of the problem is measured.

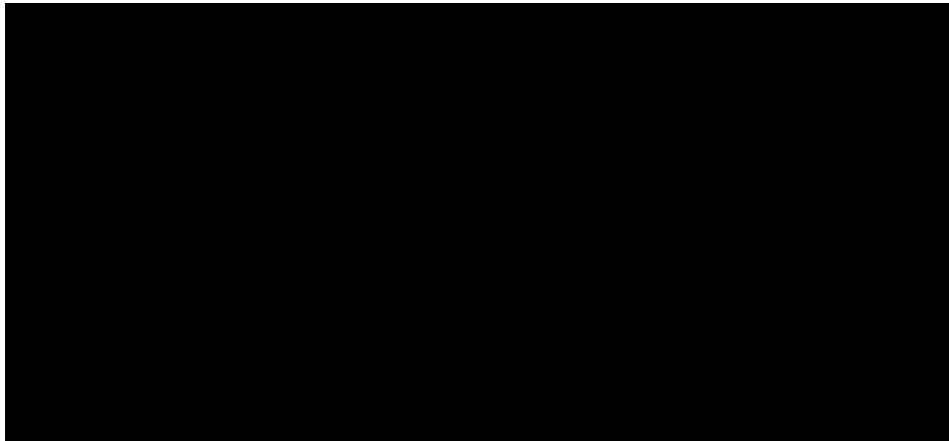


Figure 5.8: *The Times*, February 21, 2008: 31

As attention shifts from a Werther effect, which can occur either online or offline, to the potentially detrimental or even lethal consequences of establishing a virtual presence, including the former effect as well as a vast array of other cyber-risks, the initial IS frame is no longer subordinate to that of SC, but evolves into a frame of its own. Though the two frames intersect when the suggestibility of suicide in online environments is at issue, promoting one over the other entails a different level of Internet responsibility and, consequently, a different understanding of the nature and appropriate responses to the Bridgend problem.

4. Internet suicide as a form of cyber-deviance

After the initial framing of the story and as the terms ‘Internet’ and ‘suicide’ start being associated more and more with each other in the public’s minds, a new online risk rises: that of ‘Internet suicide’. The risk in question comes to the fore apropos the claims about an ‘Internet suicide cult’ in the Bridgend case and is added to the existing, rather long list of online risks, which already includes exposure to explicit (pornographic or extremely violent) material, grooming, privacy violations and many others. Therefore, Internet suicide is identified as yet another aspect of an already constructed social problem, (specifically, of cyber-deviance), whose domain is, in this case, further expanded (Best, 2008). Commenting on the perception of Internet suicide within the wider context of cyber-deviance, Papyrus trustee Paul Kelly argues this has been substantially overlooked compared to other online risks:

‘[T]here are official organisations in this country [UK] such as the IWF [Internet Watch Foundation] and CEOP [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre]. You can complain as a parent or as anybody to those groups about sexual grooming or, photographs, racial hatred and even bullying and they will deal with that. If you go to

them and say 'I am very worried about a site which is promoting suicide', they will say 'It is not within our remit'. Now, there isn't anywhere that myself or a parent who is concerned about this can complain to an official body.'

(Paul Kelly, interviewed on May 19, 2010)

By extending beyond the potential glamorisation of suicide in memorial sites, the Bridgend problem is seen as a typical example of the unforeseen physical-world ramifications of the 'dark side' of cyberspace. It is not limited to that particular location, but is part of a larger and far graver problem, which, given the constantly increasing level of Internet penetration in our everyday lives and the medium's popularity among the young, could easily reach 'epidemic' levels, hence the imperative need for immediate solutions.

Going back to Cohen (2002 [1972]), when the seeming 'disaster' involves individual incidents of deviant behaviour, their view as part of a broader phenomenon amplifies the level of the perceived threat and, correspondingly, those of the concern and alertness over subsequent occurrences. Likewise, according to Hall et al. (1978), the media's tendency to draw, through a process of convergence, parallels between dissimilar conditions and present isolated events as just the 'tip of the iceberg' in a much deeper problem results in the creation of a signification spiral, which promotes a very specific understanding of the events in question. In the context of this spiral, shocking, violent incidents are often linked to other criminal, but non-violent acts and, further, to non-criminal, but just deviant ones, all of which are regarded as posing an equally serious threat to civilised society. Due to the coincidence between the roles of the 'victim' and the 'perpetrator' in the person of the deceased, suicide is generally seen as a controversial and incomprehensible deviant act (Marsh, 2010). However, if placed within a broader cyber-deviance framework, it becomes less contentious: responsibility is displaced away from the deceased, who can, thus, easily stand up to his/her 'victim' status, and transferred to a blameable 'other', that is, the Internet medium per se and those personifying its 'dark' nature, for example, cyber-bullies. In that regard, seen within the quest for order, which characterises modernity (Douglas, 1985; Bauman, 1991), the IS discourse neglects underlying socio-economic factors like local deprivation, gender role crisis, family and community breakdown that might have contributed to the victims' deaths (see also Thom et al., 2011). It aptly strips the risk of suicide of its complexity, thus rendering it '*knowable, decisionable (actionable) and potentially controllable*' (Hollway and Jefferson, 1997: 265; emphasis in the original). This Internet dimension of the Bridgend

problem was in the entire coverage almost twice as prominent in right- than left-wing newspapers, with an average of approximately 12 reports adopting IS as their primary frame in the first compared to 7 in the second⁶. As will be further discussed later on, this construction of the local suicide problem as the ‘tip’ in the ‘iceberg’ of online risks posed

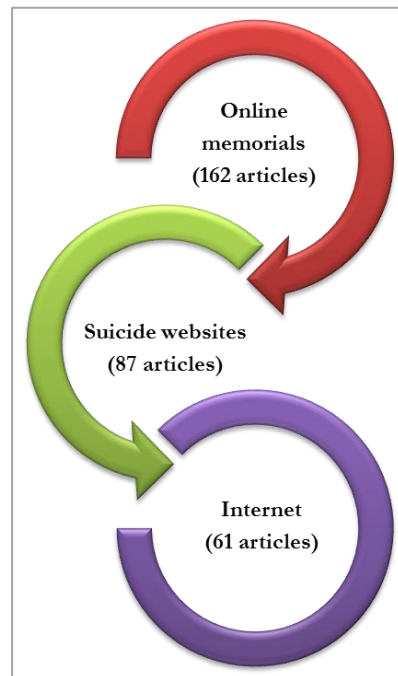


Figure 5.9: Signification spiral indicating the transition between different points of concern in the context of the constructed IS frame.

by cyber-deviance allowed the ideological exploitation (Cohen, 2002 [1972]) of the Bridgend case by the right-wing press, who saw it as an opportunity to promote their conservative agenda and argue for the necessity of tighter Internet regulation.

Figure 5.9 shows how, in the process of assessing the possibility of an Internet link between the Bridgend victims, the questionable harm of online memorials is associated with sinister suicide websites and other forms of cyber-deviance, eventually resulting in the demonisation of the Internet medium per se. The following section will address the issue of suicide websites, as made sense of in the wake of the Bridgend deaths. Due to their evident links to suicide (though not necessarily to the

ones in South Wales), such websites constitute a much more suitable target than online memorials and, therefore, it comes as no surprise that they become the next point of concern in the constructed signification spiral.

5. The risk of suicide websites

A. ‘They DO encourage hangings’: Despite the inconclusive evidence as to whether the Internet had played a part in the suicides, a number of claims-makers, amongst which mental health charities and suicide victims’ parents, took advantage of the Bridgend events to raise public awareness around suicide websites. These include Internet

⁶ My sample contained five right- (*The Times/Sunday Times*; *The Daily/Sunday Telegraph*; *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday*; *Daily/Sunday Express*; *The Sun/News of the World*) and three left-wing (*The Guardian/Observer*; *The Independent/Independent on Sunday*; *Daily/Sunday Mirror*) newspapers, which was why, in order to be able to compare the two, I calculated the average number of reports with IS as their primary frame in each of them in the following way:

Right-wing average: 62 (reports where IS primary frame) / 5 (number of right-wing newspapers in sample) = 12.4.

Left-wing average: 22 (reports where IS primary frame) / 3 (number of left-wing newspapers in sample) = approx. 7.3.

chatrooms, where users egg each other on to kill themselves, and the so-called ‘recipe’ websites, which provide detailed information on the variety, duration and effectiveness of different suicide methods. Just like online tributes, suicide websites are considered likely to lead to an online Werther effect (Whitlock et al., 2006; Biddle et al., 2008; Dunlop et al., 2011; Smithson et al., 2011), but the explicitness of their content is often seen as bringing this risk to a new level. Going back to the discussion on the links between suicide and the Internet (see Chapter Two), theorists like Eichenberg (2008), Harris et al. (2009) and Jones et al. (2011) point out that the anonymity of cyberspace may in fact promote a more constructive dialogue around suicide; it may provide people with ‘spoiled identities’ (Goffman, 1963) (in this case, self-destructive individuals struggling with the stigma of suicide) with a forum to openly express their emotions and receive advice on how to overcome their problems from other users in similar situations. However, the ‘Suicide Websites’ (SW) sub-frame paints a rather different picture. Within this sub-frame, the Bridgend case is viewed as the latest in a series of Internet-related tragedies (Simon Kelly’s in 2001, Brandon Vegas’ in 2003, Carina Stephenson’s in 2005, Kevin Whitricks in 2007 and Imogen d’Arcy’s in 2008, amongst others), in which the victims, mostly youngsters, had evidently discussed or announced online their intention to kill themselves or otherwise used the Web to better plan their final act (Macintyre, *The Times*, 2008a; Craig and Leach, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008). Such cases are presented as the norm rather than the exception, while the possibly positive influence of the Internet on vulnerable individuals (Eichenberg, 2008; Harris et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2011; Kemp and Collings, 2011; Daine et al., 2013) is largely overlooked.

The linkage of all these suicide cases, even at an incidental level, naturalises the IS understanding of the Bridgend events and reinforces a negative perception of cyberspace, which is, once again, regarded as a carnivalistic, unregulated environment (Presdee, 2000; Wall, 2001, 2010; Yar, 2010), where ‘anything goes’. Any pre-existing mental health problems of the deceased are downplayed (see Chapter Eight), while the emphasis placed on the Internet factor suggests that, though possibly depressed and contemplating suicide, the victims would, in all probability, not have carried it out had they not had access to these websites. ‘If this information had not been on the website she wouldn’t have homed in on it. There is no policing’, states Carina Stephenson’s mother, Liz, in a *Daily Mirror* article (Eveleigh and Carey, 2008: 39), which considers her daughter’s suicide alongside those of the aforementioned individuals, including the Bridgend victims. Likewise, Imogen d’Arcy’s mother, Susan, expresses her shock at how ‘explicit and

available' suicide-related information is online. 'I'd have moved mountains to protect Imogen, but we never had the chance', she says. 'This information came into our home and we were defenceless' (Eveleigh and Carey, *Daily Mirror*, 2008: 38). In that way, in media terms, but also on a policy level, the issue of whether the Internet just facilitates or actively encourages suicide becomes an increasingly grey area and the benefits of its liberal nature (Jenkins, 2001; Livingstone, 2009), particularly, of a boundless online freedom of expression, are called into question.

Table 5.D: Bridgend-related articles in which the SW sub-frame is most prominent	
▪ 'Fashionable website where teenage suicides are a cause for celebration' (<i>The Times</i>, January 24, 2008: 11) ▪ 'Land of the online death pact fights to save lives from the web' (<i>The Times</i>, January 25, 2008: 33) ▪ 'Scramble to curb suicide websites/Websites that may encourage teen suicides face new curbs' (<i>The Times</i>, January 26, 2008: 1-2)	
▪ 'Seven suicides blamed on internet craze' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, January 23, 2008: 3) ▪ 'Coroner to study websites linked to suicide craze' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, January 24, 2008: 9) ▪ 'Suicide websites face curbs' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, January 26, 2008: 11) ▪ 'They took their own lives seven years apart. But were Simon and Natasha victims of the internet?' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i>, January 27, 2008: 22-23) ▪ 'Investigation: suicide cults exposed as Bridgend grieves/Exposed: the predators telling children how to kill themselves/Town racked by despair as cousins add to death toll' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i>, February 17, 2008: 1, 8) ▪ 'Coroner: YouTube clip 'incited suicide' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, March 20, 2008: 15)	
▪ 'The sites that give lessons in suicide' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, March 23, 2008: 6) ▪ 'Legal reform to highlight illegality of suicide websites' (<i>The Independent</i>, September 18, 2008: 12)	
▪ 'The Internet Suicide Cult?/They lived and died online' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, January 23, 2008: 1, 4-5) ▪ 'The internet ghouls who glory in our girl's suicide' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, March 20, 2008: 25) ▪ 'Suicide sites warning' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, April 11, 2008: 22) ▪ 'Outlawed: The websites that encourage teen suicides' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, September 18, 2008: 31)	
▪ 'Suicide is 'cool' says death cult gang's pal' (<i>Daily Express</i>, January 24, 2008: 17) ▪ 'End of my dreams' (<i>Sunday Express</i>, January 27, 2008: 9)	
▪ 'Sick sites' 'glamour' (<i>The Sun</i>, January 24, 2008: 19) ▪ 'Coroner's fury at suicide sites: 'They DO encourage hangings' (<i>The Sun</i>, March 20, 2008: 17) ▪ 'Mum's turmoil at web sickos' (<i>The Sun</i>, March 20, 2008: 17) ▪ 'Suicide sites ban: crackdown on web guides after Bridgend tragedies' (<i>The Sun</i>, September 18, 2008: 4) ▪ 'Stop the sites' (<i>The Sun</i>, September 18, 2008: 8)	
▪ 'Suicides Net Probe' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i>, January 27, 2008: 2) ▪ 'We'll shut down suicide websites' (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, June 6, 2008: 26) ▪ 'Suicide Net Ban' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i>, September 14, 2008: 18) ▪ 'I blame suicide websites for my beautiful Imogen's death' (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, December 6, 2008: 38-39)	

In the wake of the Bridgend deaths, the risk of suicide websites to young, susceptible and often depressed people is acknowledged by several key claims-makers, who publicly express their concerns about it, especially since the existing legislation seems inadequate to deal with the problem. During an inquest held on the deaths of five

young men from Bridgend, many of whom had been facing personal issues (such as relationship problems, blackmail, or grief for best friend's death), the Bridgend Coroner, Philip Walters, called for tighter control over suicide websites underlining his assertion that '[t]hey DO encourage hangings' (Walters, cited in Coles, *The Sun*, 2008b: 17; emphasis in the original). It was precisely this statement of his that made the headlines, confirming, once again, the newsworthiness of a potential Internet involvement. Likewise, the Bridgend MP, Madeleine Moon, quoted in the *Daily Mirror* (Beattie, 2008: 26), describes pro-suicide websites as 'horrendous' and 'truly evil', while stressing the imperative need for the law to change. At the same time, Biddle et al.'s (2008; see Chapter Two) study on pro-suicide websites, cited in the *Mail* (Hope, 2008), is also viewed as potentially offering an explanation to the Bridgend phenomenon. Both the study in question and the corresponding news report underline the wide range of suicide-related information available on the Web and the ease of accessing it. They conclude there is a strong possibility that suicide websites push suicidal Internet users over the edge, hence the Government should consider criminalising them.

Moreover, other stakeholders attempted to underscore the severity of the problem and ultimately, give legitimacy to their claims by using the rhetorical technique of 'piggybacking', which consisted in building their arguments around an existing problem that everyone was familiar with (Loseke, 2003a). Rosemary Vaux, spokeswoman of the mental health charity Papyrus, highlighted the urgent need for criminalisation of suicide websites by drawing parallels to Internet-facilitated child sexual abuse and presenting online encouragement of suicide as an alternative form of grooming: 'In the United Kingdom', she said, 'the law specifically bans grooming a child for sex, but it's not illegal to groom a child for death' (Vaux, cited in Macintyre, *The Times*, 2008a: 11). In a similar fashion, Liberal Democrat MP Greg Mullholland (cited in Eveleigh and Carey, *Daily Mirror*, 2008: 39) argued that, although the Internet was difficult to police and any legal changes to tackle these 'monstrous' suicide websites could be vague and lengthy, the child porn paradigm had proven that the shutdown of websites containing such controversial material was actually feasible.

Considering the legal difficulties of effectively regulating suicide-related online material, Eve Salomon of the IWF and the PCC points out the lack of jurisdiction over potentially harmful sites hosted outside the UK:

'There are no suicide websites hosted in the UK. [...] [A]ny website that was found in the UK that encouraged suicide would be criminal content and the UK Service Providers would take it down. Now, when it comes to material hosted outside the UK,

which is where all this stuff is, [...] because the criminal law doesn't say that it is an offence to access this content, putting any barriers to access is [...] interference with freedom of expression.'

(Eve Salomon, interviewed on June 9, 2010)

Furthermore, Paul Kelly from Papyrus distinguishes between different sites in the IS spectrum, emphasising the great risk posed by those at the extreme end of it. He maintains that, irrespective of where these websites are hosted, successfully prosecuting people who intentionally encourage other users to take their own lives (like Melchert-Dinkel in the USA⁷), is, in any case, problematic:

'In Internet suicide, really, there is a spectrum. It goes from, on the one side, sites like ourselves [Papyrus], because we have got an Internet site [...] and we clearly offer support and help prevent suicide, through to discussion sites, which will create an atmosphere of openness about it [suicide], which is fine if we consider those to be neutral; then, through sites which are providing unnecessarily detailed technical information on how to take your own life; and then, at the extreme end, you've got Bill Melchert-Dinkel and the likes of him, who are actively promoting and seeking out young, vulnerable people to encourage them to take their own lives. [...] [I]t would be extremely difficult to gain a successful prosecution for anybody promoting suicide [...] when really all you have to do is say 'Well, I didn't mean that anybody would actually act upon my advice! I was only joking.' To prove that there was intent, [...] you need a lot of evidence. [...]; and it is our belief that the law is still very much heavily biased towards the defendant'.

(Paul Kelly, interviewed on May 19, 2010)

The above-mentioned juxtaposition of young, vulnerable individuals, searching the Internet for advice on how to deal with their suicidal feelings, and others like Melchert-Dinkel, deliberately inciting them to put, once and for all, an end to their agony, creates an image of 'innocent' victims being at the mercy of 'evil' online perpetrators. This image, which features widely in the Bridgend-related news reports, facilitates the personification of the IS problem and underlines its moral ramifications. As already explained, in order to construct appealing narratives, the media have the tendency to remove any shades of grey and simplify complex issues by associating them with the acts of specific individuals (Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2011). Online discussions of suicide could, under other circumstances, be seen as an acceptable expression of pre-existing

⁷ William Melchert-Dinkel is a US nurse who would seek out depressed individuals online and urge them to take their own lives. In 2011, he was convicted of aiding the suicides of Mark Drybrough in Coventry in 2005 and Nadia Kajouji in Ottawa in 2008 (BBC News, 2011).

suicidal feelings and as having a preventative effect by offering consolation and creating a sense of community among those in despair (Barak, 2007; Baker and Fortune, 2008; Eichenberg, 2008; Wykes, 2010; Jones et al., 2011). They are, however, likely to draw greater media attention when demonised and portrayed as the means through which a minority of online deviants derive pleasure from convincing young and impressionable users to kill themselves. In that way, the media-favourite 'stranger-danger' narrative template, perfectly consistent with the anonymity and the allegedly prevalent deviance of cyberspace, is altered and expanded to include a newly-discovered 'folk devil': the 'suicide ghoul'. This personification and simplification of the problem increases the newsworthiness of the Bridgend story by blending micro (individual), meso (community) and macro (society) concerns: firstly and most importantly, the acts of 'evil' individuals like Melchert-Dinkel pose a threat to young and vulnerable users and their families. Furthermore, by egging these innocent victims to end their lives, 'suicide ghouls' also threaten the conservative ideological values that the alleged 'moral majority' (including the readers) shares and has a responsibility to protect. Finally, given that young people symbolise the future, their engagement in online deviant activities, the risks they face while 'surfing' the Web and their consequent victimisation also threaten society as a whole. From this perspective, the Bridgend suicides are considered indicative of a deeper social malaise. The issue will be further discussed in sub-section B. For the construction of the Bridgend problem as the product of a wider social decline, see also Chapter Seven.

B. The *Telegraph's* moral crusade against suicide 'ghouls': Although the possibility of some Internet users encouraging others, through suicide websites, to take their own lives is also addressed in a number of other sample newspapers (as indicated in Table 5.D, in all but *The Guardian/Observer*), the concentration of blame on the faces of a few palpably evil and easily recognisable individuals, posing a threat to the established moral order, is a key feature of the *Telegraph* coverage of the Bridgend case. Typical is the article shown in Figure 5.10, entitled 'Exposed: the predators telling children how to kill themselves' (Sawer, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008: 8). In mid-February 2008, while Bridgend is still in the media spotlight and the authorities, locals and journalists are desperately looking for answers after the sudden deaths of three more teenagers in the area (two of which were cousins), the *Sunday Telegraph*, apparently responding to a moral responsibility to protect vulnerable youngsters by warning parents, runs its own investigation and has its own take on who is responsible for the local suicide problem.

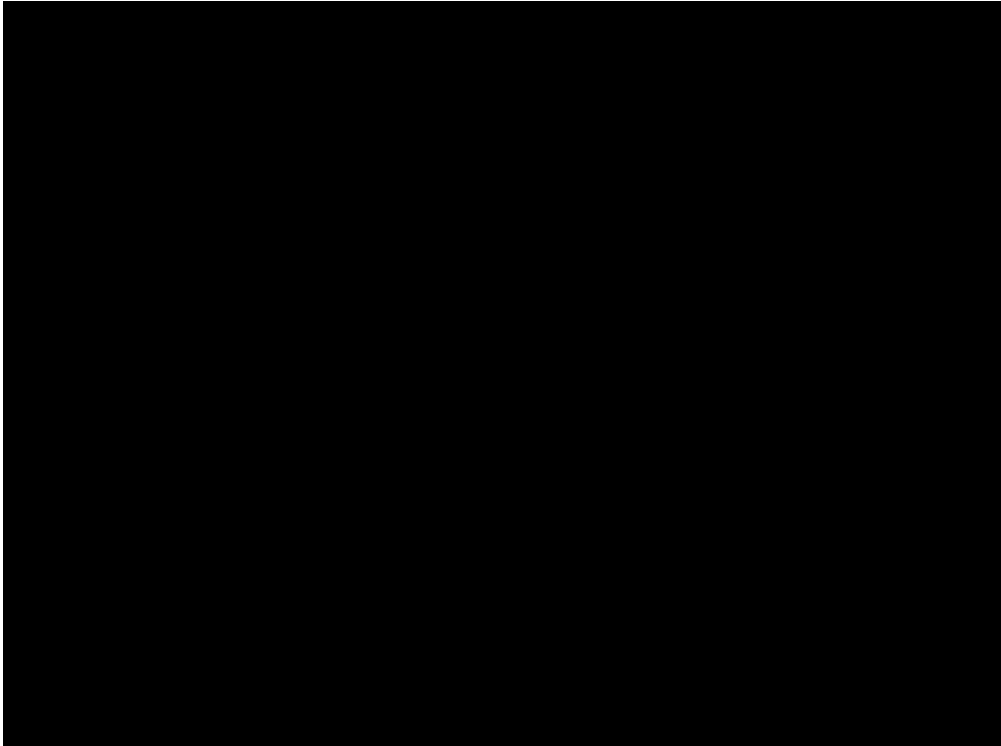


Figure 5.10: *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 17, 2008: 1, 8

First of all, the underlying factors potentially contributing to (youth) suicide, among which mental health issues, family and relationship problems, are evidently neglected and the otherwise complex suicidal act is primarily constructed as an impulsive reaction to the noxious influence of pro-suicide websites. Specifically, the article's approach to the Bridgend phenomenon is consistent with Katz's (1987) Durkheimian view of crime news as a ritual moral exercise, which allows readers to recreate their moral sensibilities on a daily basis and reaffirm their collective identity by outraging at those seen as engaging in deviant activities, thus endangering the moral integrity of a community of respectable, law-abiding citizens. The scenario of having not just irresponsible, but merely 'evil' individuals, hiding behind the anonymity offered by the Web, while 'prowling' online for suicidal users and taking 'sick' pleasure in convincing them to get on with it, pervading the *Telegraph's* feature article, is intentionally shocking in an attempt to morally 'awaken' its readers. Its purpose is, ultimately, to draw a line between 'us', parents and all the scrupulous members of the adult world, who have a given moral responsibility to protect the young, and 'them', the 'ghouls' living at the margins of society and using the Internet to bring their darkest fantasies to life at the expense of their unsuspecting young and vulnerable victims. The distance between the two sides of the moral continuum and the urgent need for action are made even clearer

through the use of provocative statements from the apparently ruthless suicide ‘gurus’, who claim that there is nothing wrong with taking one’s own life and that suicide websites are, in fact, ‘socially useful’ (Dybedahl, quoted in Sawyer, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008: 8).

This moral call to stand our ground, refusing to let these ‘monsters’ goad our children to suicide, but also, in this case, the links between suicide websites and the Bridgend deaths, are corroborated on a semiotic level through the placement of the article on the page and the use of visuals, both of which are far from random. As shown in Figure 5.10, in the aforementioned *Sunday Telegraph* article, the Bridgend news story on the right could easily be read separately from the one pointing out the risk of ‘recipe’ websites on the left-hand side. Nonetheless, the headline on the top extends to the full length of the page and thus, serves as a framing device proposing a ‘reading path’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998: 205), that is, suggesting that the two stories address the same issue and should, as a result, be read together. In that sense, it is, once again, made clear that, the authors of these two-read-as-one news stories (Sawyer, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008, and Sawyer and Copping, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008 respectively), moving further along the anti-Internet signification spiral, directly associate the abundance and explicitness of suicide-related information available online with the extensive online memorialisation of many Bridgend victims and the potentially harmful influence of such tributes on impressionable youngsters. It is exactly due to this association that the Internet’s contribution to the Bridgend phenomenon appears to be almost self-evident, despite the lack of incriminating evidence.

As far as the visuals are concerned, in the same article, the selection and positioning of the images leave little doubt as to where the blame lies: there is a clear juxtaposition between, on the one hand, the young, mostly smiling faces of twelve of the Bridgend victims, occupying the most prominent position in the newspaper, i.e. the centre of the front page (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998), and, on the other hand, the image of the half-naked, pigtailed director of the Church of Euthanasia, Nagasiva Yronwode, which dominates page 8. Contrary to the majority of happy faces on the front page, the photos of the latest Bridgend victims, accompanying the relevant news story on the right side of page 8, present two innocent and, at the same time, apparently pensive teenagers. What is remarkable is that these two photographs are disproportionately small and in contrast to the large photo of the suicide ‘guru’ at the centre of the same page, which creates the impression that these vulnerable youngsters were defenceless to the

scheming plans of such 'evil' individuals. Operating on a symbolic level, these images personalise the story and go beyond Bridgend, representing everyone's child as being at the mercy of the pictured and other ruthless people, when online. In a Durkheimian fashion, the depicted individuals look back at us as if implicitly posing the question 'Will you allow this to go on?' and thus reinforce cohesion amongst readers, firstly, by inviting them to distinguish between right and wrong (Katz, 1987) and, secondly, by cultivating a collective sense of moral duty to protect the vulnerable.

6. The Internet as an inherently deviant and 'corrupting' medium

Moving beyond the 'Virtual Immortality' (VI) and 'Suicide Websites' (SW) sub-frames, the main 'Internet Suicide' (IS) frame, used to explain the South Wales deaths, also raises concerns about the Internet medium per se. The discussion on whether this new medium could possibly lead to alarming Bridgend-like phenomena is twofold: firstly, one that centres around the different types of online risks and the extent to which the Web serves as a deviant 'paradise' or a facilitating tool in the hands of cunning individuals, who commit their reproachful acts online, while staying anonymous and thus, undetected; secondly, one that considers the potential implications of excessive Internet use, which is often elevated to a generational problem. This is a problem of older generations' inability to understand contemporary youth's obsession with the medium in question, but most importantly, a problem of a new 'cyber-generation' or 'Web generation 2.0' (Ferreday, 2010: 411), whose members can, as the mother of a Bridgend victim puts it, 'speak to each other on the computer but do not know how to express their emotions in other ways' (Melanie Davies, quoted in Pilditch, 2008: 10). This wider Internet perspective is present in all the sample newspapers, which bring up the Bridgend example in a number of news stories and mostly, feature articles and comments (61 in total and the primary point of focus in 24 of them; see Table 5.E) either to endorse their view of cyberspace as a 'safe haven for misbehaving' (Selwyn, 2008) or, in the case of *The Guardian* and partly, *The Times* and the *Express*, to argue against it.

Regarding the virtual aspect of the problem, there is a general skepticism around online social interaction alongside a realisation that, as the 'virtual' permeates more and more into the 'physical', whatever happens online inevitably has actual ramifications and that there is absolutely no way to foresee all cyber-threats. The apparently endless list of online risks brought in discussion can be divided into two categories, each presupposing a different level of agency, but both identifying young users as victims in need of protection: on the one hand, risks involving illegal online activities, either resulting in the

immediate victimisation of unsuspecting users in cyberspace or laying the ground for their victimisation in the physical world at a later stage. On the other hand, the Internet medium's potential, though still questionable, capacity to gradually 'corrupt' innocent youngsters by blurring their sense of morality, eventually leaving them unable to communicate and disenchanted with the physical world.

Table 5.E:
Bridgend as evidence of a wider Internet problem?

▪ ['Grade waits in the wings for ITV plot to develop']* (<i>The Times</i>, January 25, 2008: 65) ▪ 'How about a life-affirming epidemic?' (<i>The Times</i>, February 12, 2008:15) ▪ 'Children's social network pages 'must have privacy lock' (<i>The Times</i>, April 2, 2008: 4) ▪ 'Suicides lead to call for websites control' (<i>The Times</i>, August 28, 2008: 8)
* Media analyst Dan Sabbagh's comment in the 'Business' section of <i>The Times</i>, in the second (untitled) part of which, he criticises the unjustified hostility against social networking sites in the wake of the Bridgend suicides.
▪ 'They took their own lives seven years apart. But were Simon and Natasha victims of the internet?' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i>, January 27, 2008: 22-23) ▪ 'Facebook spells end of lasting friendships, says expert' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, July 4, 2008: 5)
▪ 'Beyond the digital divide lies a new world of intimacy' (<i>The Guardian</i>, February 21, 2008: 33)
▪ 'When teenagers lose touch with reality' (<i>The Independent</i>, January 24, 2008: 43) ▪ 'Just upstairs, and horribly at risk' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, January 27, 2008: 42-43) ▪ 'A bad week for the Web' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, March 23, 2008: 6) ▪ 'Privacy is down the YouTube and real friends are history; Teenagers weaned on the instant gratification of the internet do not understand the dangers that lurk in its virtual world' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, July 6, 2008: 20)
▪ 'The Internet Suicide Cult? / They lived and died online' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, January 23, 2008:1, 4-5) ▪ 'Wild child who surfed her way to suicide' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, January 23, 2008: 5) ▪ 'We are creating a generation for whom reality now exists only on a computer screen' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, January 24, 2008: 14) ▪ 'Tragedy and the strange, lonely borderless world inhabited by too many teenagers' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, February 21, 2008: 14) ▪ '400 Facebook friends, but who else did the web let into Laurent's life?' (<i>The Mail on Sunday</i>, July 6, 2008: 28) ▪ 'Dark side of YouTube' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, July 31, 2008: 37)
▪ 'Social websites like Bebo give a shoulder to cry on' (<i>Daily Express</i>, February 7, 2008: 39) ▪ 'Can the internet be made safe?' (<i>Sunday Express</i>, March 2, 2008: 6)
▪ 'Bridgend suicide lad's web threat' (<i>The Sun</i>, February 23, 2008: 23) ▪ 'Don't let net snare your kids' (<i>The Sun</i>, March 21, 2008: 25) ▪ 'Teens on internet 20 hours a week' (<i>The Sun</i>, March 24, 2008: 11)
▪ 'Logged on to despair' (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, January 26, 2008: 21) ▪ 'MySpaced out' (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, July 4, 2008: 27)

In the first of these two categories of Internet-related risks, attention focuses on chatrooms and social networking sites, particularly, on the Web's ability to eliminate time and space barriers and bring together people who have never met or are in hostility with each other in the physical world; an ability, which sometimes has unexpected consequences, ranging from identity fraud and cyber-bullying to online grooming for sex or, in the case of suicide chatrooms, even for death. In such occasions, victimisation is absolutely undesirable, but the victims only become aware of the risks they are up against when it is too late. In other words, in this case, the problem consists in a naïve use of the medium, that is, a tendency of Internet (especially younger) users to unhesitatingly disclose their personal information to online 'friends' they sometimes barely know, without realising that, by neglecting to safeguard their privacy, they render themselves easy targets for aspiring online 'predators'. 'In the right hands the internet is both a great educational and social tool. But in the wrong or naïve ones it can have tragic consequences', writes Jon Gaunt (2008: 25) in the *Sun*, who, using a hunting metaphor, urges parents to not 'let [the] Net *snare* [their] kids' (my emphasis).

As for the second category, this is widely based on and encourages a view of the Web as a liberal, highly sexualised space, where all kinds of physical-world deviants seek refuge and live out their fantasies; a carnivalistic, unregulated space, which owes a large part of its popularity precisely to its 'dark' side (Presdee, 2000; Jewkes and Sharp, 2003; Sharp and Earle, 2003). Within this category, youngsters are regarded as being only a few clicks away from websites containing hardcore pornographic or extremely violent material and pro-anorexia/bulimia/self-harm or suicide chatrooms, bringing together vulnerable individuals, who, unlike one would expect, support each other, not in overcoming their condition, but in perpetuating it. The main difference to the first category, focusing on the existence of unanticipated outside cyber-risks is that, in this case, it is possible that users visit such webpages on purpose. Therefore, the corresponding risk is inclusive rather than exclusive and consists in the possible ramifications of being a member of a particular virtual community. Nevertheless, the anti-Internet perspective most frequently adopted in the Bridgend coverage is, to a large extent, a deterministic one, which fails to see the bigger picture: journalists subscribing to this perspective tend to confine themselves to a short-sighted criticism of the Internet medium for the easy and socially unstigmatised access it provides to potentially harmful online content. At the same time, however, they usually overlook the equally, if not

more, important issue of why people choose to access such material when they are given the chance.

Discussing Internet safety, both the Bridgend MP, Madeleine Moon, and the Independent Chair of the IWF Board and Commissioner of the PCC, Eve Salomon, underline the vital need to educate children and parents about the plethora of risks pervading cyberspace. Nonetheless, each of them endorses a different understanding of the risks in question. The first draws parallels to physical-world situations like crossing the street or having a pen pal precisely to illustrate how real these are. On the contrary, the second partly attributes the anxiety around them to older generations' bewilderment with a new medium like the Internet and argues that, as long as children are taught how to be responsible online, they have nothing to worry about:

'Here, we have something called 'the Green Cross Code' about crossing the road: look left, look right, look left again...[...][E]very parent teaches their child that rule. [...] We need to embed into parental behaviour an awareness of the need to teach our children Internet safety. [...] [W]hen I grew up, I had a pen pal. [...] Now, people have almost taken that to an extreme of having pen pals all over the world. That is not the same as having a friend. People on social networking sites are *not* your friends, but we have diminished what being a 'friend' means.'

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010; my emphasis)

'[The Internet] is a new medium and we, as the older generation, find it all rather bewildering. We are not as competent even as our children, who are using the Internet. So we feel it is out of control because it is out of *our* control. But as children grow up with [...] a good understanding of what is and is not appropriate for them to see, the Internet will be a much less scary place. I think that the important thing is teaching children how to be responsible and how to use the Internet as a really important tool and not to be scared of it. That has really got to be the way forward.'

(Eve Salomon, interviewed on June 9, 2010; my emphasis)

The argument that the Internet can have such a strong influence on human psyche as to cause despair and depression to previously vivacious adolescents or to 'corrupt' them in any other way brings the 'media effects' debate to the digital age. Particularly, it is reminiscent of the so-called 'hypodermic needle' theory, developed in the early twentieth century and based on the assumption that media have a dominating power over a passive audience, which uncritically 'consumes' their content (McDonald, 2004; Ferreday, 2010). It is exactly this allegedly passive 'consumption' of inappropriate media content by contemporary youth, which is considered problematic on multiple levels: first of all, a

continuous exposure to such explicit and violent online material is seen as likely to normalise the depicted socially unacceptable behaviours (gang rape, forced fights, knife crime, anorexia and suicide among others) and to give young users the impression that such behaviours are acceptable or, even worse, desirable in the physical world. Expressing her concerns as a parent in the wake of Bridgend suicides, Fiona Phillips (2008: 21) of the *Daily Mirror* argues that physical-world norms do not apply online and that the more young people encounter violent online content, the more desensitised to it they become. In fact, she refers to these physical-world norms and values as ‘the rules of *normal* life’ (my emphasis), thus suggesting a superiority of the physical over the *ab-normal* virtual world, let alone a superiority and a sense of normalcy with tangible moral implications. A similar point of view is adopted by Sally Emerson (2008: 14) of the *Daily Mail*, who likens the Internet to a monster or an ancient god who lures people to an alternative deviant reality, giving them the chance to surrender to their (offline seen as morally condemnable) passions, without, however, having to be treated as social outcasts because of that:

‘The paedophile chats with other paedophiles and thereby makes his lusts seem normal – after all, in his virtual community everyone feels the same. The handsome young man discusses hanging himself with a friend and suddenly, in the privacy of his room, with the written word sanctifying his bizarre plans, his craziness seems less crazy because it is shared. [...] On the internet, people risk losing our ordinary everyday community and shared ordinary values. In the kingdom of the internet you choose your values, choose your obsessions. The censures, the checks and balances of society are no longer there and even suicide can be applauded.’

(Emerson, *Daily Mail*, January 24, 2008: 14)

As far as the Internet use of the Bridgend victims is concerned, Paul Harris’ (2008) account of Natasha Randall’s suicide in the *Daily Mail* is illustrative of this supposedly corrosive nature of the medium and particularly, of social networking sites. Describing the victim as a ‘[w]ild child who *surfed her way* to suicide’ (my emphasis), Harris (*Daily Mail*, 2008: 5) embraces, but, at the same time, goes beyond the VI theory. He suggests that Internet tributes to suicide victims may indeed glamorise suicide, but are only the final stage in the alarming moral downfall taking place online. Going through the victim’s Bebo profile, he comments on her username ‘sxiwildchild’, her revealing photographs and a quiz, addressed to her online ‘friends’, asking them, amongst others, whether they would have sex with her. He is staggered by the amount of personal information given and, ultimately, by the fact that such an adult-oriented space is not just accessible to

teenagers, but, actually, co-created by them. 'You have to keep reminding yourself when you read her page that she was only 15, according to her membership profile, when she set it up', he writes, while also pointing out that such content 'should never be accessible to any juvenile with a fake email address, which, incidentally, is all it takes to join Bebo' (Harris, *Daily Mail*, 2008: 5).

Furthermore, aside from the type and explicitness of the content Internet users are given access to, the Internet medium per se is often accused of alienating young people from the physical world and depriving them of basic social skills. In fact, the medium's power over its young users is allegedly such that it eventually turns them into zombie-like individuals, who spend their days and nights staring blankly at their computer screen, unable to express their feelings anywhere outside of cyberspace (Ferreday, 2010). The local MP, Madeleine Moon (quoted in Seamark and Salkeld, *Daily Mail*, 2008: 11 and Sawyer and Copping, *Sunday Telegraph*, 2008: 8) is, once again, a key proponent of this view: '[T]here is a risk from spending too much time in the alternative reality of computer games and chatrooms', she states in the House of Commons. 'For a vulnerable person contemplating suicide, communication through words on a screen does not provide the warmth, humanity, compassion and empathy of talking to another person' (for the full parliamentary debate on suicide prevention, see House of Commons, 2008a). At the same time, the psychiatric research of Dr Himanshu Tyagi, cited in the *Telegraph* (Smith Rebecca, 2008), the *Independent* (Street-Porter, 2008), the *Mail on Sunday* (Jones, 2008) and the *Mirror* (No author, 2008a), suggests that, being accustomed to the instant gratification of the Web, the 'Facebook generation' is incapable of forming long-lasting offline relationships. Due to their disappointment with the 'boring' physical world and their inability to perceive the actual consequences of their actions, its members are deemed likely to behave in an impulsive or even suicidal manner. 'This is the age group involved with the Bridgend suicides', says Dr Tyagi (cited in Smith Rebecca, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008: 5) 'and what many of these young people had in common was their use of the Internet to communicate'.

In relation to this youth disenchantment with the physical world, Bel Mooney's (*Daily Mail*, 2008: 14) comment constitutes a remarkable deviation from the *Mail's* standard anti-Internet approach. She, too, acknowledges that the Bridgend phenomenon goes far beyond a single geographical area and is, in all probability, a product of 'the strange, lonely, borderless world inhabited by too many teenagers' nowadays. She points out that youngsters of today have come to believe actual death is as permanent as that of

their avatar, i.e. their virtual persona, instantly coming back to life again and again. Equally disquieting is, according to her, the fact that they can only communicate in a text and e-mail jargon, that is, an oversimplified, abbreviated and ultimately, eroded and incomprehensible version of the English language, full of 'lol's (an acronym for 'Laugh Out Loud') and smileys. 'The web [...] is a much more dangerous phenomenon than we've even begun to comprehend', she writes. However, unlike other *Mail* journalists, Mooney (2008: 14) takes a step back to also reflect on the social factors potentially offering an explanation as to why adolescents seek refuge in the virtual reality of cyberspace in the first place. She raises a number of issues like parents' absence from their children's lives, family breakdown, lack of human contact, the influence of celebrity culture and the growing individualism of late modernity, which will be further explored in the context of the BB frame in Chapter Seven. Through the consideration of these issues, she indicates that the Web is not the cause, but the most convenient arena for teenagers to express their dissatisfaction with the physical world they inevitably live in. In reaction to this feeling of dissatisfaction, which has deep social roots, youngsters construct an alternative virtual reality. This is a stimulating reality, which often defies physical-world norms and raises a series of ethical dilemmas that they naturally find difficult to deal with, without any adult support. As Mooney (2008: 14) eloquently puts it, '[t]he internet represents total freedom – a boundless ether filled with everything and nothing, which is an apt metaphor for the moral emptiness, the lack of direction and guidance, in so many young people's lives'.

7. Rebuttals, causal uncertainty and alternative frames

The extensive criticism of potentially harmful online material and the Internet medium in general did not go rebutted. Rebutting articles either merely denied any Internet involvement in the Bridgend case or occasionally went as far as to stress the positive aspects of the medium. Such articles, which appeared primarily in broadsheets (especially *The Guardian/Observer* and *The Times/Sunday Times*; see Table 5.F), are reminiscent of the arguments made by a number of theorists (Turkle, 1997, 1999; Hardey, 2002a, 2002b; Baron, 2008; Ito et al., 2008; Seymour and Lupton, 2004) regarding the personal and social benefits one can achieve by establishing a digital identity. The articles in question constitute an exception to the openly negative or ambivalently neutral tone permeating the entire Bridgend coverage vis-à-vis youngsters' use of the Web. They can only be seen as a response to the original *Mail*-initiated 'Internet suicide cult' claims, considered to be offering a flawed understanding of technology's involvement in young people's lives.

Table 5.F:
Bridgend-related articles in which the IS frame is rebutted

- '[Grade waits in the wings for ITV plot to develop]' (*The Times*, January 25, 2008: 65)**
- 'Internet death cults? Or is it a humdrum cause closer to home?' (*The Times*, February 9, 2008: 24)
- 'How about a life-affirming epidemic?' (*The Times*, February 12, 2008: 15)
- 'The police say there's no link but the people say otherwise' (*The Times*, February 20, 2008: 6-7)
- 'Welsh to adopt 'Choose Life' strategy that cut deaths by 13%' (*The Times*, February 20, 2008: 7)
- 'Suicide not linked to internet, say friends' (*The Times*, February 21, 2008: 31)
- 'Deaths of 3 young men cannot be called suicide, says Bridgend coroner' (*The Times*, March 20, 2008: 25)
- 'Hanging is not the way to go gently into that good night' (*The Times*, March 25, 2008: 17)
- 'No suicide pact, say police after another teenager is found hanged in Bridgend' (*The Times*, April 21, 2008: 11)

** See note * in Table 5.E

- 'It just seems normal, fashionable almost...' (*The Daily Telegraph*, January 24, 2008: 20)
- 'Who on earth would listen to this batty 'suicide guru'?' (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 18, 2008: 22)
- 'What hope can we offer suicidal teenagers?' (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 20, 2008: 21)
- 'Grieving parents ask: Why did you leave us, butterfly?' (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 21, 2008: 5)
- 'Man found hanged in Bridgend was friend of dead teenager' (*The Sunday Telegraph*, June 8, 2008: 8)
- 'Why did they die so young? Police re-examine files on 13 tragedies' (*The Guardian*, January 26, 2008: 9)
- 'Let's not tell our children there's a place called 'Suicide Town'' (*The Observer*, January 27, 2008: 13)
- 'Suicide 'axis' crosses Welsh valleys' (*The Observer*, January 27, 2008: 17)
- 'Sensitivity and suicide' (*The Guardian*, MediaGuardian, January 28, 2008: 6)
- 'The dangers of trivialising suicide' (*The Observer*, February 3, 2008: 32)
- 'Two cousins die from town hit by spate of young suicides' (*The Guardian*, February 16, 2008: 8)
- 'Calls to Samaritans soar after Bridgend suicides' (*The Observer*, February 17, 2008: 9)
- 'There is no 'suicide chain' in Bridgend' (*The Guardian*, g2, February 19, 2008: 3)
- 'Girl becomes 17th suspected suicide/Suspected suicides in Bridgend area reach 17 as schoolgirl found hanged' (*The Guardian*, February 20, 2008: 1, 3)
- 'Beyond the digital divide lies a new world of intimacy' (*The Guardian*, February 21, 2008: 33)
- 'Inquests on five young men found hanged in south Wales' (*The Guardian*, March 20, 2008: 13)
- 'How Bridgend was damned by distortion' (*The Observer*, March 1, 2009: 6-8)
- 'Sensitive reporting can be a matter of life and death' (*The Independent on Sunday*, February 10, 2008: 44)
- 'Bridgend's mood turns from shock to anger' (*The Independent*, February 21, 2008: 13)
- 'Should the media stop reporting the suicides in and around Bridgend?' (*The Independent*, February 22, 2008: 39)
- 'Bridgend inquests told of young men's tormented lives and desperate deaths' (*The Independent*, March 20, 2008: 9)
- 'Father insists there is a link in Bridgend tragedies' (*Daily Mail*, February 21, 2008: 9)
- 'Boy hanged in Bridgend 'wanted to be with his dead friend' (*Daily Mail*, March 20, 2008: 41)
- 'Suicides are linked, says grieving father' (*Daily Express*, February 21, 2008: 5)
- 'We must talk to our teenagers' (*Daily Express*, February 23, 2008: 20)
- 'Goodbye our little butterfly' (*The Sun*, February 21, 2008: 12-13)
- 'Bridgend hanging after girl's love split' (*The Sun*, October 11, 2008: 31)
- 'Suicide No17 in the town of no hope' (*Daily Mirror*, February 20, 2008: 4-5)
- 'There ARE links' (*Daily Mirror*, February 21, 2008: 14)
- 'Bridgend coroner suicide plan plea' (*Daily Mirror*, March 20, 2008: 19)

Sabbagh (2008) of *The Times* argues that social networking sites like Bebo serve as a remedy to the loneliness of adolescence, bringing together like-minded young people and, therefore, being much more likely to reduce, rather than increase, suicide rates. At the same time, Brooks' (2008) comment in *The Guardian* portrays any attempt to demonise the Internet for Bridgend-like phenomena as reflecting adults' failure to understand that, in the eyes of the new generation, the distinction between the physical

and the virtual world no longer applies. From this perspective, it is natural for youngsters of the 21st century to create and maintain an online personalised space, away from adult surveillance, where ‘privacy’ consists in having absolute control over the amount of private information being accessible to other users (Livingstone, cited in Brooks, 2008; for more details on this transforming definition of ‘privacy’ in the Internet age, see the original source, that is, Livingstone, 2006).

In order to put the largely negative portrayal of the Web in the Bridgend coverage into perspective, it is important to consider the wider impact of new technologies on journalism. Curran et al. (2012) describe how the rise of the Internet was expected to democratise journalism by empowering consumers against top-down media corporations. ‘Armed with cellphones, BlackBerries or iPhones’, Peat (2010) writes, ‘the average Joe is now a walking eye on the world, a citizen journalist, able to take a photo, add a caption or a short story and upload it to the Internet for all their friends, and usually everyone else, to see.’ Nevertheless, Curran et al. (2012) suggest that the preceding expectation did not fully materialise since the Internet quickly came to reflect the inequalities, conflicting interests and values of the physical world: leading news brands have been successful in extending their hegemony online, while the autonomy and self-expression provided by social media have primarily served entertainment and leisure purposes rather than social transformation.

With regard to traditional media’s hostility against the Internet and the level to which this influenced the Bridgend coverage, journalist Zack Newmark notes that this was not strictly targeted at the Internet per se, but reflects a general distrust of anything new:

‘[T]his [the Bridgend case] wasn’t an ‘Internet suicide cult’. [...] It just became this ‘dirty’ way of reporting a story and it happened to be the three words that got picked up by global media. [...] This is not the first time that a relatively new technology or a new entertainment medium has been attacked for causing suicides. This goes back over a hundred years that people have attacked heavy metal, punk rock, jazz music and blues music and some classical pieces as inciting suicidal behaviour just like the radio or comic books have been attacked or various movies have been accused of inciting suicidal behaviour. So, this is nothing new. It’s not new. It’s just new that it’s attacking social networking websites.’

(Journalist Zach Newmark, interviewed on June 18, 2010)

A similar point is made by Ellen (2008: 13) in her article for *The Observer*, in which she criticises this view of the Internet and especially of social networking sites as the ‘all-

purpose bogeyman'. At the same time, author Loren Coleman (cited in Brewis, *The Sunday Times*, 2008: 10) also maintains that, as a new medium, the Internet constitutes an easy target in delicate situations like Bridgend. He draws parallels between the demonisation of the Internet in the Bridgend case and that of comic books blamed for causing suicides in the American depression of the 1930s. This process of demonisation, he argues, is counterproductive since it draws attention away from the numerous and complex social factors actually contributing to one's decision to take his/her own life. The issue will be further discussed in Chapter Seven.

Contrary to the *Mail* or the *Telegraph*, not all newspapers and not all authors take an early stance on the Bridgend issue. In an attempt to maintain accuracy and objectivity in their reporting, media professionals often present arguments both for and against a particular view of the problem, while making sure to back them up, wherever possible, with quoted statements from apparently credible sources (Chibnall, 1977). As far as the IS frame is concerned, the initial concerns about the Internet's potential involvement in the suicides are frequently reported alongside the South Wales police statement denying any online connection between the victims, thereby leaving the final judgement as to whether the Web is to blame or not upon the reader. However, as more and more youngsters take their own lives in the Bridgend area, the validity of this official point of view is questioned. Though it is beyond a shadow of a doubt that these suicides are not without a cause, there is a general uncertainty amongst the authorities and journalists as to what this cause could be. Consequently, in terms of the press coverage of the suicides, although the Internet is not always openly blamed, the possibility of an Internet involvement is rarely off the table: it is present in the majority of the sample articles (Figure 5.2 in Appendix V), even if just briefly mentioned to be dismissed right after. In fact, the rejection of the IS frame itself, either by the police or by friends and relatives of the victims, is occasionally deemed more important and given more emphasis than the discovery of the actual cause of the problem (see Gordon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008; Yeoman and de Bruxelles, *The Times*, 2008a).

This uncertainty as to what is happening in Bridgend leaves room for further speculation and the construction of alternative frames to explain the local suicide problem. Their proponents often attempt to draw attention to their claims by invoking and indicating the weaknesses of the original IS model. They, thus, put into words the question floating in everyone's mind in the wake of the Bridgend tragedy: is the Internet really the cause of it? If not, then what is? The doubts around the IS frame and their

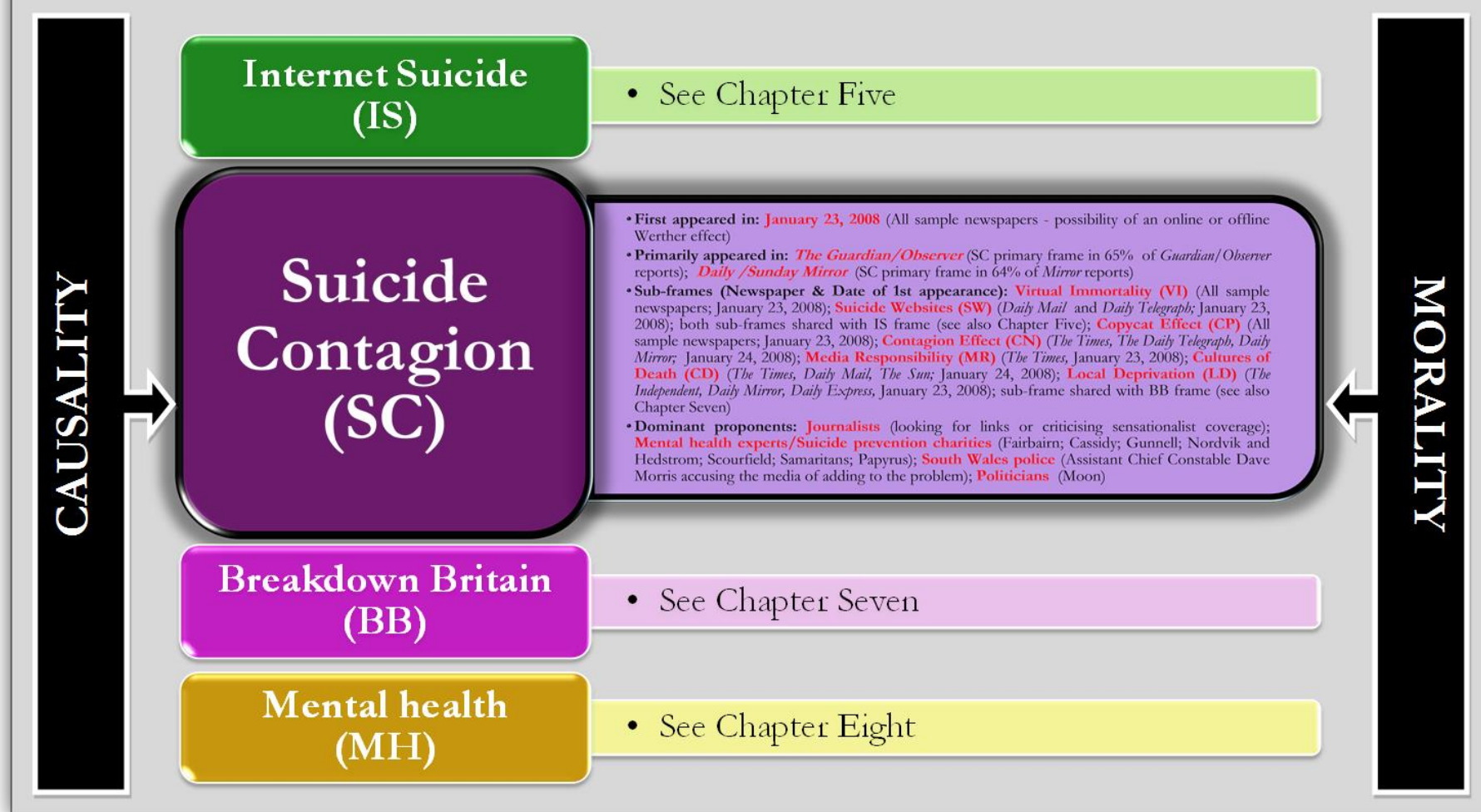
function as the basis for the investigation of other possible causes are reflected in the following *Times* headline: 'Internet death cults? Or is it a humdrum cause closer to home?' (Marsh, 2008: 24; see Figure 5.7). The additional frames developed through this investigation encourage different interpretations of the Bridgend phenomenon, which focus on the effect of other (offline) factors such as insensitive reporting, social breakdown or mental health issues. These will be examined in detail in the chapters that follow.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the national press construction of the Bridgend deaths as 'Internet suicides' and situated it in the context of a pre-existing anxiety over online social interaction and the 'dark side' of the 'virtual' in general. The appeal of the IS frame has been pointed out and the level to which the *Mai's* original 'Internet suicide cult' story encouraged other newspapers to adopt a similar angle in their subsequent reports on the matter has been assessed. The prominence of this frame in the entire Bridgend coverage and its role in bringing attention to the potential links between suicide and the Internet has been discussed. Particularly, it has been argued that journalists saw the Bridgend events as an opportunity to portray a largely negative image of the Web and underline its supposedly detrimental influence on vulnerable youngsters. The emphasis placed on the latter influence stressed adults', especially parents', moral responsibility to protect young users from the risks of cyberspace, increasing the calls for better Internet education and tighter control over potentially harmful online content.

The lack of conclusive evidence that the Internet had actually played any part in the Bridgend case allowed the rebuttal of the originally potent IS frame. Within the general uncertainty around the cause(s) of the local suicides, rebutting claims encouraged further speculation, resulting in the development of alternative frames ['Suicide Contagion' (SC), 'Breakdown Britain' (BB) and 'Mental Health' (MH)] that searched for answers beyond any Internet responsibility. Due to its overlap with the 'Internet Suicide' (IS) frame at the point where this involves the risk of an online Werther effect ['Virtual Immortality' (VI) and 'Suicide Websites' (SW) sub-frames], SC will be the first of these alternative frames to be studied. Its contribution to the construction of the Bridgend problem will be the subject of Chapter Six.

Figure 6.1
Main frame 2: Suicide Contagion (SC)



CHAPTER SIX

A suicide epidemic?

‘I went to my friend’s funeral and it gave me the confidence to do it myself. I thought that if she has done it, then so could I. I wouldn’t be alone in doing it.’

(Rosanna Lewis on how Natasha Randall’s death gave her the ‘courage’ to attempt suicide herself, quoted in Herbert, *News of the World*, February 17, 2008a: 11)

‘Suicides spread like a contagion...If one death happens in a community, it’s as if permission has been granted’

(Darren Matthews, former director of the Bridgend branch of the Samaritans, cited in Rayner and Savill, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 23, 2008: 23)

‘I have noticed an increase in sensationalist reporting and the fact that Bridgend is becoming stigmatised. The link between the deaths isn’t the internet – it is the way the media is reporting the news.’

(South Wales Assistant Chief Constable Dave Morris, quoted in Laurance, *The Independent*, February 22, 2008: 39)

Introduction

In their attempt to construct engaging narratives, media professionals have the tendency to emphasise the notion of risk, presenting particular, usually shocking, incidents as part of a spreading epidemic (Hall et al., 1978; Jewkes, 2011). It is beyond a shadow of a doubt that some of the phenomena of which they warn the public are, in fact, exaggerated, what Best (2002) calls a ‘phantom epidemic’, since they are not supported by evidence and are neither as sudden, nor as widespread as the media portray them to be (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009). But what happens when the risk of such an epidemic is scientifically acknowledged as an actual possibility, let alone one which the media themselves are likely to aggravate?

A number of researchers like Phillips (1974), Sonneck et al. (1994), Etzersdorfer et al. (2001) and Pirkis et al. (2006) regard the so-called ‘Werther effect’ as an actual risk. They stress that suicide news stories and ultimately any positive image of the act or the victim may encourage other vulnerable individuals to also kill themselves. As the line between objective and media-constructed reality becomes thinner and thinner in the era of 24/7 news, the level of media exaggeration and responsibility for inciting imitative incidents is difficult to assess when the subject matter is suicide. That is another issue which comes to the fore through the Bridgend paradigm.

Journalists' endeavour to discover a 'suicide pattern' across all the individual suicide cases in the area can easily be viewed as an attempt to boost the newsworthiness of the story. But how exactly is this alleged suicide epidemic, centred around Bridgend, made sense of in the national press? Inversely, how do the latter perceive the possibility of causing a Werther effect? Susceptible and immature individuals such as adolescents are nowadays likely to come across an abundance of suicide-related information, both online and offline. But to what extent can the inevitable exposure to such information be blamed for putting the idea of suicide in their heads? Are the media capable of actively causing suicide or do they just trigger it in people already predisposed to it? Finally, how are seemingly 'dark' youth subcultures like goth and emo and self-destructive celebrities portrayed in the Bridgend coverage and what does their portrayal reveal of the meaning attached to suicide in our culture? All these questions will be addressed in the current chapter.

1. The quest for deadly links



Figure 6.5: *Daily Mirror*, February 21, 2008: 14

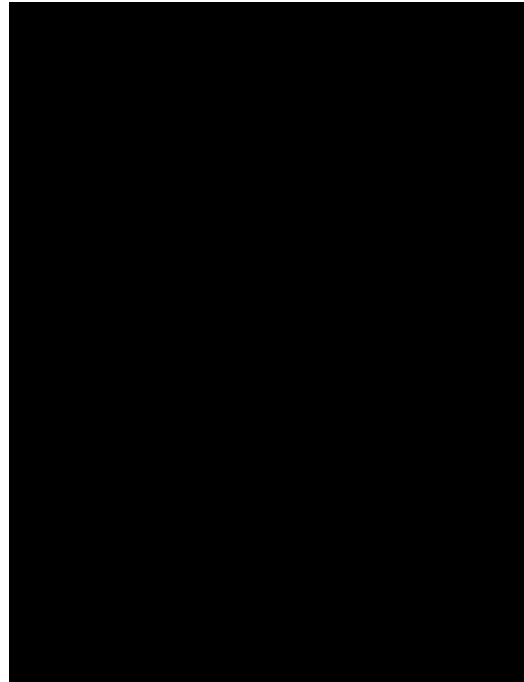


Figure 6.6: *News of the World*, March 2, 2008: 26

The apparent link between Natasha Randall's and Liam Clarke's suicides, established through Natasha's Bebo message, was, as already explained, the element that drew the national media's attention in the first place, but the high local youth suicide rate left room for the construction of a much more powerful story. This involved several other victims

who had also died in the area under similar circumstances: all of them had been living in Bridgend or the surrounding areas; all had been teenagers or, at least, in their early 20s; all had died by hanging; many of them had been using social networking sites like Bebo or Facebook; some had been friends or acquainted with each other or even relatives.

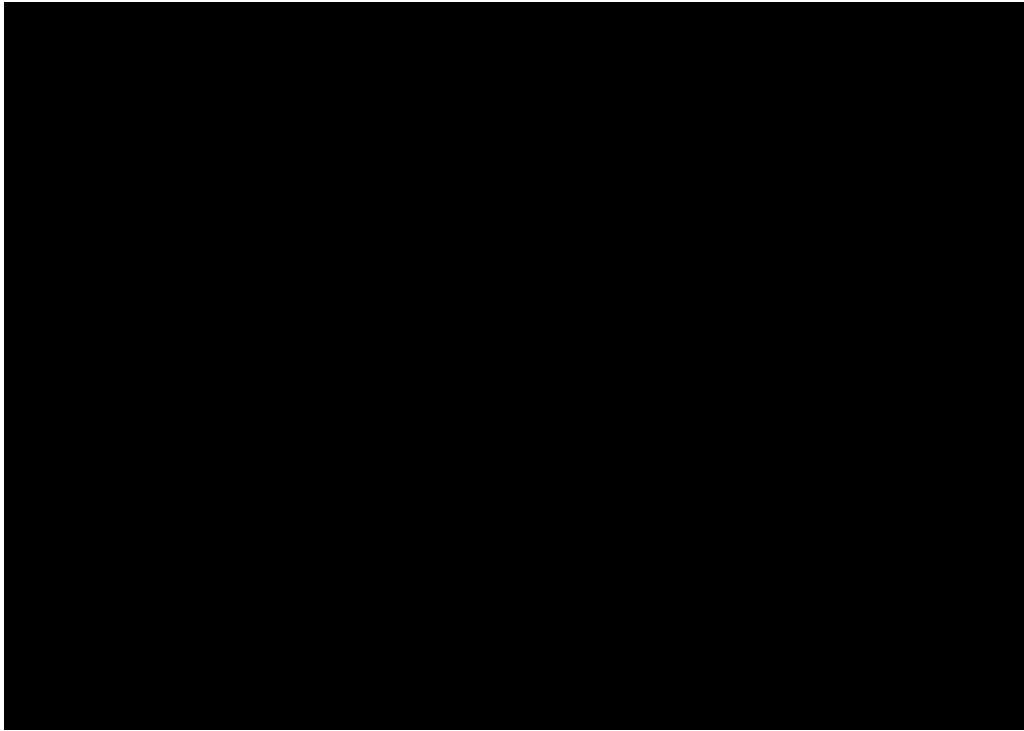


Figure 6.7: *The Sunday Times* magazine, May 25, 2008: 46–47

Building on the arguments developed by poststructuralist theorists like Barthes (1974, 1977a) and Kristeva (1986 [1967]) who suggest that a text acquires meaning only in relation to other texts, it is essential that the intertextual value of the Bridgend-related reports be explored here. As far as the national press are concerned, the possible connections between the individual victims are considered in the context of a ‘media loop’ (Manning, 1998; Ferrell, 1999); a loop that draws on a broad cultural repertoire of crime news stories and films and provides the intertextual framework within which readers are invited to make sense of the Bridgend problem. Any links between the deceased become in a Hitchcockian fashion the ‘MacGuffin’ (Fabe, 2004) of the Bridgend story, that is, a mysterious element of ambiguous nature, which aims to catch the audience’s attention and advance the plot (see Figures 6.5 and 6.6). The constructed narrative and especially the way it plays with readers’ expectations is reminiscent of the conventions of the crime genre (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013) as it aims to intrigue, to shock, to scare but also to entertain the audience just like any murder mystery or horror movie would. Just like a stalker, a psychopath, a serial killer, suicide claims the lives of

more and more young people in Bridgend (see also Chapter Seven). As a result of this process of cultural looping, the Bridgend story echoes a wide range of cultural texts from the nightmarish films of David Lynch (Manning, 2011) to the pseudo-shockumentary *The Blair Witch Project* to Stephen King's novels (Cherry, 2009) to the news coverage of the Columbine (BBC News, 1999) and Utøya (Beaumont, *The Observer*, 2011) shootings.

Altheide (2009b) draws attention to the discourse of fear constructed and promoted by the media in the aftermath of the Columbine-like cases involving young victims and the Bridgend suicides are no exception. As the Bridgend problem comes under scrutiny, the potential influence of past young deaths on the latest ones is reconsidered and, with the region's suicide toll constantly increasing, Bridgend comes to be seen as the centre of a spreading suicide epidemic; an epidemic that no one really knows how to respond to or what its cause(s) may be, but which the longer it is being neglected the more local youngsters it leads to suicide. Figure 6.7 shows on the map the location where each body was found and indicates in homocentric, 'vicious' circles the extent to which the alleged epidemic has spread. Commenting on the use of this figure for his *Sunday Times* magazine article and, particularly, on the impression of a growing problem it creates by associating numerous local tragedies with each other, Ed Caesar states:

'The map, I think, was important. It is important to show people where the stuff was happening and I have really got no problem with that [its inclusion in the article].'

(Ed Caesar, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

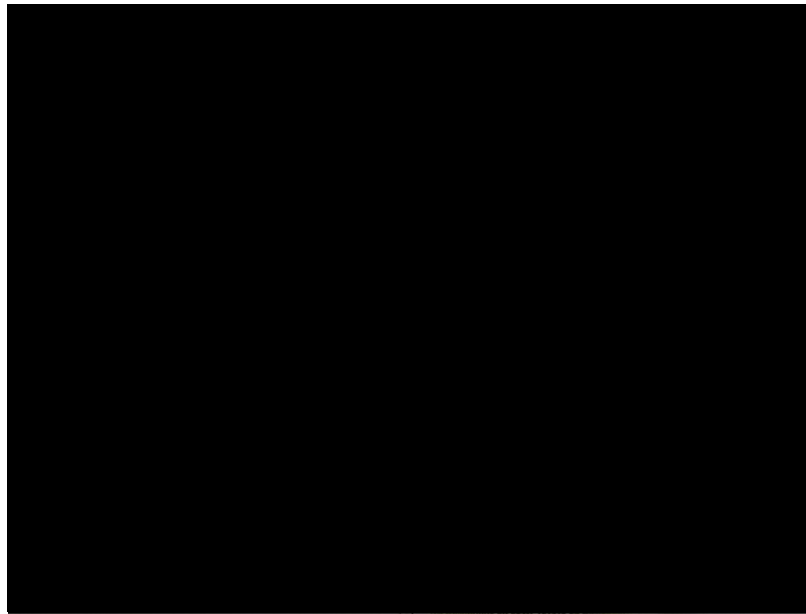


Figure 6.8: *Daily Mirror*, February 20, 2008: 4-5

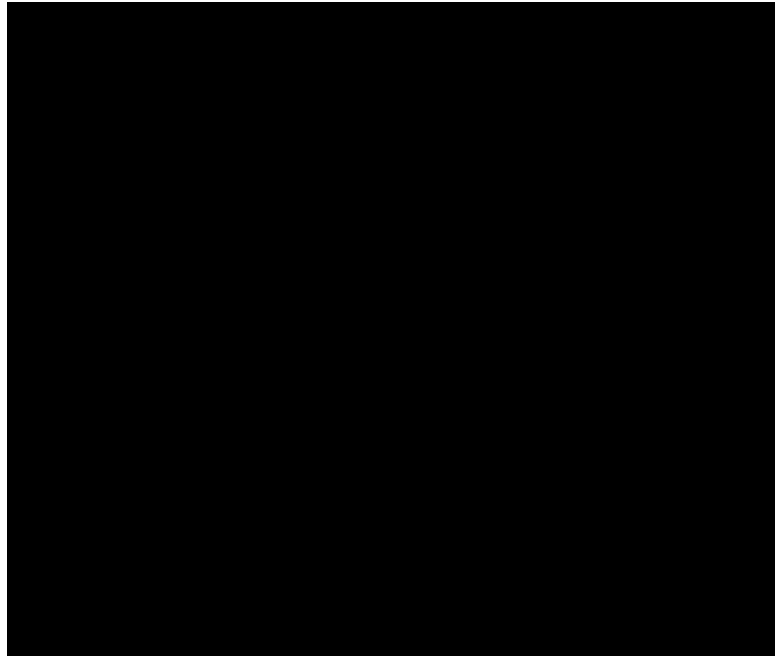


Figure 6.9: *The Independent*, January 24, 2008: 24

To the original list of seven, apparently linked, suicide victims, six more, who killed themselves back in 2007, are soon added, while nine other suicides, which took place in the Glamorgan Valleys, also become a matter of concern (for the evolution of the Bridgend narrative, see Table 4.D in Appendix IV). In the course of the national coverage of the matter, the constructed ‘inferential structure’ (Lang and Lang, 1955) of SC encourages a view of all subsequent suicides in Bridgend as somehow tied to the ones that preceded them. This view is reinforced through the use of visuals, which often include a large photo of the most recent victim, surrounded by smaller photos of the prior ones, sometimes even linked together with arrows, as if to point out that each of the suicides is the product of the previous and the cause of the following one (see Figures 6.8 and 6.9). Emphasising the significance of understanding the connections between the victims in the Bridgend case, Zack Newmark (2010) created, for the purposes of his documentary *Cluster*, the graph of Figure 6.10 and noted:

‘There is definitely evidence that the thirty people [victims between 2007 and 2009] could have networked together in some way. That is not to say all thirty were best friends with each other or anything along those lines, but many of them knew each other or knew somebody who knew somebody else in the cluster. In my documentary, I have that graph, where I put up the pictures of the different people on the wall and draw the links between them. To me, it was very evident that there was a nexus of people who knew each other.’

(Zach Newmark, interviewed on June 18, 2010)

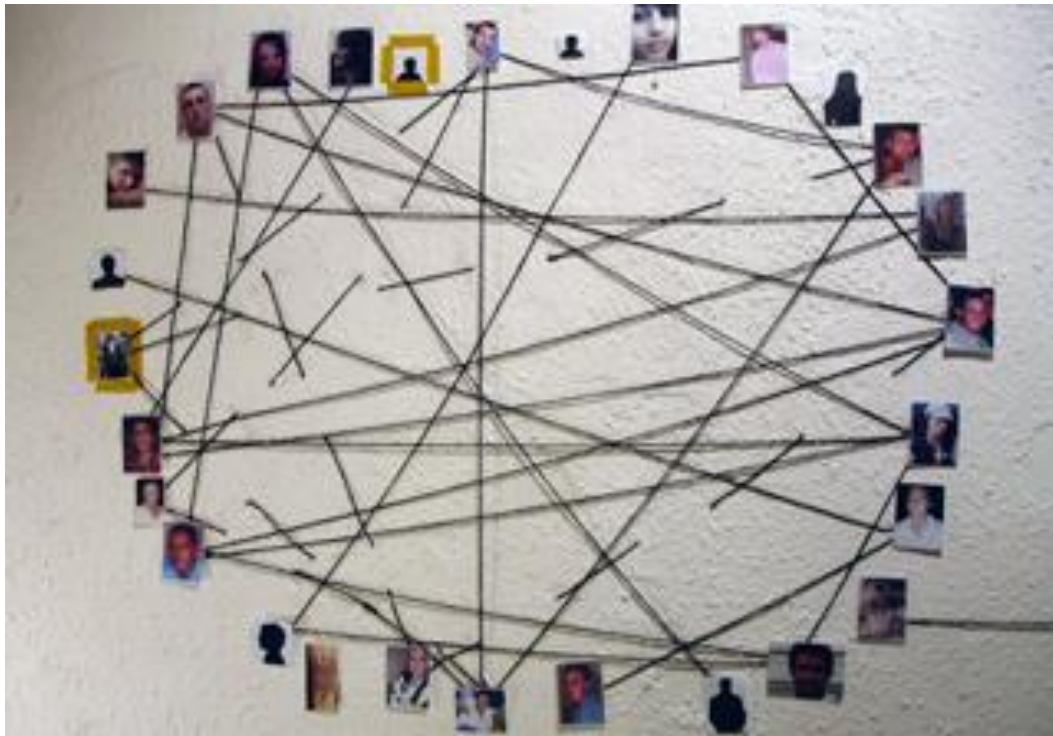


Figure 6.10: Graph illustrating the alleged connections between all the Bridgend victims of the 2007-2009 period. The graph was created by Zack Newmark (2010) and presented in his documentary *Cluster*, which looks at the local suicide phenomenon. Image retrieved on February 15, 2012 from the official website of the film: <http://www.clusterdoc.com>.

The potency of the above-mentioned inferential structure is such that any unexpected young death in the wider South Wales area is, due to its occurrence in geographical proximity to Bridgend, automatically regarded and reported as a potential suicide, even when there is a clear uncertainty about the victim's motives. For instance, on February 10, 2008, four out of the eight newspapers under study present the possibly accidental rail death of Ian Jenkins in Pyle, near Bridgend, as the fifteenth (or, in the case of the *Telegraph*, the fourteenth) incident in the 'suicide town' in question (Herbert, *News of the World*, 2008b: 14; Nikkhah, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008: 2; No author, *Sunday Express*, 2008b: 2; Penrose, *Sunday Mirror*, 2008: 6; the event goes unreported in the rest). As will be explained in Chapter Seven, when the, intrinsic in the SC frame, 'suicide town' image is enriched with allegations of socio-economic deprivation, it allows the development of the 'Local Deprivation' (LD) sub-frame, which is where 'Suicide Contagion' overlaps with 'Breakdown Britain'. Discussing the geography of the problem, the Bridgend MP, Madeleine Moon, points out that journalists looking for links could easily find them among the members of a small community like Bridgend, but also that, in any case, the deaths did not just take place in a single town:

‘Every time there is a death, there is major coverage. [Journalists’] need is to find a link. I have to tell you, though, in a small community of 67,000 people, they are always going to be able to find links. They confuse the borough with the town and with my constituency, all of which are called ‘Bridgend’. Many of the deaths were not in Bridgend. They were to the north. They were in Ogmere. Some of [them] were in villages. [...] So, the deaths spread in a wider geographical area than you would think from just reading the papers.’

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

Of course, the addition of more and more names to the list of victims of a local suicide epidemic is not random, nor media-initiated, but its roots can be traced to the local police investigations on the matter. It is the South Wales police that initially examine the possibility of the first seven youth suicides being connected in some way (de Bruxelles and Malvern, *The Times*, 2008; Hodgson, *The Guardian*, 2008). Likewise, it is the police that decide to re-open closed suicide cases to look for potential links to the latest victims, raising the suicide toll to thirteen (Coles, *The Sun*, 2008c; Salkeld and Koster, *Daily Mail*, 2008b). Finally, it is the Bridgend coroner that considers it necessary to probe nine more cases in the surrounding Welsh valleys and expresses his concern about the soaring local suicide rate, stating that he is ‘investigating more hangings than [he] would normally expect in such a short period of time’ (Bonnici, *Daily Express*, 2008b: 6). Consequently, it becomes, once again, evident that it is ultimately the police who are the primary definers (Hall et al., 1978) of the Bridgend suicide problem, openhandedly offering journalists a raw material to work with that is in itself too dramatic and newsworthy to overlook.

Nonetheless, the police end up dismissing the possibility of all these suicides being connected. However, by that time, the emphasis placed on this aspect of the problem by the press is such that even the rejection of the media-favourite ‘suicide cult’ theory by the authorities is not enough to overturn the established inferential structure. On the contrary, given the causal uncertainty pervading the investigation and press coverage of the suicides as well as the obvious similarities between them, their view as linked becomes almost self-evident. In other words, since no one, not even the authorities and experts, can be absolutely certain about the victims’ motives, this rejection of the SC frame is often seen as going against common sense by denying what is allegedly in front of everyone’s eyes. Such a denial is therefore considered a signal of institutional failure, particularly, a failure on the police’s part to grasp the true nature of the Bridgend problem and act responsibly upon it in time to prevent future suicides. This criticism of the police’s approach to the matter is most clearly reflected in the following headlines:

- 'Seventeenth teen is found dead but police insist: there is no suicide pact' (Rayner, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 20, 2008: 6)
- '17 suicides in one town but a police chief says the media is to blame' (Clark, *Daily Express*, February 21, 2008: 11)
- 'The police say there's no link but the people say otherwise' (Yeoman and de Bruxelles, *The Times*, February 20, 2008b: 6-7)

The conception of the Bridgend phenomenon as the result of a broader institutional failure, which goes beyond any shortcomings of the South Wales police in the way they dealt with it, will be further discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight.

2. The dominance of the 'Suicide Contagion' frame and its overlap with 'Internet Suicide'

'Suicide Contagion' constitutes the dominant frame pervading the national press coverage of Bridgend and defining what the local suicide problem consists in. Despite being largely considered in the light of the exceptional Internet factor, the risks from the suggestibility of suicide are part of the discussion around the Bridgend problem from the first day of its reporting in the national press. In the entire coverage span, the SC frame is present in 72 per cent of the sample articles and the primary frame in 52 per cent of them (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3 in Appendix V). Just like the IS frame, SC allows the construction of a very dramatic and appealing story, which stresses the great number of existing victims, but also the risk of future suicides and the urgent need to take action. Similarly to the 'Internet cult', the 'suicide epidemic' story offers a simple, easy-to-understand explanation to the numerous local deaths and shifts focus away from complex social factors and individual mental health issues. What is even more significant in the construction and prevalence of this SC frame is that the relevant journalistic claims are not random sensationalism. On the contrary, they reflect a possibility reportedly taken into account in the course of the police investigation and are also supported by credible scientific sources acknowledging imitation as an important contributory factor to youth suicidal behaviour (Phillips, 1974; Gladwell, 2000).

When the Bridgend issue rose to national news visibility, the IS and SC frames were, in six out of the eight sample newspapers, inseparable. Although the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* clearly used the Bridgend example to demonise the Web and argue for tougher Internet regulation, all of them attempted to establish links between the victims, be it online or offline. The Internet dimension of the Bridgend problem increased the

newsworthiness of the story and underlined how the supposed local suicide epidemic could easily and uncontrollably spread through the Web, thus encouraging more and more teenagers all over the world to kill themselves. Notwithstanding any such claims, the ‘Virtual Immortality’ (VI) and ‘Suicide Websites’ (SW) sub-frames essentially involve a broader phenomenon (imitation), whose roots go beyond the ‘dark side’ of cyberspace, which is why they are shared by both the IS and the SC frames (see Chapter Five). The Bridgend narrative ultimately concerned a number of young people, who were, as pointed out by Ellen (*The Observer*, 2008), living in the same area and allegedly knew each other locally, so, the risk of one suicide triggering a series of imitative incidents was, in any case, present in the local community in question, irrespective of the level of Internet involvement in them. Consequently, the attempt to trace the online and offline social networks of the victims in order to explain their unexpected deaths aims to uncover the connections between multiple suicide incidents so as to present them as the product of an (online or offline) Werther effect. In search of those connections, which are, more often than not, difficult to establish, journalists tend to alternate their focus between the virtual and the physical world, sometimes obviously emphasising one at the expense of the other. However, in the context of the SC frame, the relationship between any online and offline links is complementary rather than mutually exclusive. As will be further discussed in the following chapters, there are competing frames like ‘Breakdown Britain’ (Chapter Seven) and ‘Mental Health’ (Chapter Eight), which do not necessarily favour this view of the local suicides as linked nor do they consider any such links as a defining feature of the Bridgend problem. However, as Gramsci (1971) would argue, in this struggle for ‘hegemony’, which the Bridgend coverage consists in, these frames receive far less attention than SC (Figure 6.3; see Appendix V). Consequently, it is precisely the aforementioned links between the victims that are, from the very beginning and through their discovery, affirmation or even rejection, at the heart of the discussion around Bridgend in the entirety of the newspapers under study.

3. The ‘copycat’ and ‘contagion’ effects

A. Definitions and ‘Copycat’ sub-frame dominance over ‘Contagion’: In order to acquire a better insight into the content of the SC frame, a distinction between two slightly different approaches to the Werther effect needs to be made: the ‘copycat’ and the ‘contagion’ effects. Both terms refer to the risk of imitative deaths, but the first attributes it to an intention to ‘copy’ others for no other reason than the suicide experience itself

(CP sub-frame), while the second to an identification with previous victims, which renders suicide an acceptable response to one's own problems (CN sub-frame). Elaborating on what each of these two effects entails, the former Samaritans director, Darren Matthews, remarks:

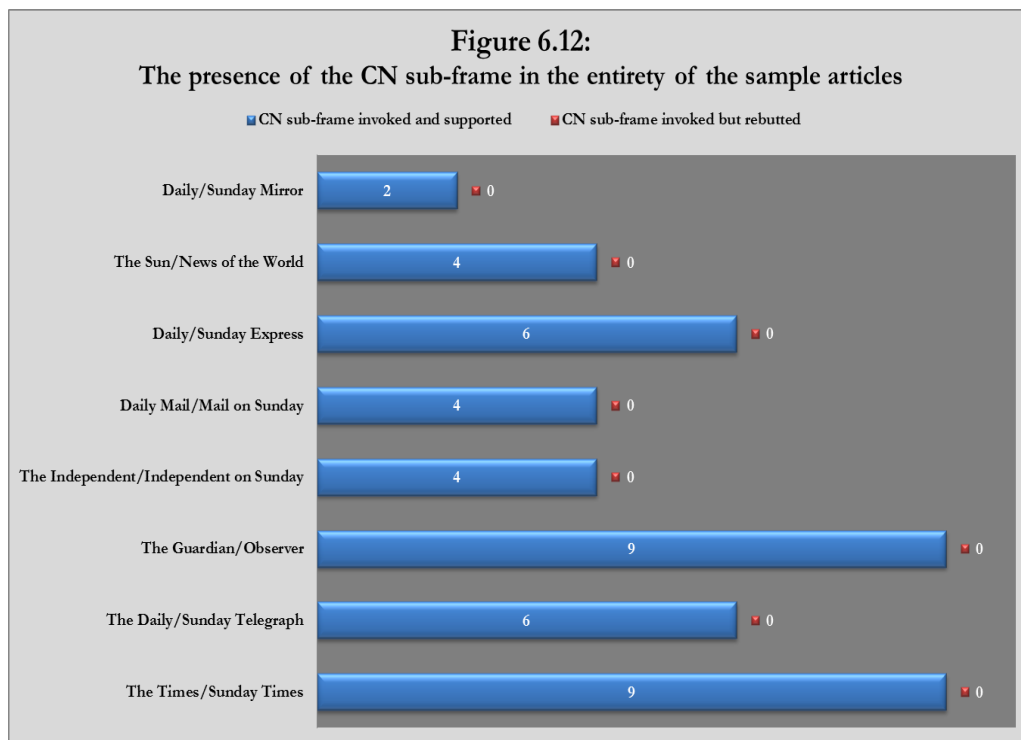
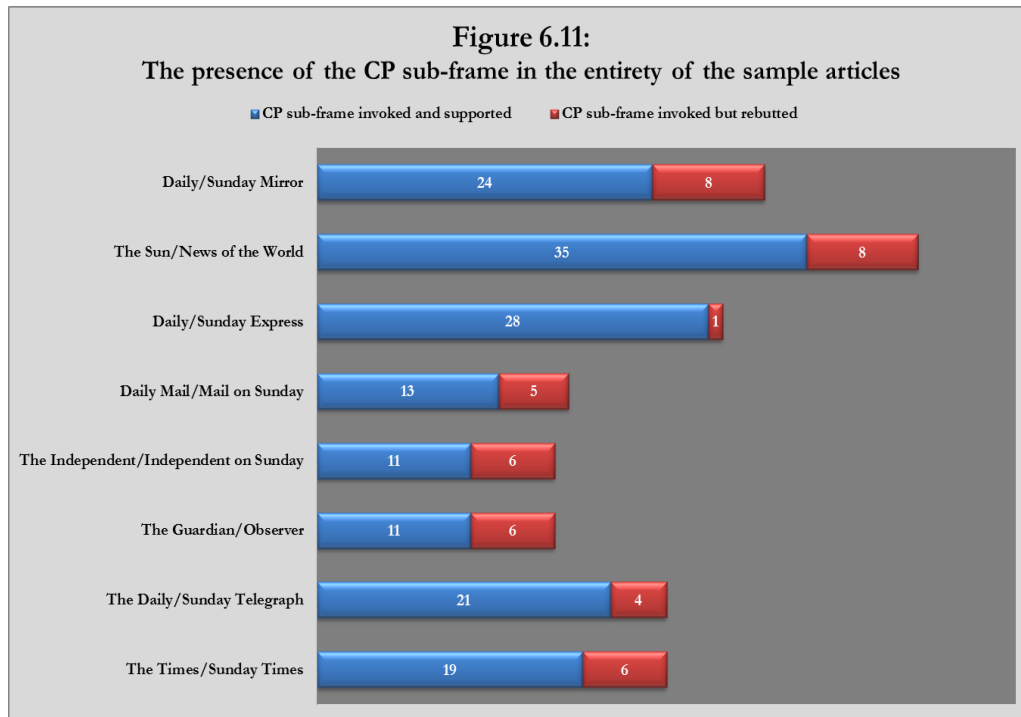
'There are people out there, who will copy what they have seen and not quite realise the finality with all. But, in the contagion, what is usually happening is that there are a lot of people within the community at any given time who will be suicidal and, for one reason or another, they have not taken the step to take their lives. It may be, for example, that they don't know how to do it. But then, if you get one death and if that death, for example, is reported in great detail, that could then give them information that they need to complete the suicide. [...] Another thing that happens is when people identify with somebody who has died [...] and [...] think: 'This is how somebody else has dealt with the problems that I'm facing. They were in exactly the same boat as me. I'd hoped that I would get out of this; that things would turn round, but perhaps they don't. Perhaps this is the way it is'. And then, they decide to take their lives as well'

(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

From this perspective, the journalistic quest for deadly links between the deceased and allegations about a local suicide pact fall under the CP sub-frame, whereas any reference to the victims' decision to succumb to their personal troubles after the suicide of someone they knew under the CN one. The distinction between the two sub-frames, however, does not mean that these cannot overlap. In fact, there are sample articles (29 in total) in which they are both present, especially when suicide is associated as much with the 'allure' of the act per se as with the victims' individual anxieties and difficulties (Herbert, *News of the World*, 2008a; Porter and Bonnici, *Daily Express*, 2008).

Figures 6.11 and 6.12 show that the Bridgend deaths are much more frequently framed as 'copycat' rather than 'contagion' suicides (206 and 44 articles respectively from a total sample of 358), but also that the corresponding sub-frames are not perceived to be of equal validity. Particularly, the CP sub-frame is occasionally rebutted (44 articles in total⁸) due to the lack of evidence, while the CN one may not be as prominent, but, whenever present, it is fully supported (no rebutting articles), most likely because of the high status of its proponents (usually mental health experts).

⁸ This is not to say that the 44 articles adopting the CN sub-frame are the same as the 44 rebutting the CP one. The two categories overlap only on one occasion (Hume, *The Times*, 2008).



In the majority of SC articles, especially the ones published at the initial stage of the Bridgend coverage, which are defined by a general uncertainty regarding the victims' motives, there is an evident ambiguity about the level of their predisposition to suicide. The shock factor of the Bridgend story consists in the fact that a number of apparently

happy and carefree youngsters, who had everything to live for, killed themselves out of the blue. Concern primarily centres on whether a positive portrayal of suicide victims in online or offline tributes and news stories could possibly tempt these impressionable young people into ‘experimenting’ with suicide themselves, without realising the finality of such an experimentation, just like the Micronesian boys in Rubinstein’s (1983, cited in Gladwell, 2000) study. In the days following the suicide of someone they know, young people may, according to Professor Gavin Fairbairn (*The Times*, 2008: 31), experience a fake ‘high’, which, combined with drugs or alcohol (see also Chapter Seven), may incite a desire, not necessarily to die, but to take a ‘holiday from life’ just for a little while. The terms ‘copycat suicide’ and ‘suicide contagion’ are often used interchangeably to describe this process of allegedly putting the idea of suicide in these victims’ heads, while any other individual motives, aside from pure imitation, are, to a large extent, neglected.

The construction of the Bridgend deaths as ‘copycat’ suicides is particularly prominent in human-centred articles, discussing locals’ views on the matter and the anxiety over ‘who will be next’, while underlining the need for an appropriate response. For example, the report of Figure 6.5 (Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008b: 14) clearly aims, through its headline ‘There ARE links’ and especially, through the capitalisation of the verb ‘are’ in it, to titillate readers by implying that the stepfather of David Dilling disagrees with the police that the numerous local suicides ‘are not’ connected. The headline in question encourages an assumption that, as someone who was close to one of the victims, Christopher Claypole is probably in a better position to understand what is going on in Bridgend. In that respect, it is, once again, suggestive of a ‘copycat’ effect and institutional failure on the police’s part to acknowledge it. However, Claypole’s assertion, found in the main text, is, in fact, inconsistent with any such perception of the problem, as it rejects the ‘Internet’ and ‘copycat’ perspectives and attributes the suicides to a ‘contagion’ effect instead. ‘I don’t believe they arranged it or that it was a copycat thing’, he says. ‘I don’t believe in a suicide cult or anything weird on the Internet. But they were all connected because they knew each other and were very upset by the deaths’ (Claypole, cited in Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008b: 14).

Furthermore, other articles reinforce the impression of a ‘copycat’ effect through the personal stories of suicide survivors. One of Natasha Randall’s friends explains how the latter’s suicide gave her the ‘courage’ to try to end it all’ (Rosanna Lewis, cited in Herbert, *News of the World*, 2008a: 11). Likewise, as reported in *The Times* (de Bruxelles, 2008a), the suicide attempt of another one, Leah Phillips, caused such distress to her

classmates that the authorities of that particular Bridgend secondary school decided to set up an anti-suicide unit and provide counselling services to pupils in need. At the same time, as far as school activities are concerned and confirming the status of Bridgend as the centre of a suicide epidemic, which can easily spread in the surrounding areas, the *Sun* and the *Mirror* are highly critical of class exercises, allegedly stimulating impressionable youngsters' interest in death and suicide. The exercises in question, assigned in schools near Bridgend and requiring pupils to write suicide notes or plan their own funerals, are seen as 'playing with fire' (Tracey Roberts, cited in Coles, *The Sun*, 2008d: 29) in the wake of the South Wales tragedy (Coles, *The Sun*, 2008d; Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008c).

B. Transition from 'Copycat' to 'Contagion': In the course of the Bridgend events and while the corresponding narrative is being re-constructed again and again in the national press, the dominant in all the original reports CP sub-frame, which views victims as ending their lives just to copy what their friends did, though shocking and newsworthy, partly subsides in favour of the CN one. In six out of the eight sample newspapers, it only takes a few days after the issue's rise to national news (January 23, 2008) for the CN sub-frame to appear and it is only the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday* and the *Sun/News of the World* that make no reference to it until late February 2008 (Table 6.B). Despite an evident tendency on the friends', families' and other acquaintances' part to idealise the deceased and present them as if living a perfect life, the subsequent inquests into their deaths tell a rather different story (Bonnici, *Daily Express*, 2008c; Judd, *The Independent*, 2008): some of the victims had relationship, family, drug and alcohol or mental health problems. Others were grieving for their dead friends. As adolescents, all of them lacked the experience needed to handle such situations effectively, which increased the chance of them reacting impulsively to the latter, without realising the consequences of their actions (see Chapter Eight). As Assistant Chief Constable David Morris (cited in Yeoman and de Bruxelles, *The Times*, 2008b: 6) put it in the press conference held in Bridgend after the death of Jenna Parry, these were all vulnerable 'young people with big issues', influenced by 'a constellation of factors'.

Table 6.B
First appearance of the CP and CN sub-frames

CP sub-frame	▪ 'Natasha, 17, is the seventh victim in town hit by series of copycat suicides' (<i>The Times</i> , January 23, 2008: 13)
	▪ 'Suicide: a teen's way to instant fame' (<i>The Sunday Times</i> , January 27, 2008: 10)
	▪ 'Seven suicides blamed on internet craze' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 23, 2008: 3)
	▪ 'The passion plays of youth are often just wayward self-love' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , January 27, 2008: 29)
	▪ 'Police suspect internet link to suicides' (<i>The Guardian</i> , January 23, 2008: 8)
	▪ 'Let's not tell our children there's a place called 'Suicide Town' (<i>The Observer</i> , January 27, 2008: 13)
	▪ 'The web linking seven young people who chose to take their own lives' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 24, 2008: 24)
	▪ Police warn of Bebo 'internet suicide cult' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , January 27, 2008: 35)
	▪ 'The Internet Suicide Cult?/They lived and died online' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 23, 2008: 1, 4-5)
	▪ '21 st victim in 'suicide town' (<i>Mail on Sunday</i> , June 8, 2008: 8)
	▪ 'Seven die in suicide 'craze' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 23, 2008: 10-11)
	▪ 'End of my dreams' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , January 27, 2008: 9)
	▪ 'Bebo mates 'in suicide chain' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 23, 2008: 9)
CN sub-frame	▪ 'Street of suicide' (<i>News of the World</i> , January 27, 2008: 8)
	▪ 'Suicide Town' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 23, 2008: 19)
	▪ 'Tash had been so happy on the day she killed herself' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i> , January 27, 2008: 27)
	▪ 'Fashionable website where teenage suicides are a cause for celebration' (<i>The Times</i> , January 24, 2008: 11)
	▪ 'Suicide: a teen's way to instant fame' (<i>The Sunday Times</i> , January 27, 2008: 10)
	▪ 'It just seems normal, fashionable almost...' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 24, 2008: 20)
	▪ 'The passion plays of youth are often just wayward self-love' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , January 27, 2008: 29)
	▪ 'Suicide 'axis' crosses Welsh valleys' (<i>The Observer</i> , January 27, 2008: 17)
	▪ 'Sensitivity and suicide' (<i>The Guardian</i> , MediaGuardian, January 28, 2008: 6)
	▪ 'When the subject is suicide, reporting on it requires the utmost sensitivity' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 26, 2008: 18)
	▪ 'The tragedy of Jenna, suicide town's 17 th victim/In a town shattered by a series of teenage suicides, another young girl takes her own life' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 20, 2008: 1, 11)
	▪ 'How many more of our children will succumb to the suicide cult?' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 25, 2008: 28-29)
	▪ 'They want to be dead for a bit...but if you're dead there's no coming back' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 24, 2008: 10-11)
	▪ 'Tasha's funeral drove me to hang myself too' (<i>News of the World</i> , February 17, 2008: 11)
	▪ '17 hangings, 13 months, 1 town, 1 question..WHY?/Place where shadow of death stalks the young' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 20, 2008: 1, 4-5)
	▪ 'I'd never do that to you Mum' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 24, 36-37)

It is this press conference of February 19, 2008 that destabilises the established inferential structure in the remaining two newspapers (*Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday* and *Sun/News of the World*) as well. It marks a transition from online to offline links and from the conspiratorial CP to the apparently more grounded in the victims' lives CN view of the problem. At this meeting, the police publicly deny the existence of any links between

the individual victims. However, such an assertion refers to the lack of any unusual links and aims to put to rest the, prominent in the press, suicide pact and Internet suicide cult theories. This point is made by the local MP Madeleine Moon (cited in Sawyer and Copping, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008), who adds, nonetheless, that these suicides have an inevitable impact on the small community of Bridgend and especially, on local youngsters, who frequent the same places. Subscribing to her concerns, David Morris (cited in de Bruxelles, *The Times*, 2008b) of the South Wales police and Darren Matthews (cited in Rayner and Savill, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008) of the Samaritans also stress the risk of suicide coming to be seen as an acceptable way for Bridgend adolescents to deal with their problems. More specifically, all three of them express fears that in small communities like Bridgend a single suicide may indirectly ‘grant permission’ for more incidents to occur by triggering and intensifying the pre-existing suicidal feelings of those community members who can somehow identify with the first victim. In a similar fashion, during our interview, Papyrus Press Officer, Rosemary Vaux, emphasises how alarming, yet common, such a ‘contagion’ effect is, suggesting that the exceptionality of the Bridgend phenomenon lies only in the increased media attention it received:

[P]articularly with young people, [...] anyone who has a friend or knowing somebody who has taken their own lives [...] can be very vulnerable themselves, but what [happened with] the cluster of suicides in South Wales, you know, it is not rare. I mean, there was another one in another part of the country just a few months before, but it just didn’t receive the publicity.’

(Rosemary Vaux, interviewed on May 18, 2010)

The more interest moves away from the discovery of a ‘suicide pattern’ to the personal difficulties of the deceased and the extent of peer influence in handling them, the more CN is identified as a more plausible explanation to the Bridgend problem. What is of great importance here is that, apart from politicians and the police, several other key stakeholders and mainly mental health experts also embrace the sub-frame in question. In particular, Dr Monika Nordvik and Professor Peter Hedstrom (cited in Coles, *The Sun*, 2009a) recognise the preceding ‘trigger’ effect, which turns suicide from a theoretical to a real possibility in the eyes of those belonging to the same social network (e.g. family, workplace etc.) as the victim, and underline the relevance of their study to the Bridgend phenomenon. Likewise, Dr Jonathan Scourfield (cited in Phillips M., *The Sun*, 2008) of Cardiff University points out the influence of social and cultural beliefs, which may present suicide as not just a viable option, but a socially expected response to one’s problems. In his turn, social psychologist Arthur Cassidy (cited in Caesar, *The*

Sunday Times magazine, 2008: 47-48) regards the Bridgend suicides as a 'point cluster', which refers to a localised in time and space phenomenon involving youngsters, who are not necessarily personally, but socially acquainted (e.g. friends of friends). Belonging in the same social circles, Cassidy suggests, these young people often think alike and handle particular situations in a similar fashion, so, if one of them decides to kill him/herself, this opens the door for his/her peers, going through the same difficulties, to do the same.

4. The Bridgend suicides as a result of irresponsible media reporting

A. The first concerns over the role of the media in the Bridgend case: The possibility of causing a Werther, either 'copycat' or 'contagion', effect through their articles is, to a large extent, neglected by national journalists in the early days of the Bridgend coverage. Even when it is not, it is mostly mentioned to support the view that the Internet could also cause a similar effect and not to actually criticise the press' part in potentially spreading the contagion (see Gunnell, cited in de Bruxelles and Malvern, *The Times*, 2008). Nonetheless, as the suicides keep coming and the media's attention to the story increases, this partial view, which demonises new, but exonerates traditional media from all responsibility or even praises the latter's role in raising public awareness around the Bridgend problem (Clark, *Daily Express*, 2008) is more and more frequently challenged. The concerns over news media inciting a Werther effect in the Bridgend case result in the development of the 'Media Responsibility' (MR) sub-frame, which is present in 82 out of 358 sample articles.

Figure 6.13 and Table 6.C indicate that this sub-frame appears earlier and, with the exception of the *Telegraph*, more frequently in broadsheets than mid-sheets or tabloids. As the close examination of its content in the current section will reveal, the MR sub-frame offers no explanation regarding Bridgend's high suicide rate before January 2008, but looks at the level of journalists' responsibility for the subsequent incidents, that is, for those that took place while the issue was at the centre of media attention. In that way, it points out the two-fold role of journalists both as critics and recipients of criticism, both as constructors of and contributors to the Bridgend suicide problem. The two newspapers taking the lead in the construction of MR are *The Independent/Independent on Sunday* and *The Guardian/Observer*, with the first chronologically preceding the second in addressing the issue of appropriate suicide reporting, though eventually not dedicating as many articles to it in the overall Bridgend coverage.

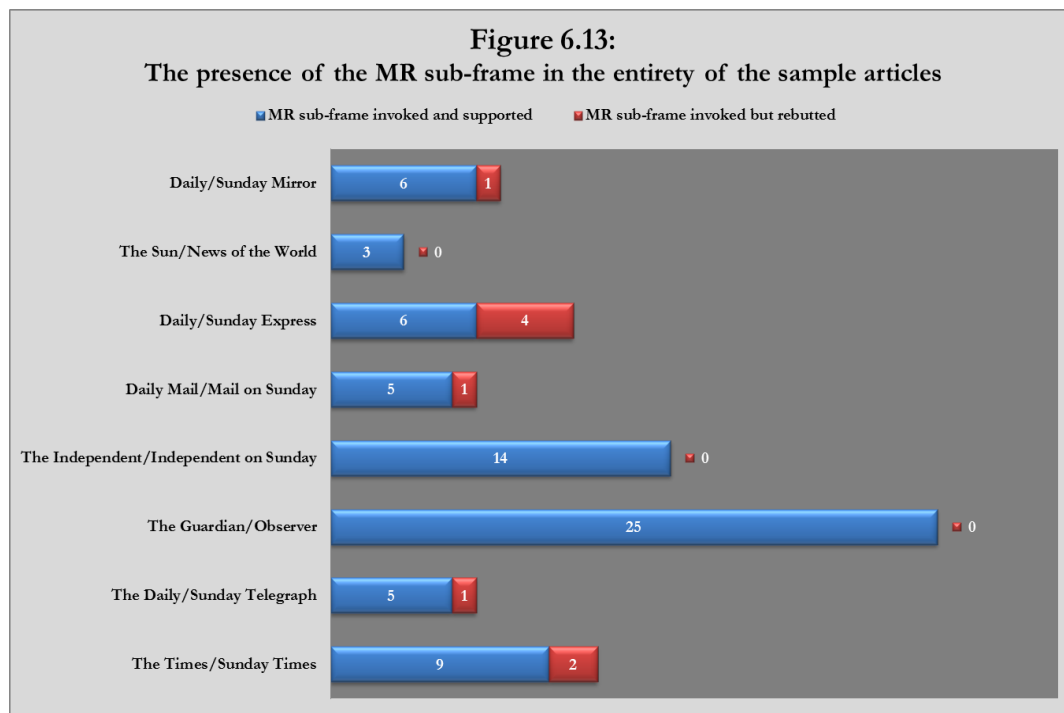


Table 6.C:
First appearance of the MR sub-frame

- 'Natasha, 17, is the seventh victim in town hit by series of copycat suicides' (*The Times*, January 23, 2008: 13)
- 'Death valleys' (*The Sunday Times magazine*, May 25, 2008: 44-53)
- 'The passion plays of youth are often just wayward self-love' (*The Sunday Telegraph*, January 27, 2008: 29)
- 'Boy, 10, hangs himself after talking to his mother about craze' (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 16, 2008: 5)
- 'Let's not tell our children there's a place called 'Suicide Town' (*The Observer*, January 27, 2008: 13)
- 'Suicide 'axis' crosses Welsh valleys' (*The Observer*, January 27, 2008: 17)
- 'Sensitivity and suicide' (*The Guardian*, MediaGuardian, January 28, 2008: 6)
- 'When the subject is suicide, reporting on it requires the utmost sensitivity' (*The Independent*, January 26, 2008: 18)
- 'Police warn of Bebo 'internet suicide cult' (*The Independent on Sunday*, January 27, 2008: 35)
- 'Found hanged, the boy aged ten who wanted to be a girl' (*Daily Mail*, February 16, 2008: 38)
- 'Suicide of boy who read of tragedies' (*Daily Express*, February 16, 2008: 5)
- 'They want to be dead for a bit...but if you're dead there's no coming back' (*Sunday Express*, February 24, 2008: 10-11)
- 'We can't bring back hanging' (*Sunday Express*, February 24, 2008: 29)
- 'Telly 'copycat' (*The Sun*, February 16, 2008: 11)
- 'Mum fears copycat death' (*Daily Mirror*, February 16, 2008: 21)

‘When the subject is suicide, reporting on it requires the utmost sensitivity’, reads the title of Deborah Orr’s (2008: 18) comment in *The Independent* of January 26, 2008, which is the first among the national press articles under study to elevate journalists’ involvement in the Bridgend case to its main theme. This piece offers a quite different view on the local suicide problem, since, unlike most Bridgend-related articles appearing on other newspapers of that day, it clearly abstains from any attempt to establish online or offline links between individual victims and discover a ‘suicide pattern’. Orr (*The Independent*, 2008) points out that sensationalist suicide reporting is not just disturbing for the victims’ families, but also likely, if not to cause, at least to trigger imitative suicides. With regard to the attention attributed to Bridgend, she argues that this is chiefly due to the ‘entertainment’ value of the story, which could easily be read as fictional drama, and to a ‘grotesque fascination’ (Orr, *The Independent*, 2008: 18) with the subject rather than actual compassion for the people involved. At the same time, she criticises traditional media’s tendency to demonise the Internet, since the risk of triggering imitative behaviour is present in all forms of communication giving excessive emphasis to suicide. In that sense, she openly questions the IS frame, suggesting that the press is as likely to cause a ‘contagion’ effect as the Internet or any other medium. That is precisely why, Orr (*The Independent*, 2008) concludes, journalists need to acknowledge their responsibility and ensure sensible and sensitive suicide reporting.

Furthermore, Barbara Ellen (2008: 13) expresses a similar concern in *The Observer* a few days later, when arguing that the media’s obsession with apportioning blame is as disturbing as the Bridgend suicide problem itself. According to her, any conspiracy theories about the town being cursed, the Internet being ‘evil’ or local youngsters being doomed risk reducing the Bridgend events to some ‘corny horror movie’, thus trivialising the seriousness of the issue. No matter how dramatic and newsworthy the ‘suicide epidemic’ narrative might be, journalists always need to bear in mind, she maintains, that their stories have an impact on real people. Cultivating an impression that there is no way out of this ‘unstoppable craze’ creates a climate of hopelessness amongst the people of Bridgend, leading to mass hysteria and increasing the risk of future suicides. Addressing her colleagues, Ellen (*The Observer*, 2008: 13) states: ‘for these people, [...] Bridgend is their home, not a *Hammer House of Horror* set. Bearing this in mind, maybe we should back off, stop rubbernecking and let those raw wounds heal’.

B. '[The link] is you, the media': the 'Media Responsibility' debate expanded: In the course of the claims-making process and while the issue of sensitive suicide reporting acquires more and more prominence in *The Independent* and *The Guardian* (and respectively, *The Independent on Sunday* and *The Observer*), the MR sub-frame is embraced, not just by journalists, but also by a number of other key stakeholders. First of all, in early February, the Bridgend MP, Madeleine Moon (cited in Williams, *The Independent on Sunday*, 2008a: 44), clearly expresses her fury at journalists' tendency to demonise Bridgend. She states that any discussion around 'suicide cults' as well as the overall media portrayal of Bridgend as a 'suicide town' are absolutely 'disgraceful' and constitute a breach of the PCC's (2009b) Editors' Code of Practice. She openly accuses the media of being 'part of the problem', since she sees this construction of Bridgend as a hopeless 'death town' as likely to increase the risk of imitative suicidal behaviour (Moon, cited in Hughes, *The Independent*, 2008a: 6). She also makes a similar point during our interview, when asked to comment on the implications of insensitive media reporting in the Bridgend case:

'[By 'insensitive media reporting'], [y]ou mean 'lying'? [...] [T]here have been statements [...] that yes, deaths were caused not only in this country, but also abroad as a result of the British media's reporting of the Bridgend events. [...] I've got no problem with newspapers who report accurately and newspapers that inform; [...] that highlight failure; that demonstrate there is a problem here that needs tackling. [...] We have this moral outrage about footballers who get drunk or take drugs. Well, newspapers also have responsibility as exemplars and they shouldn't be running stories that they haven't checked and that aren't accurate; that can add to the vulnerability of an individual.'

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

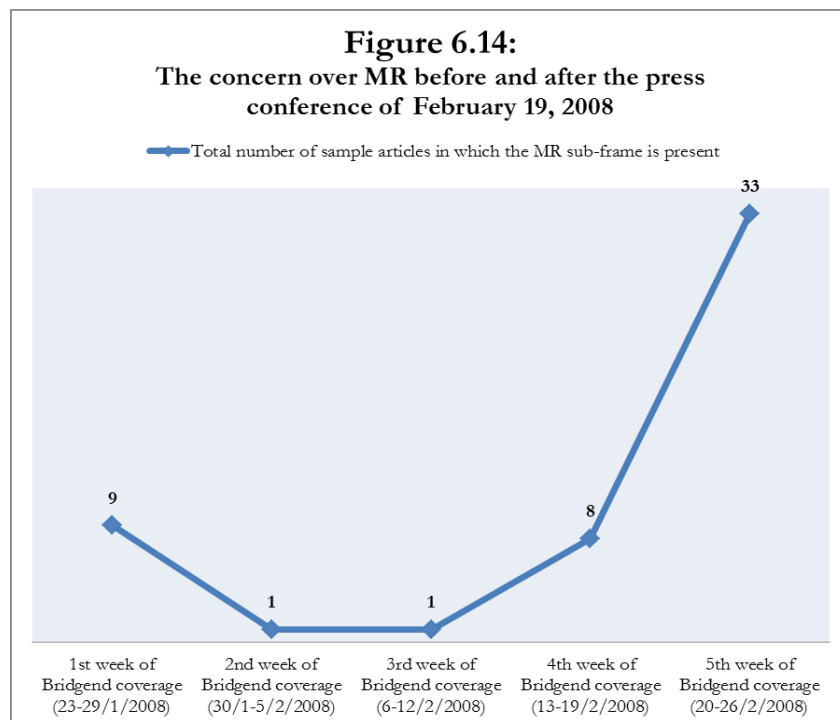
Likewise, on February 5th, 2008, that is, after the death of the second female victim, Angie Fuller, and as the Bridgend story gathers momentum, Papyrus urges for the reporting of the local suicides to stop temporarily. Its chairwoman, Anne Parry, underlines the imperative need to defuse the media frenzy and implement a period of calm in order for imitative suicide attempts to be prevented (Laurance, *The Independent*, 2008; Papyrus, 2008). Explaining the rationale behind the charity's decision to call for a temporary cease of coverage, Papyrus Press Officer Rosemary Vaux notes:

'[W]e called for a temporary cease of coverage because our trustees were concerned there would be more deaths. And there were because it was just snowballing and you get this hiatus effect. So, I spent a lot of time trying to say [to journalists] why we felt that they shouldn't cover the story, just not for the moment. And [one journalist] said:

‘But I don’t get it! Reading something in the paper and going and topping yourself?’ His words, not mine...But I said: ‘We are not talking about you and me. We are talking about vulnerable young people who can be feeling extremely distressed, just feeling [...] that life is not worth living and there is no way out. That is how they are feeling at that time and sometimes it is difficult for some of us to understand that.’

(Rosemary Vaux, interviewed on May 18, 2010)

Nevertheless, at the time when these criticisms are expressed, they are mostly regarded as individual viewpoints rather than widely-accepted allegations which media professionals need to address. They receive minimum attention by the press and it is uncertain whether even that would be present had it not been for the high status of the claims-makers in question. Therefore, the MR sub-frame is at that time still resisted by the majority of journalists. It is only when the South Wales police publicly accuse the media of aggravating the Bridgend suicide problem that the preceding arguments are revisited and acquire an increased prominence in the press. After the press conference of February 19, 2008, when these accusations are articulated, journalists evidently decide that they have no choice but to respond to them. Figure 6.14 shows that the number of sample articles discussing the issue of MR is in the fifth week of the Bridgend coverage (February 20-26, 2008) more than five times higher than in the fourth one (February 13-19, 2008). This notable rise indicates a collective effort on journalists’ part to counter these media-hostile claims made by the police and, by extension, everyone else before them.



‘What is the link since Natasha Randall’s death?’, Assistant Chief Constable of South Wales police, David Morris, rhetorically asks at the February 2008 meeting on the Bridgend suicides just to address journalists and answer right away: ‘It is you, the media’ (for the full video of his statement, see BBC News, 2008). With this statement and as the

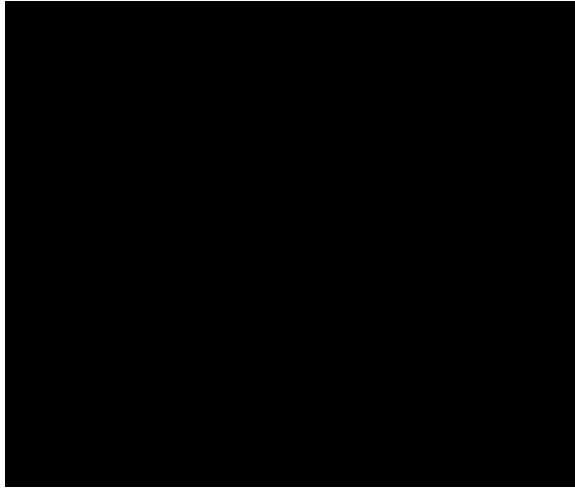


Figure 6.15: Assistant Chief Constable David Morris openly blaming the media during the press conference at South Wales police headquarters on February 19, 2008. Retrieved November 14, 2011 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/02/reporting_bridgend.html.

causal uncertainty and media interest in the local deaths reach their peak, he openly rules out any deadly links between the victims and puts the blame on journalists, bringing them face-to-face with their responsibility for accurate and sensitive reporting. Showing articles from the *South Wales Echo* and the *Sunday Express* as typical examples of sensationalist coverage, he underlines the risks deriving from the boundless speculation about the ‘grim secret’ that Bridgend is allegedly hiding (Paul, *Sunday Express*, 2008: 15). More

specifically, he maintains that the town’s unjustified stigmatisation by the media puts pressure on and generally deteriorates the mental state of vulnerable local youngsters. The role of the media in pushing susceptible young people over the edge is in the same press conference also pointed out by victims’ parents with first and foremost those of Nathaniel Pritchard (Hughes, *The Independent*, 2008a; Laurance, *The Independent*, 2008).

It is precisely this turn in the discourse around the Bridgend suicides in February 2008 and the fact that, in the process of assigning causal responsibility (Iyengar, 1989; Loseke, 2003a), journalists come to be seen as ‘folk devils’ themselves that make the Bridgend case so unique. Reflexively examining the level of their involvement in the Bridgend case in the wake of these criticisms, media professionals often take a rather defensive stance. This consists in either fully denying the insensitivity of the Bridgend coverage or most frequently admitting to it, but only in order to condemn other cases of inconsiderate reporting, while praising their own allegedly accurate and responsible account of the problem: the leader of the *Express* the day following the press conference in Bridgend refers to the police claims that the media are to blame as ‘nonsense’. It suggests in response that the local suicide problem pre-existed the media attention; that

there is a clear link to social networking sites; finally, that the media have a responsibility to inform and raise awareness over youth suicide, which constitutes a genuine issue of public concern (*Daily Express*, 2008: 12). Likewise, writing in the same newspaper, which is the one in which the MR sub-frame is mostly rebutted (Figure 6.13), Clark (*Daily Express*, 2008: 11) sees these police claims as ‘pathetic’, ‘dishonest’ and ultimately ‘a feeble attempt to blame the messenger’. Though he acknowledges the risk of glorifying suicide through irresponsible reporting, he argues that, as far as Bridgend is concerned, this is hardly the case, since the overall coverage has been nothing but appropriate or even beneficial. It has, according to him, clearly focused on the tragic loss of young lives and also informed the public, especially vulnerable youngsters and their parents, of the risks of social networking sites as well as charities working on suicide prevention. In a similar fashion, the editorial of the *Daily Mail* from February 21, 2008 insists that blaming the media for the Bridgend deaths is not just wrong-headed, but also dangerous, since the problem needs to be widely known and discussed in order to be tackled. It also sarcastically criticises the attention given to Bridgend by some ‘so-called quality newspapers’ and claims that the *Mail* is aware of the risks and has made every effort to report the story responsibly (*Daily Mail*, 2008: 14).

Despite admitting the shortcomings of the Bridgend coverage, Ed Caesar of *The Sunday Times* argues that these were over-emphasised by the police, who thus failed to see the complexity of the local suicide problem:

‘[T]he police leant so heavily on this [MR] angle [...] that they closed their ears to anyone who was telling them there was a bigger problem apart from the media. [...] You didn’t see a lot of 16-year-olds in Bridgend with copies of the *Daily Mail* under their arm. They communicated in a completely different way. I’m sure having newspaper reporters and TV crews around probably didn’t help in terms of glamorising what was going on, but they didn’t commit suicide because newspapers reported that. It is really, really complicated and to say that it was the media’s fault seems to me a completely bogus argument. [...] They [the media] definitely made claims of their own, but that’s what the media do! [...] And I don’t think it’s the media’s role just to pair at what the police officers are saying. Because, actually, what the police officers said in this case was quite often obstructive and not very helpful.’

(Ed Caesar, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

Furthermore, Caesar along with journalists Zack Newmark and Tony Bonnici castigate Madeleine Moon for the way she dealt with the media and the Bridgend situation in general:

‘[Madeleine Moon] had a problem on her doorstep and she was very happy to talk to me off-the-record, but she wouldn’t be on-the-record and I felt it was slightly cowardly after that to then go and file a PCC complaint against one of the only examples of in-depth and sensitive reporting that had actually been written about her area [referring to his piece for *The Sunday Times magazine*; the PCC complaint in question will be further discussed later on]’

(Ed Caesar, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

‘I have nothing to say about [Madeleine Moon] anymore. [...] By threatening [to take legal action against] me and claiming that my interviews were somehow untruthful, even though I was open to showing her the documentary to begin with, by making that threat, you are already taking a stance where the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press is not something that is important to you. And if freedom of expression is not important to a collection of MPs, then you kind of see the area that they are going to drive with their policy as well.’

(Zach Newmark, interviewed on June 18, 2010)

‘I’m afraid I often find that calling stuff ‘sensational’ is the last refuge of the scandal. [...] I’m not sure what Madeleine Moon had been doing up until the spate of suicides, up until the press took an interest, but she was certainly very vocal afterwards...’

(Tony Bonnici, interviewed on June 22, 2011)

Following the South Wales police’s accusations, broadsheets appear, once again, more receptive to the possibility of media blame than tabloids and mid-sheets. However, this does not mean that the former are less eager to divest themselves of all responsibility by putting the blame on the latter, whenever they get the chance. For example, Peter Wilby (2008) of *The Guardian* views the *Daily Mail*’s (2008) self-proclaimed commitment to sensitive reporting as a signal of hypocrisy, since it was this very newspaper that gave from the beginning the most prominence to the Bridgend case. As more and more journalists join the debate, numerous issues are raised: the clause on the avoidance of ‘excessive detail’ about the suicide method in the Editors’ Code of Practice and the questionable efficiency of the PCC in ensuring responsible suicide coverage; the use of graphic imagery as well as of visuals copied from the victims’ online profiles without their families’ permission; finally, the inaccuracy and sensationalism of some Bridgend reports and generally the volume of the overall coverage, possibly portraying a romantic image of suicide (Laurance, *The Independent*, 2008; Pritchard, *The Observer*, 2008; Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, 2009). These issues will be discussed in more detail in the following sub-section.

C. Sensitive suicide reporting as perceived in the aftermath of the Bridgend experience

C. I. ‘Excessive detail’ and the role of the PCC: In the context of the MR discussion, it is often acknowledged that the search for a ‘good story’ is not without limits and that there are certain professional standards that journalists always need to comply with. However, the boundaries between sensitive and insensitive reporting, or, as the readers’ editor of *The Observer* points out, between what is ‘in the public interest’ to know and what ‘interests the public’ (Pritchard, *The Observer*, 2008: 30) are frequently quite blurry. As a result, as it is rather difficult to explain what responsible suicide reporting consists in, it is much more convenient for broadsheet journalists to offer a negative definition of it, i.e. to explain what it is not by invoking and condemning reports which, according to them, present a distorted view of the Bridgend problem (see Figure 6.16).

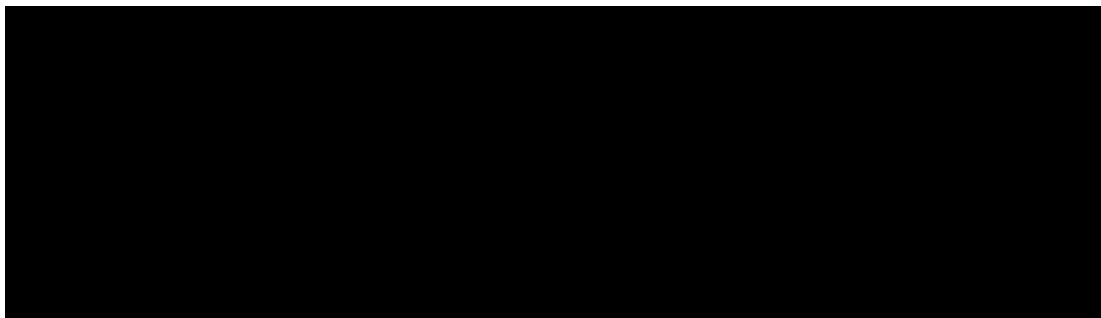


Figure 6.16: *The Observer Review*, March 1, 2009: 8

According to clause 5(ii) of the PCC’s (2009b) Editors’ Code of Practice, ‘[w]hen reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used’, a rule introduced in 2006, after a Samaritans request, in order to prevent the risk of imitative suicidal behaviour (see also Editors’ Code of Practice Committee, 2014). However, the application of this clause is in itself problematic and its adequacy to ensure responsible reporting questionable:

‘[T]here is a huge gap between what an average journalist might consider ‘excessive’ reporting and what the trustees of our charity [Papyrus] feel as ‘excessive’ reporting.’

(Papyrus spokeswoman Rosemary Vaux, interviewed on May 18, 2010)

‘If they [the PCC guidelines] were rules or if there was some kind of redress for breaching those guidelines, then they might have been more effective, but they are just

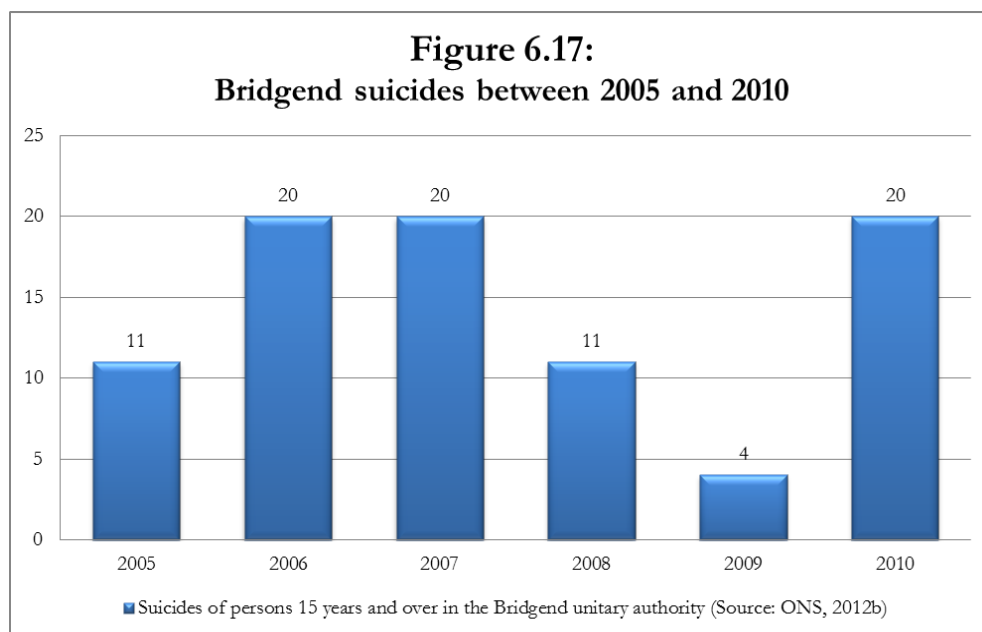
guidelines, so I don't think any guidelines can stop people from reporting the way they want to report.'

(Journalist Ed Caesar, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

It is suggested that what constitutes 'excessive detail' is often rather subjective (Pritchard, *The Observer*, 2008) and that the sensitivity of suicide reporting should not be considered only on an opportunity basis (i.e. providing suicidal readers with information on suicide methods). There are other important aspects that also need to be taken into account when covering a suicide such as the tone of the article itself, the assumptions about the victim's motive(s) and the accompanying visuals (Butterworth, *The Guardian*, 2008; Laurance, *The Independent*, 2008). 'These elements' potential to sensationalise the matter is emphasised here. This involves an 'exploit[ation] [of]the unusual' and 'appeal to baser emotions - excitement, titillation, shock, astonishment, horror, and so forth' (Pribanic-Smith, 2002, cited in Berry, 2008: 24). In the Bridgend coverage, the prominent, yet unsubstantiated claims about an online or offline suicide pact and generally any journalistic attempt to attribute the local deaths to a single 'mystery' cause are seen as typical cases of sensationalism (O'Hara, *The Guardian*, 2008; Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, 2009). In the context of this sensationalist reporting, the suicide incidents in the wider Bridgend area are homogenised and directly associated with the location in question to such an extent that the term 'Bridgend' per se eventually encodes the notion of suicide (see also Chapter Seven). As a result, the Bridgend story becomes, what Kitzinger (2000) calls, a 'media template', that is, a reference point influencing the coverage of subsequent events either occurring in Bridgend or presented as 'another Bridgend'. These include apparently similar cases of SC or journalistic malpractice like the murder of Rebecca Aylward in the Bridgend area (Morris, *The Guardian*, 2011), the Foxconn suicides (Whipple, *The Times*, 2010) or the suicide of a City stockbroker (Baker, *The Times*, 2010) in 2010.

Furthermore, the volume of media attention is seen as adding to this sensationalism and, consequently, to the risk of suicide contagion, especially since Bridgend is not a one-off story, but a continuing one, coming back to news prominence with every new name added to the list of local suicide victims. In her 2009 feature on Bridgend, Cadwalladr (*The Observer*, 2008: 6) asks: '[N]ow that the media furore has died down, so have the deaths. Is that a coincidence? And is it just another coincidence that the highest incidence of deaths occurred when the media reporting of the phenomenon

was at its height?’ The media interest in Bridgend peaks between January and March 2008, but overall spans the whole of that year, after which the suicides keep coming, but go largely unreported, an indication either of awareness of the risks of suicide reporting or of media fatigue with the topic (see Figures 6.4 in Appendix V and 6.17)⁹. Dramatic headlines, extensive articles and large photographs of young victims define the Bridgend coverage of early 2008. The cumulative effect of such abrupt and excessive media attention could reportedly glamorise suicide and egg vulnerable individuals to also take their own lives (Booth, *The Guardian*, 2008a; Butterworth, *The Guardian*, 2008; Papyrus, 2008; PCC, 2009b). Commenting on the risk of romanticising suicide apropos Bridgend in *The Times*, Sarler (2008) criticises journalists’ tendency to draw a veil over the tragic reality of taking one’s own life, for example, to describe hanging as a ‘final swing into oblivion’ (Moir, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008: 21) rather than a reckless act leading to a permanent and agonising death. She suggests that the finality of suicide and the brutality of hanging as a suicide method be explicitly emphasised in order for those contemplating suicide to be ‘scared back to life’ (Sarler, *The Times*, 2008: 17).



In addition, the possible media blame and the corresponding risk of SC are also linked to the PCC’s shortcomings in the way it handled the situation. When Bridgend happened, the PCC, that is, the main body assigned to maintain standards in press reporting, was, to a large extent, admittedly unprepared and slow to respond to the

⁹ The reasons behind the limited span of the national press’ attention to the Bridgend matter will be further discussed in Chapter Nine.

sensationalist portrayal of the local deaths (Williams, *The Independent on Sunday*, 2008b). It is true that, in collaboration with the local MP, Madeleine Moon, the Commission held a meeting in Bridgend to give locals the opportunity to express their concerns about the suicide coverage of the previous months. However, this only took place in May 2008 (PCC, 2009b) and even the then Chairman, Sir Christopher Meyer (2008, quoted in House of Commons, 2010: 93), conceded at the time that the PCC ‘should have been down there earlier’. Describing the atmosphere that prevailed in the meeting, Scott Langham and William Gore of the PCC note:

‘[T]here was a lot of anger very clearly and the concern was particularly around what was perceived to be the ‘demonisation’ of Bridgend as a [suicide town] [...] I think that kind of anger was very understandable. The thing that was particularly upsetting for them [the victims’ families] was the fact that every time there was a suicide, all the pictures of the previous suicide victims were included in the news article.’

(William Gore, interviewed on May 21, 2010)

‘People were happy to vent their anger on someone and they were very upset with the way in which the media were reporting their town. My memories of it were that it was a constructive meeting. I think people were able to lay open precisely what they wanted to say without any fear of anyone saying ‘you know, that’s not justified’.

(Scott Langham, interviewed on June 8, 2010)

Nonetheless, Langham’s impression of a ‘constructive’ meeting is inconsistent with Carole Cadwalladr’s view of it as being superficial and far from helpful:

‘Usually, it’s not a question of the life of a child, or children, being at stake. But in this instance, it was and I think the PCC failed. Individual reporters and editors bear a responsibility of course, but in a competitive news environment, it’s very hard to make these calls; it’s why a concerted nation-wide appeal for restraint by the industry body should have been made, in my view. [...] I went to the PCC’s inquiry in Bridgend, and thought it was very unhelpful and conducted rather patronisingly. There seemed to be no real sense that it was there to actually learn lessons, and to examine its own behaviour. It struck me more as a PR exercise.’

(Carole Cadwalladr, interviewed on July 5, 2011)

C. II. Visual sensationalism: The Bridgend-related reports under study serve a mimetic function (Nichols, 1981; Hall, 1997; Orgad, 2012), that is, they aim to blur the lines between text and lived experience and to give readers the impression that they reflect reality. To this end, journalists make an extensive use of photographs which invite readers to believe what appears to be ‘right in front of their eyes’, but in fact always

involve a particular point of view. Photographs of vivacious youngsters, who had apparently everything to live for and could be anyone's children or friends, acquire a symbolic value in the Bridgend coverage and bring the local suicide problem on readers' doorstep. They increase the story's dramatic effect by personalising the matter, while emphasising the alarming risk of SC among such vulnerable individuals:

'[W]hat they [journalists] did was they painted a picture of someone like you. This person took their life. That could be you!'

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

The study of the content, size and position (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998; Jones and Wardle, 2008) of these images has revealed that their selection and publication are



Figure 6.18: *Daily Express*, February 16, 2008: 5

far from random. Particularly, as already made clear, their syntagmatic placement adds to the SC narrative by providing photographic validation of the otherwise questionable links between the victims through symbolism (Barthes, 1977b; Huxford, 2001). Moreover, female victims, especially Jenna Parry and Natasha Randall, are usually chosen over or appear in larger size than male ones (see Figures 6.6 and 6.8 in the current chapter as well as Table 4.C in Chapter Four). That is firstly due to their unusual choice of a masculine-oriented technique like hanging as a suicide method (Cassidy, cited in Caesar, *The*

Sunday Times magazine, 2008); secondly, due to a journalistic propensity to depict them, whenever possible, in controversial poses (having a drink with their friends or wearing low-cut dresses; see Natasha Randall and Kelly Stephenson in Figures 4.4 and 6.18 respectively) and, generally, to sexualise them in a way that is evidently more likely to titillate the reader (Papyrus, 2008; Wilby, *The Guardian*, 2008).

In any case, the visual material used to accompany the Bridgend-related articles underlines, once again, that the sensitivity of suicide reporting is often rather subjective and, for that reason, contentious. The publication of personal photos obtained through the victims' online profiles in social networking sites and their re-publication after every new death caused great distress to the grieving families (Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, 2009) and was criticised by the PCC (2009b). Nevertheless, the readers' editor of *The Observer*,

Stephen Pritchard, amongst other media professionals, considers the use of such photos for journalistic purposes an acceptable practice. He transfers the blame from the press to the victims and their inconsiderate use of the Internet:

‘[P]eople put things in the public domain and I don’t think you can blame newspapers for publishing material that *they themselves* have self-published actually. [...] If you have a social media site and you want to put pictures of yourself up, *you* are doing the publishing; [...] distressing, yes, for the families, but it’s not illegal and I’m not even sure that it’s necessarily unethical actually. I think we need to start at the beginning here in the education of young people and the responsible use of the Internet. They’ve got to stop themselves and think: ‘Would I want this photograph I’m about to put up there to appear in a newspaper?’ [...] Discretion. Discretion. Discretion.’

(Stephen Pritchard, interviewed on June 23, 2011; my emphasis)

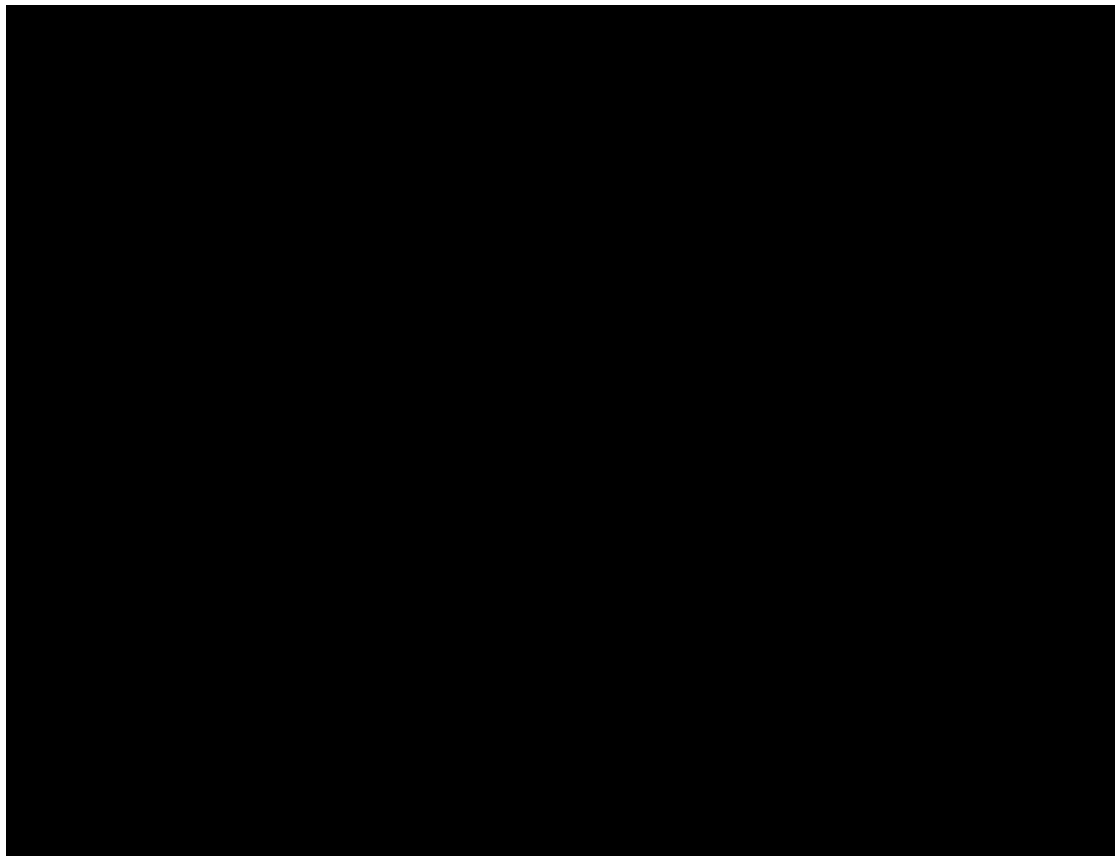


Figure 6.19: *The Sunday Times* magazine, May 25, 2008: 44–45

At the same time, the visuals accompanying Caesar’s (2008) article appearing in *The Sunday Times magazine* in May 2008 (Figure 6.19), were seen as grossly insensitive and likely to increase the risk of suicide contagion by the Bridgend MP, Madeleine Moon, who filed a complaint with the PCC for that reason. However, though the PCC acknowledged the distress that might have been caused to the victims’ families, it pointed

out that the illustration in question was important in juxtaposing the apparent cheerfulness and vivacity of the young victims with the tragic decision to end their lives so abruptly. As a result, it adjudicated that clause 5 (Intrusion into grief and shock) of the Editors' Code of Practice (PCC, 2009b) had, in that case, not been breached and therefore Ms Moon's complaint should not be upheld (PCC, 2008).

C. III. A media panic? Journalists were undoubtedly late in identifying the high suicide rate, present in the Bridgend area for over a decade (NPHS for Wales, 2008), as a matter of concern and only 'discovered' the Bridgend problem in January 2008 in the light of claims about a local suicide cult. Nonetheless, this increase of media interest in the matter was not completely groundless at the time. As shown in Figure 6.17, the number of suicide incidents in the Bridgend unitary authority almost doubled from 2005 to 2006 (11 and 20 suicides respectively) and remained as high (20 suicides) in 2007 as well (ONS, 2012b). Consequently, if such statistics are the only glimpse of objective reality we, as social researchers, have access to and given this alarming increase in local suicide rates, it is questionable whether the press' reaction to Bridgend is exaggerated, that is, disproportionate to the actual problem. Returning to Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2009) work discussed in Chapter Two, if the criterion of 'disproportion' is not met, there is no moral/media panic. In that sense, reducing the Bridgend problem to yet another media panic is equivalent to denying the substance of it and failing to see the whole picture.

Even if, after taking notice, the press became 'part of the problem' (Moon, cited in Hughes, *The Independent*, 2008a: 6) by often succumbing to sensationalism and adding to the risk of a Werther effect, its original interest in Bridgend was not totally unjustified. It concerned a very much real and urgent issue demanding public attention as well as an appropriate policy response, so, ultimately, as Jenkins (1998: 6) would ask, given the circumstances, '[w]hy should we not panic?' Irrespective of the way in which journalists made sense of the Bridgend phenomenon, the declining numbers of local suicides in 2008 and 2009 (11 and 4 incidents respectively; see Figure 6.17 and ONS, 2012b) suggest that their involvement in the case and the consequent concern and mobilisation around it probably had a positive effect towards tackling the problem. The fact that they found themselves being seen as the only responsible for the Bridgend problem neglects a number of other socio-economic and mental health issues (see Chapters Seven and Eight) possibly contributing to the high local suicide rate; issues that had been present in

the area long before the excessive media attention of early 2008. Following McRobbie and Thornton's (1995) argument that contemporary moral panics are not monolithic but constructed through a complex definitional process that involves a plethora of media outlets and claims-makers, the 'folk deviling', that is, the demonisation of journalists for the Bridgend problem could be seen as a 'reflexive' moral panic. What is disquieting is that the positive impact of the media's attention on Bridgend's suicide rate was only temporary, since, as soon as the influence of the 2008 experience started to fade, the local suicides returned to the high levels of 2006 and 2007 (20 incidents in 2010). This new increase raises questions regarding the effectiveness of the measures and strategies adopted in the aftermath of the 2008 events to prevent future deaths with first and foremost that of the Welsh national suicide prevention action plan 'Talk to me' [Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2009]. The issue will be further considered in Chapters Eight and Nine.

5. Cultures of death

Another issue, raised apropos the Bridgend events and in the context of the discussion around the risks related to the suggestibility of suicide, is that of the cultural glamorisation of self-destruction and premature death. The 'Cultures of Death' (CD) sub-frame constitutes an extension of the 'Copycat' (CP) one, in the shadow of which it develops. As a distinct sub-frame, it appears only in a minority of sample articles (22 out of 358; see Table 6.D) and never as the corresponding authors' primary point of focus. Just like CP, CD examines the possibility of a pure imitation effect, but from a broader perspective. Particularly, it is based on the premise that this effect is not just related to individual incidents, but reflects a widespread cultural attitude towards sudden death. This involves idolising and eulogising those dying young, especially celebrities, just because of doing so, which is regarded as potentially having a detrimental influence on vulnerable and susceptible youngsters. Unlike the 'Virtual Immortality' (VI) sub-frame, where suicide is seen as a means to an end, that is, to instant fame, the emphasis here is on self-destruction per se, which is perceived as an end in itself. The Bridgend suicides coincide temporally with and are occasionally reported alongside the unexpected death of Heath Ledger, the addiction problems of Amy Winehouse or Pete Doherty and generally the fall of other troubled stars, which also appear prominently in the national news in the period under study (Macintyre, *The Times*, 2008a, 2008b; McCartney, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008).

Table 6.D:
The presence of the CD sub-frame in the entire Bridgend coverage

▪ 'Fashionable website where teenage suicides are a cause for celebration' (<i>The Times</i>, January 24, 2008: 11) ▪ 'The lethal 'glamour' factor' (<i>The Times</i>, Times2, January 25, 2008: 5) ▪ 'What beauty is there in a young life snuffed out?' (<i>The Times</i>, January 25, 2008: 23) ▪ 'Suicide: a teen's way to instant fame' (<i>The Sunday Times</i>, January 27, 2008: 10) ▪ 'Raise £1 billion a year for charity? Piece of cake' (<i>The Times</i>, February 13, 2008: 17) ▪ 'Suicide is catching – and we must beware how we respond to it' (<i>The Times</i>, February 20, 2008: 7) ▪ 'Death valleys' (<i>The Sunday Times magazine</i>, May 25, 2008: 44-53)
▪ 'The passion plays of youth are often just wayward self-love' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i>, January 27, 2008: 29)
▪ 'Let's not tell our children there's a place called 'Suicide Town' (<i>The Observer</i>, January 27, 2008: 13) ▪ 'Academics back Bridgend families in blaming media' (<i>The Guardian</i>, February 21, 2008: 11)
▪ 'Just upstairs and horribly at risk' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, January 27, 2008: 42-43) ▪ 'The big question: should the media stop reporting the suicides in and around Bridgend?' (<i>The Independent</i>, February 22, 2008: 39) ▪ 'Emo: Welcome to the Black Parade' (<i>The Independent</i>, Friday 23, 2008: 20-21) ▪ 'What price the Code, if Amy is caught drunk?' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, May 25, 2008: 56)
▪ 'We are creating a generation for whom reality now exists only on a computer screen' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, January 24, 2008: 14)
▪ 'Anger over class suicide note project' (<i>Daily Express</i>, February 27, 2008: 27)
▪ 'Sick sites' 'glamour' (<i>The Sun</i>, January 24, 2008: 19) ▪ 'Welsh school's suicide lessons' (<i>The Sun</i>, February 27, 2008: 29) ▪ 'Funeral class for risk kids' (<i>The Sun</i>, February 28, 2008: 6) ▪ '20th town death' (<i>The Sun</i>, May 8, 2008: 35) ▪ 'Fury over Net game of suicide' (<i>The Sun</i>, November 13, 2008: 37)
▪ 'Bridgend fury at teen suicide note lessons' (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, February 27, 2008: 23)

Moreover, the ramifications of the adolescent fascination with the morbid in the context of seemingly 'dark' youth sub-cultures are also considered. Emo and goth sub-cultures, supposedly revolving around death, depression and self-harm, are portrayed as possibly romanticising suicide. Concerns are expressed in both *The Sun* (Clench, 2008) and *The Independent* (Brown, 2008) about the emo band 'My Chemical Romance'. Additionally, *The Sun* stresses the risk posed by the goth glamour site 'Suicide Girls' (No author, *The Sun*, 2008c). The content of such articles indicates an actual anxiety over these allegedly death-centred sub-cultures, although their view as such is, at times, attributed to a generation gap and exaggerated adult fears, amplified by media

sensationalism. While acknowledging the media's role in the cultivation of this anxiety, social psychologist Arthur Cassidy deems it likely that the wider cultural glamorisation of self-destruction, taking place nowadays, played a part in the Bridgend phenomenon:

'Some of the emo young people I spoke to in Bridgend said: 'We are not really into the 'suicide' thing. We are meant to be. According to the media, emo are all suicidal, but we are not into suicide. We just listen to a certain type of music. 'My Chemical Romance', for example.' [...] They talked, to a certain extent, about celebrities like Amy Winehouse and other celebrities who have self-harmed. So, [...] the world of media and negative role models are, in some ways, a contributory factor and maybe a major contributory factor towards this form of suicidal ideation or cognitive distortion, as we call them.'

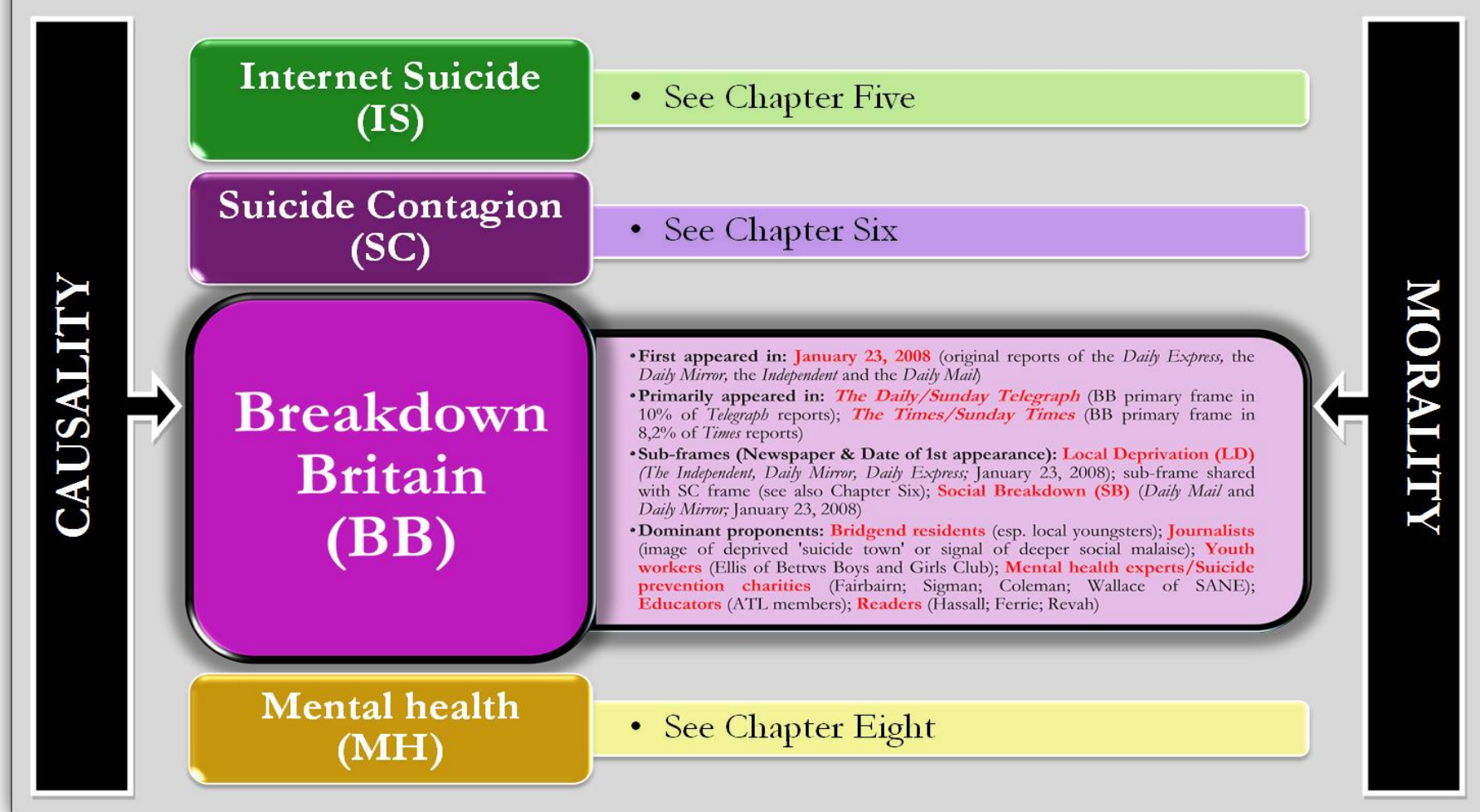
(Arthur Cassidy, interviewed on May 13, 2010)

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the construction of the Bridgend phenomenon as the product of a suicide epidemic. The press' endeavours to establish links between the victims have been pointed out and a distinction between two different views on the risk of imitation, 'copycat' and 'contagion', has been made. Moreover, the debate between journalists and the authorities, but also between journalists themselves over the degree of their responsibility for the Bridgend deaths and the sensitivity of suicide reporting has been documented in detail. Finally, the perception of the Bridgend deaths as a result of a widespread cultural glamorisation of self-destruction and premature death has also been discussed.

Having completed the analysis of the two main frames focusing on the apparent physical- or virtual-world connections between the Bridgend victims ['Internet Suicide' (IS) and 'Suicide Contagion' (SC)], it is now time to proceed to that of the remaining two ['Breakdown Britain' (BB) and 'Mental Health' (MH)], which do not necessarily deny these connections, but do not place that much emphasis on them either. As will be explained in the following chapters, the latter frames do not seek to discover a 'suicide pattern', but to shed light on the socio-economic and psychological aspects of these young people's lives that possibly led them to suicide. BB will be the first of these two frames to be examined. Its role in the national press construction of the Bridgend deaths as a problem will be the subject of Chapter Seven.

Figure 7.1
Main frame 3: Breakdown Britain (BB)



CHAPTER SEVEN

A product of Breakdown Britain?

‘Kids round here have been drinking, smoking dope, taking ecstasy and having sex since they were 13 or 14. By the time they reach my age they’ve done everything. The combination of booze, drugs and the boredom of living around here screws young people up so much that they think killing themselves will be exciting’

(16-year-old Danielle, commenting on how local youngsters cope with the mundane reality of Bridgend, quoted in Brewis, *The Sunday Times*, January 27, 2008: 10)

‘The cluster of suicides in Wales is the tip of an iceberg. For every young person who has committed suicide, hundreds of others are feeling the same sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness that leads to this ultimate act of self-harm. The suicides are thus like other signs that large parts of our society have become dysfunctional and unhappy’

(Bartholomew, *Sunday Express*, February 24, 2008: 26)

Introduction

In December 2006, the think tank Social Justice Policy Group (SJPG) published a report entitled ‘Breakdown Britain’, which indicated a rupture in the social fabric of many British communities and looked at the roots of social breakdown and poverty in contemporary Britain. The report attributes the perturbing state of the nation to five main causes: family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness and economic dependence, addictions and indebtedness. These causes are considered interrelated and their links to mental health problems and suicidal thoughts are acknowledged. The family institution is placed at the core of the welfare society and its breakdown is directly associated with a wider social malaise. Such a malaise is identified as a very alarming issue, which we all have a moral responsibility to tackle as it has a ‘deleterious effect [...] on *our* children’ (SJPG, 2006: 15; my emphasis).

Whether as victims or as offenders, children and young people are, as explained in Chapter Two, always at the centre of the ‘social breakdown’ rhetoric, widely used by journalists and politicians stressing the urgent need to ‘mend our broken society’ [see, for instance, David Cameron’s (2011) speech in the aftermath of the 2011 riots]. Younger generations represent the future and their behaviour serves as a yardstick against which the health of society is measured (Jewkes, 2011). This rhetoric is not just about crime, since behaviours seen as transgressing the alleged ‘moral consensus’ such as binge drinking or sexual deviance are, even if not illegal, considered equally problematic as

signals of a permissive society. In that sense, youth's engagement in deviant activities of any kind is regarded as demonstrative of a society in moral decline (Jewkes, 2011). In fact, when these deviant activities involve, amongst others, the apparent suicides of several young people in a far from affluent area like the South Wales valleys (Evans, 2000), the need to scrutinise the social factors, potentially leading to this tragic outcome, is deemed more imperative than ever.

Focusing on the construction of the 'Breakdown Britain' (BB) frame, the current chapter will study why and how the national press used the Bridgend example to argue that something is wrong with our society at large. On a local level, the issue of socio-economic deprivation and its potential impact on Bridgend youth's aspirations will be the first to be addressed. The engagement of these youngsters in deviant activities in reaction to the allegedly depressing Bridgend reality and the view of suicide as a form of sensation seeking and transcendence will be discussed. Furthermore, the level of accuracy or sensationalism of this portrayal of Bridgend as a deprived 'suicide town' will be, wherever possible, assessed through the consultation of official regional statistics. Finally, the process through which the local suicide phenomenon comes to be seen as a problem extending beyond the geographical area in question to an entire 'Bridgend generation' and the consequent debate on the social causes of modern youth's unhappiness will also be examined.

1. From 'Suicide Contagion' to 'Breakdown Britain': revisiting the 'suicide town' image



Figure 7.4: *Daily Mirror*, January 23, 2008: 19



Figure 7.5: *Daily Express*, February 6, 2008: 1

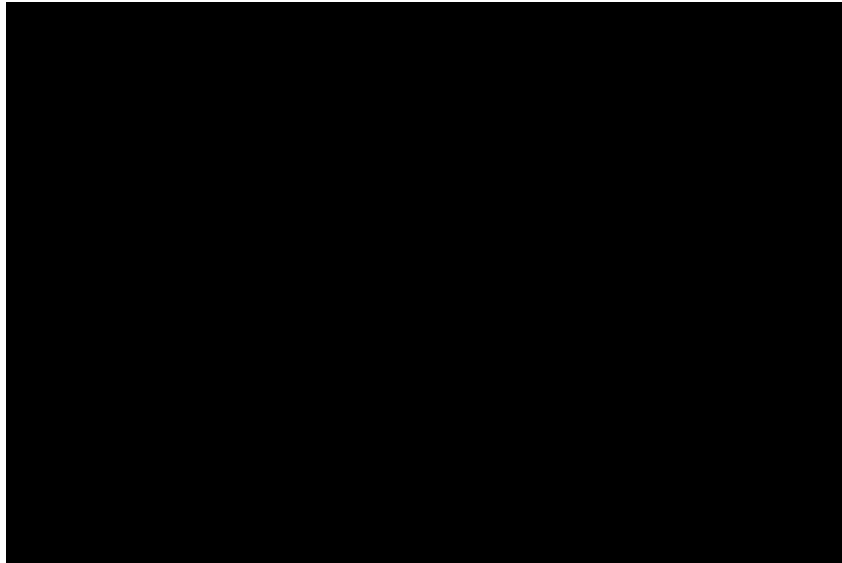


Figure 7.6: *The Sun*, February 20, 2008: 4-5

The construction of Bridgend as a ‘suicide town’ was, as discussed in the previous chapter, initially based on the occurrence of numerous youth suicides in the area and the speculation over the possibility of a ‘copycat’ or a ‘contagion’ effect. However, the term in question along with other equivalent ones like ‘death town’, ‘ghost town’ or ‘town of no hope’, frequently used by journalists to describe Bridgend (see Figures 7.4 and 7.5) in an attempt to attract readers’ attention and dramatise the facts, connote far more than just the tragedy of recent events. Particularly, such terms draw attention to the locality of the problem: they construct a negative image of Bridgend and promote a very specific understanding of what living in this South Wales town is like. This negative image is, once again, constructed and reinforced through a process of cultural looping (Manning, 1998; Ferrell, 1999). The Bridgend narrative and specifically the view of Bridgend as a deprived town where the ‘shadow of death stalks the young’ (see Figure 7.6) draws on various other cultural products: these include, amongst others, The Specials’ classic song ‘Ghost Town’ and their indictment of Coventry at a time of mass unemployment (Kelly, *BBC News Magazine*, 2011); also, crime TV series like *Broadchurch* or *Mayday* and novels by Ann Cleeves or Peter May, which emphasise the notion of enclosure and claustrophobia (Cook, 2011), explore the dark side of small town life and portray the impact of a fatal deviant act on a poor yet close-knit community. The scrutiny of the local socio-economic conditions leads to the development of the ‘Local Deprivation’ (LD) sub-frame, which is shared by ‘Suicide Contagion’ and ‘Breakdown Britain’. That is because LD considers the impact of the supposedly hopeless Bridgend reality on local youngsters, while recognising that their association with each other in this context could possibly trigger a Werther

effect. This view is consistent with suicide research pointing out not just the links between economic disadvantage and suicide on an individual level (Boxer et al., 1995; Maskill et al., 2005), but also the increased risk of imitation amongst all those living in disadvantaged communities (even those who are not disadvantaged themselves) due to their contact with suicidal others (Bernburg et al., 2009).

LD appears early in the Bridgend coverage, being present in the original reports of the *Express*, the *Mirror* and the *Independent* (Table 7.B). However, its overall presence in the entirety of the sample articles is limited. It features in a minority of them (48 out of 358), mainly as an extension of the dominant SC frame and only in 8 as the authors' primary point of focus (Table 7.C). It is therefore evident that the quality of living in Bridgend is nowhere as prominent an issue in the national press as those of a possible Internet cult or an offline suicide pact. Nonetheless, what is important to keep in mind is that, when journalists decide to raise the topic, they tend to support rather than rebut the perception of apparent local deprivation as a cause for or at least a contributory factor to the Bridgend suicide problem (30 and 18 articles respectively; see Figure 7.7).

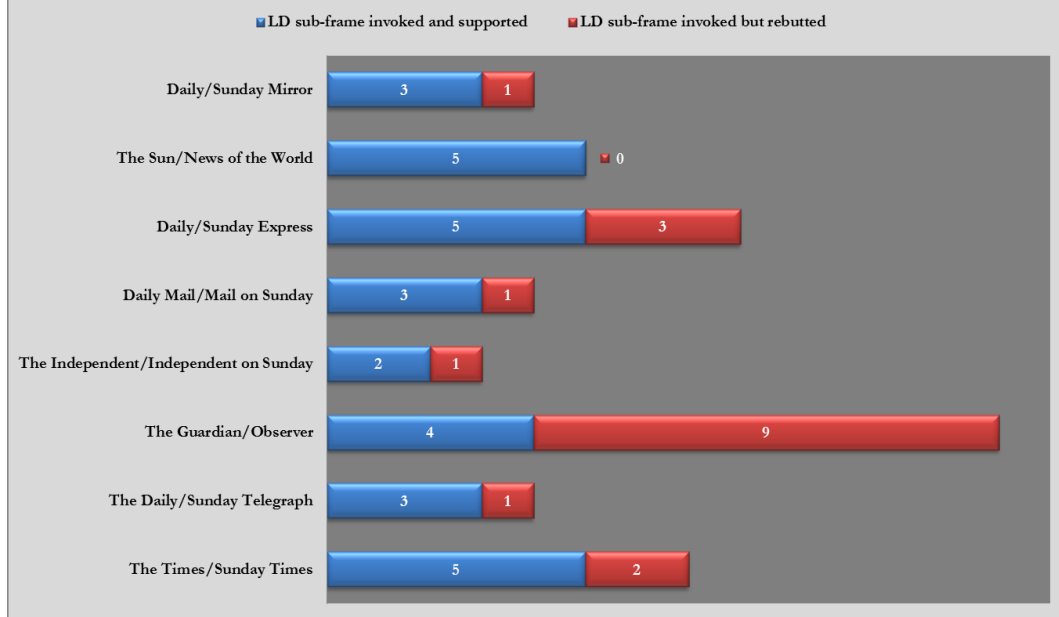
Table 7.B:
First appearance of the LD sub-frame

▪ 'The Bridgend enigma' (<i>The Times</i>, Times2, January 25, 2008: 4-5) ▪ 'Suicide: a teen's way to instant fame' (<i>The Sunday Times</i>, January 27, 2008: 10)
▪ 'It just seems normal, fashionable almost...' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, January 24, 2008: 20)
▪ 'Why did they die so young? Police re-examine files on 13 tragedies' (<i>The Guardian</i>, January 26, 2008: 9) ▪ 'Let's not tell our children there's a place called 'Suicide Town'' (<i>The Observer</i>, January 27, 2008: 13) ▪ 'Suicide 'axis' crosses Welsh valleys' (<i>The Observer</i>, January 27, 2008: 17)
▪ 'The web linking seven young people who chose to take their own lives' (<i>The Independent</i>, January 24, 2008: 24)
▪ '14th teenager found hanged in suicide town' (<i>Daily Mail</i>, February 6, 2008: 25)
▪ 'Seven die in suicide 'craze' (<i>Daily Express</i>, January 23, 2008: 10-11) ▪ 'They want to be dead for a bit...but if you're dead there's no coming back' (<i>Sunday Express</i>, February 24, 2008: 10-11)
▪ 'Gloom of dark skies' (<i>The Sun</i>, January 24, 2008: 19) ▪ 'Bridgend alert missed' (<i>News of the World</i>, April 27, 2008: 34)
▪ 'Suicide town' (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, January 23, 2008: 19)

Table 7.C:
Sample articles in which LD is most prominent

- 'The Bridgend enigma' (*The Times*, Times2, January 25, 2008: 4-5)
- 'Suicide: a teen's way to instant fame' (*The Sunday Times*, January 27, 2008: 10)
- 'It just seems normal, fashionable almost...' (*The Daily Telegraph*, January 24, 2008: 20)
- 'Teenage suicides' (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 26, 2008: 21)
- 'Just what's happened to the town I grew up in?' (*Daily Mail*, February 22, 2008: 32-33)
- 'Cannabis 'killed suicide victims' (*Sunday Express*, November 9, 2008: 4)
- 'Gloom of dark skies' (*The Sun*, January 24, 2008: 19)
- 'It's depressing, there are no jobs ..there's a sense place is cursed' (*Daily Mirror*, February 20, 2008: 5)

Figure 7.7:
The presence of the LD sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles



A negative portrayal of the suicide setting and a subsequent emphasis on the seemingly poor living conditions, which Bridgend youngsters have to put up with on an everyday basis, not only adds to the dramatic value of the story, but most importantly renders the controversial decision of the victims to end their lives so abruptly less incomprehensible. These suicides would, in all probability, have seemed totally out of place had they occurred in a prosperous town, but fit perfectly within the apparently depressing Bridgend context. Consequently, even if there were no other suspicious links between the victims, the fact that they were all living in Bridgend and the surrounding

areas would still be seen as enough to explain their final act. In that sense, according to the LD sub-frame, it is ultimately not the suicides of their friends that make Bridgend youngsters hopeless, but the hopeless Bridgend reality that eventually leads them to suicide.

Contrary to all the other main frames with first and foremost that of 'Mental Health' (Chapter Eight), BB and especially, LD are not based on expert knowledge, but build largely on the claims of laymen. And who is in a better position to be aware of and fully understand the various problems of Bridgend and their potential effect on local youth other than those already living there and primarily local youngsters themselves?

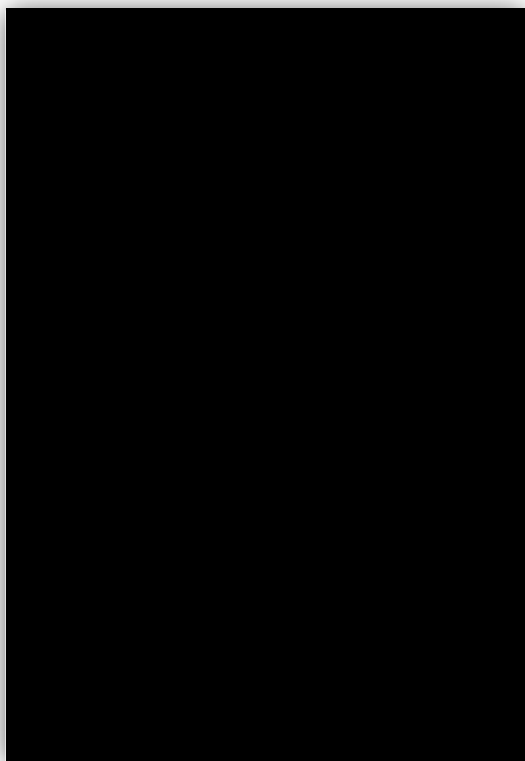


Figure 7.8: *The Guardian*, January 26, 2008: 9

Local teenager Gareth (quoted in North, *Daily Mirror*, 2008a: 5) describes Bridgend as a 'cursed' place, while another one named Katie (quoted in Gordon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008: 20) appears absolutely nonchalant and desensitised to the high occurrence of suicides in the area. 'It's become like a bit of an everyday thing. When the first one happened I was shocked but now it just seems normal, fashionable almost. I don't know. It's that time of year, isn't it?', she says. Coming from locals, let alone from people of more or less the same age as the victims and likely to be facing everyday problems quite analogous to theirs, these and other similar views are

regarded as offering an accurate, inside explanation to the Bridgend suicides. At the same time, such statements reinforce the emotional aspect and consequently the human appeal of the story. For that reason, they are usually placed at the forefront of the relevant articles (both the aforementioned statements made it to the headline). What is even more significant here is that such perceptions of the Bridgend problem do not just stress the fact that the suicides take place in a single location, but consider this location an integral part of the problem.

Moreover, journalists' descriptions of Bridgend are also crucial to the construction of the 'suicide town' label and the corresponding development of the LD sub-frame. It is

implicitly suggested that their unaccustomed to the Bridgend reality eyes could give a more objective view on the matter, particularly, one which locals would possibly be too biased or shocked to see. In that sense, locals' occasional claims about Bridgend allegedly being a nice place to live in (see Sharon Pritchard, cited in Yeoman and de Bruxelles, *The Times*, 2008b; Christopher Claypole, cited in Salkeld, *Daily Mail*, 2008a) are likely to be

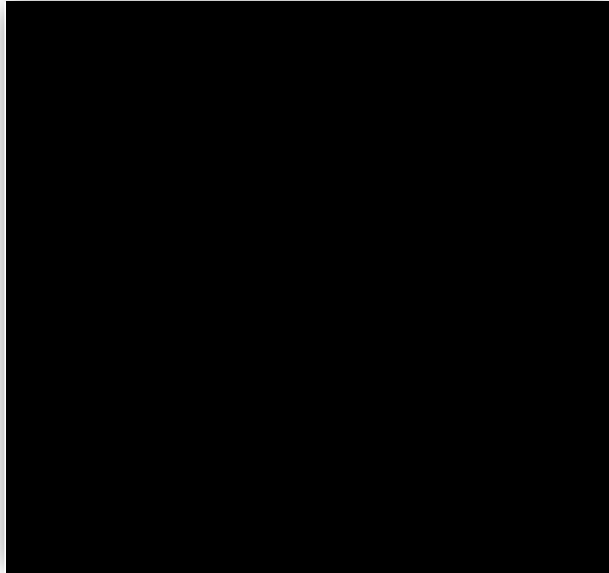


Figure 7.9: *The Daily Telegraph*, February 23, 2008: 23

tacitly regarded with suspicion, considering the high youth suicide rate of the area. That is because claims of this sort are in juxtaposition with the impressions of numerous journalists offering a rather bleak image of the South Wales town in question. Bridgend is, amongst others, referred to as: a deserted 'ghost town' presenting 'few reasons to come to [...] – and many to leave' (Gordon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008: 20); a depressing

working-class town, which saw its thriving in the 19th century prosperity vanish into thin air after the closure of the Welsh coal industry in the Thatcher era and which is nowadays 'economically moribund' (North, *Daily Mirror*, 2008a: 5); an area with no distinct local identity, which 'could be anywhere in Britain' and whose 'people get by, [...] [but] not many move on' (Wark, *The Times*, 2008: 4). Even the *Express*, initially portraying Bridgend as a 'bustling market town which has an unemployment rate below the national average' (Pilditch, *Daily Express*, 2008: 10), soon ends up contradicting itself. It also embraces the LD sub-frame, promoting the image of a 'rough little town' (Porter and Bonnici, *Daily Express*, 2008: 29) in decline, with its fair share of rising debt and unemployment. Bonnici himself uses LD as a means to rebut MR, identifying deprivation as a key contributory factor to the local suicide problem, while arguing that this had been present in the area long before the issue came to the national media spotlight:

'I think probably deprivation does play a part. [...] We are there after the fact and the media didn't create the deprivation. The media wasn't responsible for it. [...] We go there and we get out. It is, as always, a snapshot of the town. [...] [W]e are going after the event. That's what we see. You can't say that as a result of saying it is a 'ghost town'

and it is depressing, that that resulted in more suicides. The suicides were happening long before the media came onto the scene.’

(Journalist Tony Bonnici, interviewed on June 22, 2011)

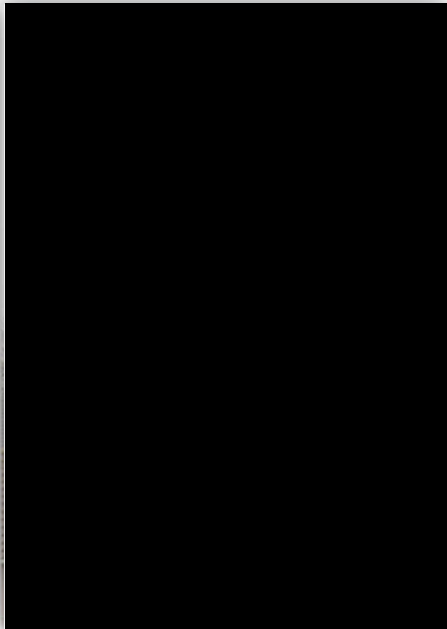


Figure 7.10: *The Times*, January 25, 2008: 4

LD claims are frequently reinforced via the use of photographs depicting not just an industrial, working-class town like all the others, but an apparently gloomy and desolate place, covered in mist. As Huxford (2001) and Jones and Wardle (2008) would argue, the grey landscape shown in Figures 7.8, 7.9 and 7.10 and other similar ones visually confirms Bridgend’s ‘ghost town’ status and increases the dramatic effect of the story. Yet, according to Porter and Bonnici (*Daily Express*, 2008: 29), the mist only ‘emphasise[s] what is, in any weather, a depressing sight’. Irrespective of the assumptions one can draw from such images

about the living conditions of Bridgend residents, it is now time to look more closely at the elements composing its allegedly depressing reality in order to determine the type and level of its perceived influence on the lives of local youngsters.

2. Deprivation and the strain on Bridgend youth

As explained in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) summary report of 2008 published by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG, 2008a: 4), deprivation is a concept wider than poverty, which does not just refer to the lack of money, but to all the problems ‘caused by a general lack of resources and opportunities’. The categorisation of Bridgend as a ‘deprived town’ in the articles under study triggers a discussion which aims not so much to evaluate the status of the local labour market, but to understand the way in which the strains placed by various socio-economic factors on local youth’s mental well-being render suicide an acceptable option. ‘Bridgend has poverty, unemployment, it’s an old mining town...the *osmosis* of depression, the groundlessness, has *leaked* through to the youth’, states the author of the book *Suicide Clusters* Loren Coleman (quoted in Brewis, *The Sunday Times*, 2008: 10; my emphasis), who emphasises the uncontrollable

consequences of youngsters losing their sense of belonging due to deprivation. ‘What is there for young people if they stay in that community? What sense of hope has been lost?’, he wonders.

With regard to the impact of deprivation on Bridgend youngsters, Rayner and Savill (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2008) point out that it is unlikely for adolescents to be taking their lives because they are worried about making a living, losing their job or providing for their loved ones, since these are mostly adult concerns. They argue that, even if deprivation is the force driving young people to suicide in the Bridgend area, it operates more on an aspirational rather than a livelihood level. Likewise, the Bridgend MP, Madeleine Moon (cited in Davies, *The Observer*, 2008) acknowledges that the suicides may be linked to the low levels of aspiration amongst Bridgend youngsters, but denies that the town is socially deprived. Considering the level to which issues like unemployment, alcohol or drug abuse are responsible for the high local suicide rates, Moon underlines their psychological impact on individual victims. She abstains, however, from commenting on whether these constitute widespread problems in her constituency:

‘[W]herever you have a suicide, the chances are that you are going to have someone who has a long history of coping with emotional trauma through self-medication [...] and that usually takes the form of drug and alcohol. Unemployment was not an issue in the majority of the [local suicide] cases. I think one or two who died were unemployed, but that wasn’t the motivation.’

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

Accurate or not, the press construction of Bridgend as a wasteland suggests that young people growing up there have nothing to look forward to, simply because local deprivation also deprives them of the means to do anything meaningful in their lives. The futility of any attempt to succeed either on a professional or a personal level in such a place is often brought up in LD-related articles and apparently confirmed through the claims of Bridgend teenagers, who are, once again, regarded as likely to understand better than anyone else the strains their peers are under. 17-year-old Gareth (quoted in North, *Daily Mirror*, 2008a: 5) appears utterly disappointed at the limited career opportunities Bridgend has to offer. ‘There’s nothing to do and we’ll never get decent jobs. The best I can hope for is to carry on stacking shelves at Tesco’, he says. A similar argument is made by 16-year-old Jasmin (quoted in Gordon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008: 20), who also stresses the difficulty of finding a job and who cannot hide her desire to leave her hometown as soon as possible. ‘I really do feel sometimes like I will never get out of

here', she states, radiating a feeling of despair and suffocation with regard to the prospect of having to spend the rest of her life in Bridgend.

This approach, focusing on the impact of deprivation on local youth's aspirations, is reminiscent of Merton's (1938) strain theory and particularly, of the type of behaviour he defines as 'retreatism'. From a Mertonian perspective, awareness of the inability to attain the cultural goal of success in Bridgend results in a state of social normlessness, in which local youngsters, trying to cope with the depressing reality of their hometown, resort to various activities that people of their age are socially expected to refrain from. Deviant practices such as smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage sex and problems with the law apparently constitute an integral part of troubled Bridgend youngsters' lives, let alone one whose deleterious effect is seen as likely to have driven several of them to suicide. 'There's not much to do around here', says another local youngster, Rhys Davies, (quoted in Stephen, *Daily Mail*, 2008: 33) 'and so teenagers turn to alcohol and drugs and then once they get off their face they are liable to do anything'.

The above-mentioned article by Stephen (2008) offers a very interesting view of the local suicide phenomenon, firstly, because it partly deviates from the *Mail*-favourite 'Internet Suicide' frame, and secondly, because its author is already familiar with the Bridgend context. In particular, Stephen (*Daily Mail*, 2008), who actually grew up in Bridgend, portrays a nostalgic image of her adolescent years there, which she then juxtaposes to the present state of the town. Although her first impression is that the local schooling and shopping facilities have improved beyond all recognition, she soon realises that Bridgend's younger generation of today seems to have regrettably lost the innocence it used to possess back in her teenage days: teenage mothers pushing prams down the street; pubs constantly packed with 15-year-old binge drinkers; a local attraction, Coity Castle, left littered with beer bottles and condoms. Limited access to higher education, soaring unemployment and inadequate support by the local council are regarded as some of the factors related to local youngsters' dependence from drugs and especially, alcohol. Nonetheless, as far as suicides are concerned, Stephen (*Daily Mail*, 2008), along with everyone else, admits being completely in the dark as to why vulnerable individuals slip more easily through the safety net lately and, most importantly, why their deaths centre around Bridgend.

Furthermore, despite the tendency of both journalists and relatives to idealise the victims, the inquests following their deaths actually indicate they were going through a rather problematic adolescence. Several of the victims had consumed an excessive

amount of alcohol, some even to the point of rendering it impossible for the coroner to reach a verdict as to whether they actually intended to take their lives or had no consciousness and control of their actions. For instance, 17-year-old Zachary Barnes was reportedly found dead after a 6-hour drinking session, during which he and his friends consumed 24 cans of beer (Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008d). At the same time, Thomas Davies' mother, Melanie (cited in Wark, *The Times*, 2008), underlines the noxious impact of alcohol and peer pressure on her son and reveals that he had had an ASBO and two custodial sentences for threatening behaviour or violence. She agrees that the dull Bridgend reality often pushes local youngsters towards joining gangs in search of some form of thrill, but denies that her son was a gang member. Meanwhile, Natasha Randall's boyfriend, Phil Underhill (cited in Jenkins, *Sunday Mirror*, 2008), expresses his concern as to whether the fear of being pregnant, which preoccupied 17-year-old Natasha a few days before her death, had, despite turning out to be groundless, anything to do with her decision to end it all. Finally, Neil Ellis (cited in North, *Sunday Express*, 2008b: 4), project manager of Bettws Boys and Girls Club near Bridgend, who also highlights the impact of the poor socio-economic conditions on local youngsters, maintains that the majority, if not all, of the Bridgend victims were regular users of a 'mind-blowing' drug called 'Northern Lights'. Referring to the alarming rise in skunk factories as well as the low cost and wide availability of this type of cannabis, Ellis points out the high risk posed by this powerful drug, known to render its users more vulnerable to depression and, consequently, to suicide.

3. Suicide as a form of sensation seeking

It is clear that, in the context of the LD sub-frame, the plunge of Bridgend teenagers into deviance is viewed as a reaction to their poor living conditions eventually leading to suicide. However, this process of self-destruction is occasionally not regarded as a type of 'retreatism' (Merton, 1938), i.e. a means to an end (specifically, to suicide), but as an end in itself. The end in this case is to transcend the uninteresting Bridgend reality; to experience intense moments of excitement and pleasure through the defiance of social norms; to explore the boundary between order and disorder (the ultimate and most seductive one being that between life and death). From this perspective, suicide along with other deviant practices mentioned earlier can be perceived as voluntary risk-taking activities revolving around the thrill of transgression. Ortin et al.'s (2012) view of suicide as a form of sensation seeking among adolescents as well as the works of theorists

looking into the foreground of deviance like Lyng (1990), Patterson and Pegg (1999), Presdee (2000), Hayward (2002) and Ferrell (2004) are central here. In late modern societies and especially in less affluent areas like Bridgend, suicide comes to be seen as a form of 'edgework': an expressive act through which the individual does not necessarily intend to die but to test the boundaries between life and death; to defy the established order including the restrictions posed to his/her aspirations by the Bridgend reality; to fight the hyper-banality of his/her existence and restore some kind of meaning and control in his/her otherwise monotonous life. Local youngsters are portrayed as lingering purposelessly on the streets of Bridgend, being literally 'bored to death' in this small town and resorting to drugs, alcohol and even suicide while desperately looking for a source of excitement. This image is prominent in several of the articles under study (Gordon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008; Hughes, *The Independent*, 2008b; Lazzeri, *The Sun*, 2008; Stephen, *Daily Mail*, 2008; see also Figure 7.11).

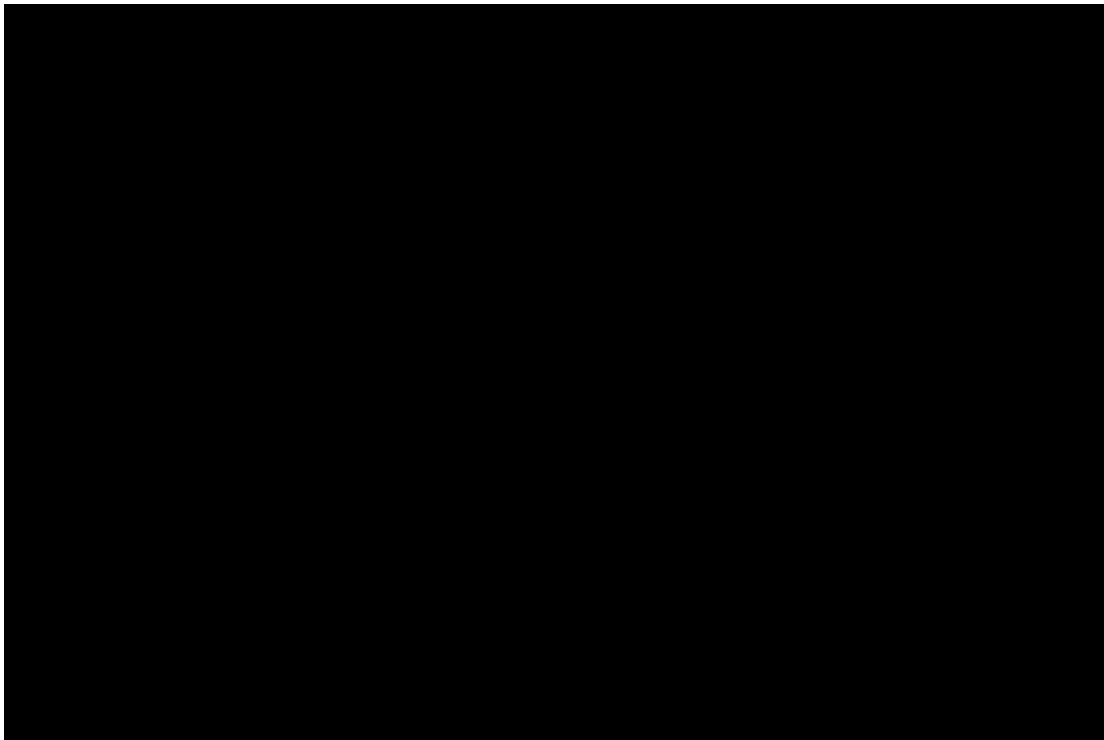


Figure 7.11: *The Daily Telegraph*, January 24, 2008: 20

The perception of suicide as a form of sensation seeking and transcendence is, once again, primarily based on the accounts of locals. Adam Jones' father, Colin (cited in Peake, *The Sun*, 2008) and Rick Tovey (cited in Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008d), who was friends with Zachary Barnes, both regard the Bridgend suicides as a product of the feelings of ennui and aimlessness felt by many young people in the area. They blame the local council for failing to adequately support the latter through youth clubs and generally

provide them with an incentive so as to take them off the streets. At the same time, commenting on the possible motives behind Natasha Randall's suicide, 17-year-old Aaron (quoted in Brewis, *The Sunday Times*, 2008: 10) states that '[p]erhaps she just got bored', suggesting that the answer to the alleged 'Bridgend riddle' may be simpler than one would imagine. In a similar fashion, 16-year-old Danielle (quoted in Brewis, *The Sunday Times*, 2008: 10)/Catrin (quoted in North, *Daily Mirror*, 2008a: 5)¹⁰ confirms Bridgend youth's deviant status and deems suicide the last bastion for them to conquer: 'Kids round here have been drinking, smoking dope, taking ecstasy and having sex since they were 13 or 14', she says. 'By the time they reach my age they've done everything. The combination of booze, drugs and the boredom of living around here screws young people up so much that they think killing themselves will be exciting'.

This construction of suicide as an 'edgework' activity through which Bridgend youngsters seek excitement and fight boredom relates to Professor Fairbairn's (cited in Johnston, *Sunday Express*, 2008a: 10) view that the local suicide victims did not necessarily seek to die, but only to experience death for a little while. He talks about the 'high' one may experience after the death of a friend or acquaintance, but also about how this is reinforced through the use of drugs or alcohol. The seduction of the suicidal act and youngsters' inability to perceive the irreversible consequences of it have already been considered with respect to the 'Copycat' sub-frame in Chapter Six. Nonetheless, in the context of LD, the issues in question are mainly associated with the socio-economic conditions of Bridgend rather than the victims' alleged desire to 'copy' others. Young people and especially males are generally seen as having an 'abiding sense of their own immortality' (Lyng, 1990: 872) and thus, as likely to engage in 'edgework' anytime. However, as indicated in the statements quoted in the preceding paragraph, the exploration of the 'edge' is in the Bridgend case deeply embedded in the depressing reality of that particular region and correlated to the pre-existing feelings of despair and boredom of local youth. In that sense, even if Bridgend youngsters do not actually want to die, they are keener to take high risks, simply because they think that, either way, they do not have much to lose. It is therefore questionable whether the same individuals would find the attempt of suicide as seductive and the consequent thrill as high outside the Bridgend context.

¹⁰ The same statement appearing in both newspapers, but attributed to different people.

4. Assessing the validity of the 'Local Deprivation' sub-frame



Figure 7.12: *The Observer*, March 1, 2009: 6-7



Figure 7.13: *The Observer*, March 1, 2009: 6

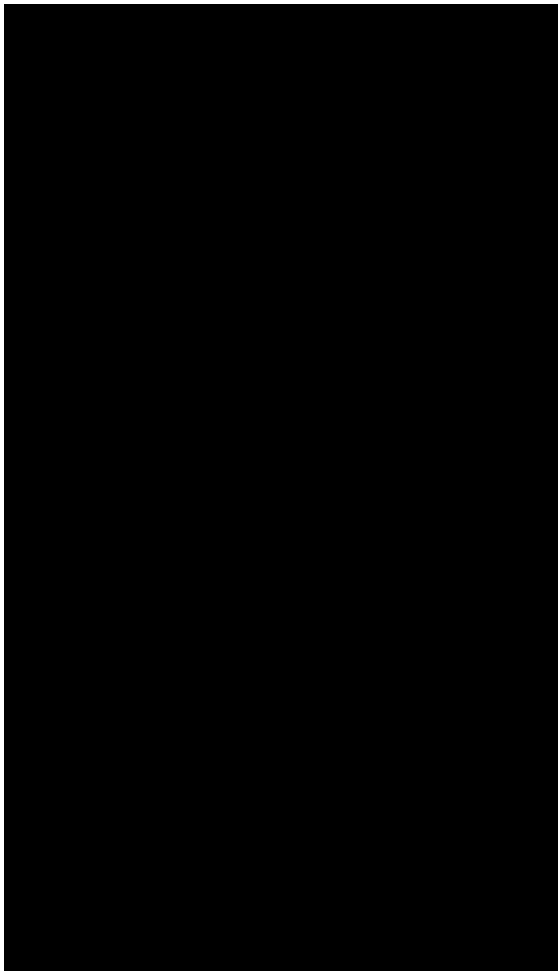


Figure 7.14: *The Observer*, March 1, 2009: 6

A. An average British town?: After the closure of the South Wales coal mines in the 1980s, the economy of Bridgend went downhill and this inevitably increased the levels of poverty and unemployment in the area (Evans, 2000). However, even if the assumption that these problems are still present nowadays is true, as the articles in support of the LD sub-frame suggest, this does not necessarily mean that living in Bridgend is so unbearable for young people that they prefer killing themselves instead. So, the question is: how accurate is the media construction of Bridgend as a 'deprived town'? Is there actually something extraordinary about Bridgend that drives its youth to suicide? To what extent do its economic and other social problems differ from those of any other working-class British town?

Answering these questions inevitably requires going back to the discussion around the level of sensational reporting in the Bridgend case. In her article for *The Observer*, Carole Cadwalladr (2009) draws a line between the hopeless town of the media and the

one she grew up in, rejecting the claim that Bridgend *per se* is responsible for the suicides. She tries to set the record straight and highlight the positive aspects of Bridgend community life: the accompanying visuals show young people relaxing and enjoying themselves on the near beach of Porthcawl or playing ball under the (for once) cloudless local sky (Figures 7.12 and 7.13); youth club leaders talking about the support they provide to local teenagers; an inset map and its legend, claiming to reveal ‘the *real* Bridgend’ (my emphasis) and providing information on its location, population and industry, which apparently confirms its status as ‘an ordinary place’ (Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, 2009: 6; see also Figure 7.14). In an attempt to refute the view of Bridgend as a ‘cursed town’, Cadwalladr (2009: 6) states:

‘There’s a whole other mythical Bridgend out there now: a town so depressed, so depressing, it drives people to their deaths. The Bridgend I know is the kind of town you find up and down the country: not poor, not rich, just average, encircled by the same out-of-town shopping centres with the same chain stores and garages and industrial estates you find everywhere else.’

Moreover, Yeoman and de Bruxelles (*The Times*, 2008b) note that Bridgend’s economy is not as withering as it is often assumed to be: unemployment may indeed be relatively high, but the same is valid for the whole of the Welsh Valleys region. Besides, they argue, Bridgend’s rate is below the national average. At the same time, PCC Commissioner Eve Salomon contends that the links between deprivation and youth suicides are clearly present in, yet not limited to, the Bridgend context:

‘There are many pockets of huge social deprivation in the UK that particularly affect young people. [...] Bridgend was known as a really ‘deadbeat’ part of the country. ‘Nothing happens in Bridgend’ is what people would say and I heard quite a few teenagers saying at the time of the Bridgend suicides things along the lines of ‘Oh my God! If I lived in Bridgend, I’d want to kill myself too!’ There is nothing to do in Bridgend. And I think there are many, many parts of the country where it is dire being a teenager. Absolutely dire!’

(Eve Salomon, interviewed on June 9, 2010)

Likewise, commenting on whether the Bridgend suicides should be mainly considered a product of local deprivation, journalist Zack Newmark states:

‘Yes, definitely. Absolutely. That is not to say also that everybody in Bridgend has an alcohol problem or [...] a problem with their job, because that is simply not true. It

seemed to me like a very average town. There didn't seem to be anything spectacular about Bridgend, one way or the other, to me.'

(Zach Newmark, interviewed on June 18, 2010)

Contrary to these 'deprived but ordinary' perspectives, a local reporter, Kerry-Lynne Doyle (quoted in Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, 2009: 7), points out that there is also a positive, even affluent, side of Bridgend, which, however, was downplayed in the press:

'I didn't think Bridgend even existed in *Daily Mail*-land. And then there it was: a very poor, working-class, down-at heel, everybody's-unemployed sort of place. Whereas actually it's a very diverse area – Charlotte Church and Gavin Henson live just down the road, and some of the families were middle-class, two-jobs, 2,2-children types. But it wasn't portrayed like that at all. I don't know why. But it was made to seem different, other'.

In a similar fashion, social psychologist Arthur Cassidy, who visited Bridgend back in 2008 offering his help to the local authorities, refers to the unjustified media demonisation of Bridgend and underlines the randomness of the geographical clustering of suicides:

'Several of these young people, lived in a very prosperous part of Bridgend, but that was never actually reported. [...] The picture I got overall was that it was just a normal Welsh town, fairly prosperous, [...] where a number of suicides were clustering. [...] There is nothing particular about Bridgend, as it's like any other part of the UK. What happens is that, when a clustering takes place, this gathers momentum. It starts with one person normally and [...] the cluster moves around like a jelly fish moving around the seabed: it moves to one place and it settles; then, it moves to another place and it settles. It's nothing particular about the geographical or the demographic nature of the area, as far as we know. It seems to be that clusters can start geographically anywhere.'

(Arthur Cassidy, interviewed on May 13, 2010)

Even though all the preceding arguments claim to present an alternative, less sensational account of the Bridgend phenomenon, acknowledging the complexity of the issues involved, this does not automatically render them more accurate. Focusing on the rebuttal of the LD sub-frame, the claims-makers in question are as uncertain about the level of deprivation's actual contribution to the local suicide problem as its proponents, if not more. In order to assess the validity of the arguments made by either side, a consultation of official Bridgend-related statistics is required.

B. Bridgend of the press vs. Bridgend of statistics: It has already been argued that, despite being yet another social construction and, thus, of questionable accuracy in objectivist terms, statistical evidence can offer a glimpse of the otherwise elusive objective reality. As Best (2001: 19) points out, when it comes to the use of such evidence by the media, statistics tend to be presented as ‘little nuggets of truth’, when they are, in fact, part of a well-planned rhetoric. This is a rhetoric which often takes out of their context and emphasises a few striking numbers in order to convince the public about the existence or the extent of a social problem. As far as the national press coverage of Bridgend is concerned, it is suggested that the town has the second highest claimant count in Wales (Irwin, *The Guardian*, 2008); that it has been identified as a binge drinking hotspot by the police (Stephen, *Daily Mail*, 2008); that it has a high unemployment rate, which, however, is below the Welsh average (Yeoman and de Bruxelles, *The Times*, 2008b); generally, that its high level of deprivation leads local youngsters to suicide. Such claims encourage readers to make objectivist assumptions about the strains Bridgend residents’ are under, without giving them the whole picture. Tracing them back to their original sources, wherever possible, is, thus, imperative in order to better understand the framing process, particularly, how journalists made use of the data available to them in the wake of the suicides to support their portrayal of Bridgend as a ‘cursed town’.

First of all, in order to assess the deprivation level of Bridgend at the time when the numerous local suicides were first identified as a problem in the national press (January 2008), a closer look at the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) report of 2008 is necessary (WAG, 2008a). This looks at eight different aspects of deprivation (income, employment, health, education, housing, access to services, environment and community safety) across the 1,896 Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs)¹¹ of Wales. The full report’s section dedicated to Bridgend (WAG, 2008b: 64) indicates that four of its LSOAs [Caerau (Bridgend) 1 and 2, Cornelly 4 and Bettws (Bridgend), coloured red in the map of Figure 7.15] are in the most deprived 10% LSOAs in Wales. At the same time, 56% of Bridgend’s LSOAs are more deprived than the Welsh average, especially in the domains of income, employment, health and education.

¹¹ LSOAs constitute the smallest units in statistical geography of about 1,500 people each. The local authority of Bridgend consists of 85 of them (WAG, 2008a, 2008b).

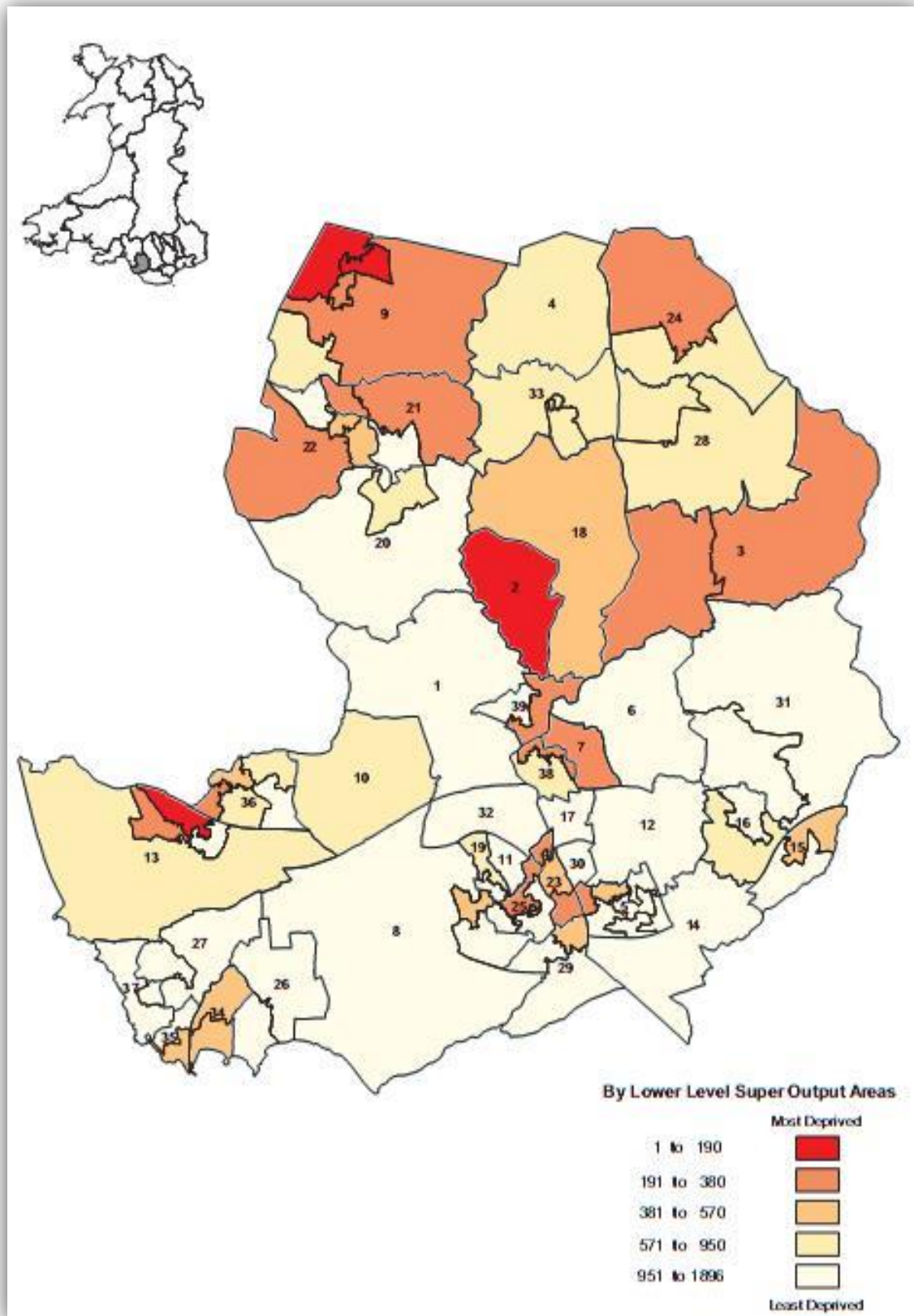


Figure 7.15: Overall Index of Multiple Deprivation: Bridgend, 2008: 63.

Figure 7.16:
Bridgend's annual unemployment rate in comparison to the Welsh and the UK average
(Source: WAG, n.d.a)

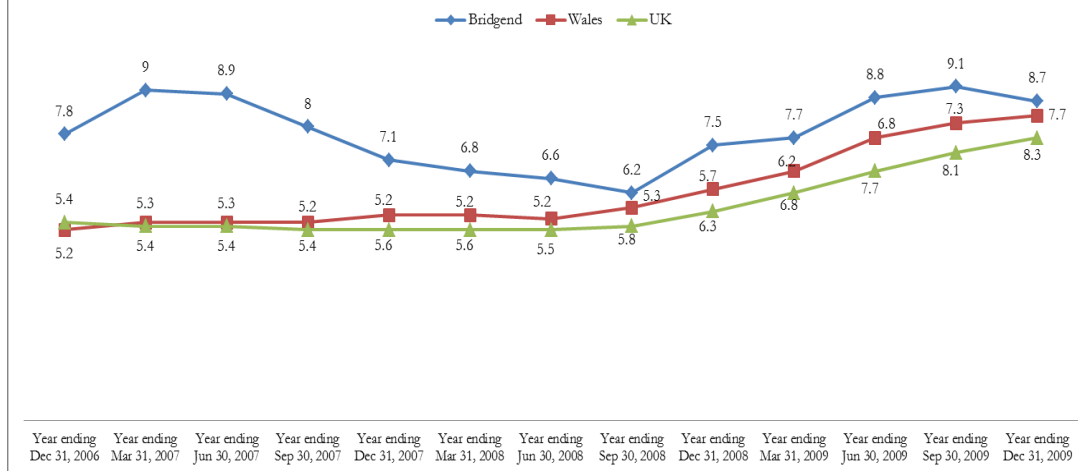


Figure 7.17:
Bridgend's workless households rate for 16 to 64-year-olds in comparison to the Welsh and the UK average
(Source: WAG, n.d.b)

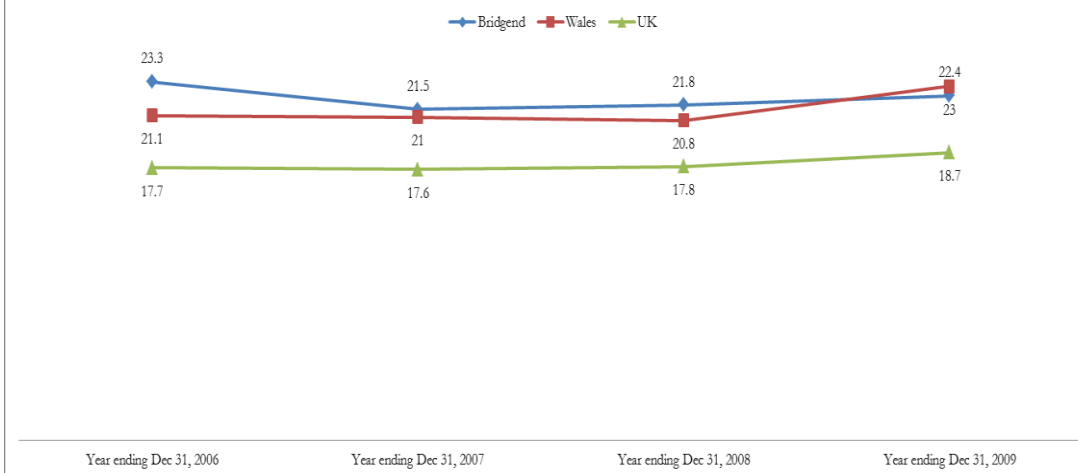
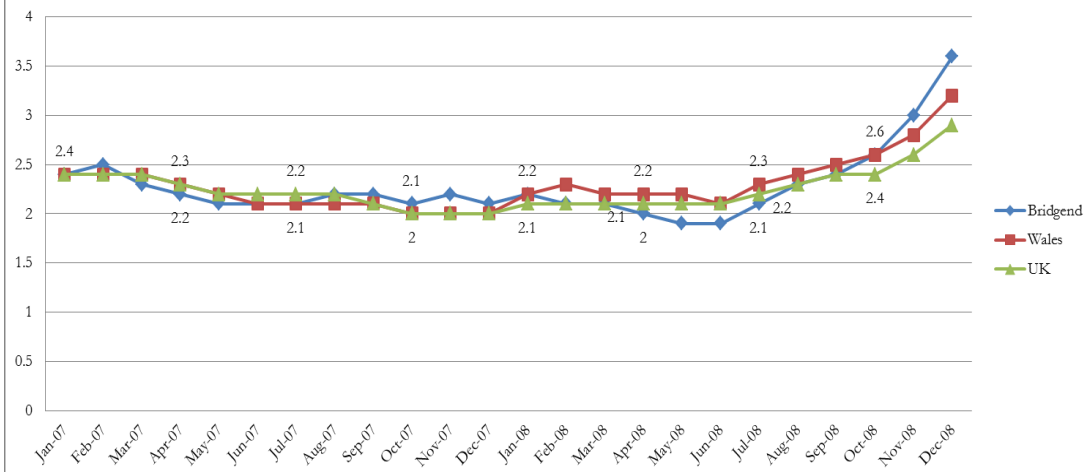
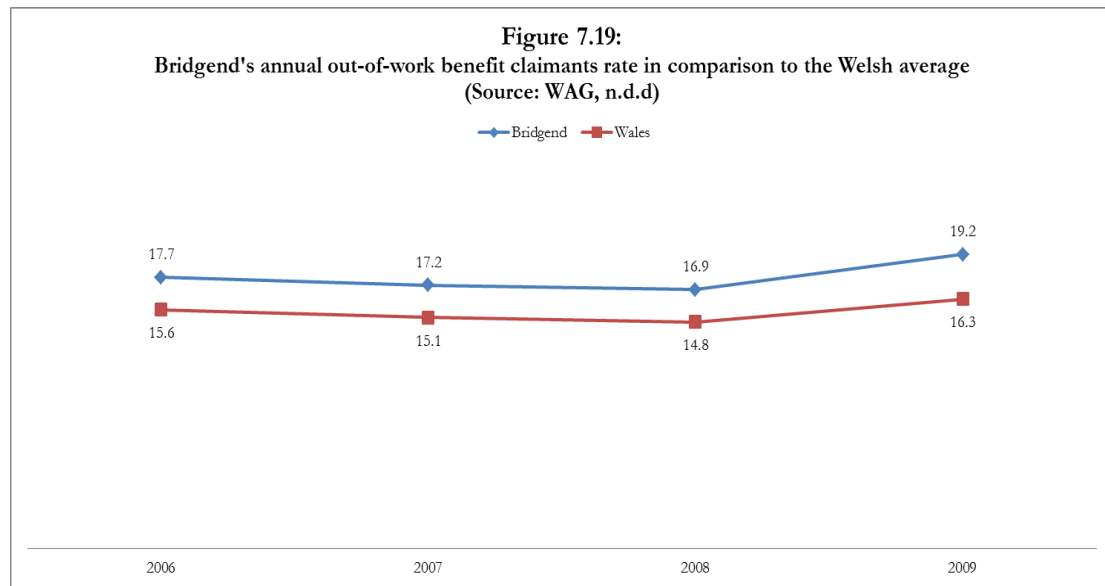


Figure 7.18:
Bridgend's monthly claimant count rate in comparison to the Welsh and the UK average
(Source: WAG, n.d.c)





Furthermore, the data available on the website *StatsWales*, held by the WAG (n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c, n.d.d), also offer an insight into the evolution of Bridgend's economy and labour market over time and allow a comparison to other Welsh local authorities. As far as unemployment is concerned, in the years of interest (2007-2009), Bridgend's annual rate is constantly above the Welsh and the UK average (Figure 7.16). In April 2007, Bridgend has the second highest rate (9%) in Wales (Welsh average: 5,4%) after Merthyr Tydfil (10%). In the following months, this rate starts to decrease, reaching a low (6,2%) in October 2008, only to start increasing again the months after. Regarding workless households, that is, households where no adult between 16 and 64-years-old is in work, the difference between Bridgend's and the Welsh average rate in 2007 is almost negligible (21,5% and 21,0% respectively), but both these rates are considerably higher than the UK average (17,6%) [(Figure 7.17)]. Moreover, Bridgend's monthly claimant count rate in January 2008 is 2,2%, that is, the same as the Welsh (2,2%) and only slightly higher than the UK one (2,1%) [(Figure 7.18)]. At the same time, its annual rate for out-of-work benefit claimants also exceeds the national average in 2007 (17,2% and 15,1% respectively) [(Figure 7.19)], but there are also a number of other local authorities, whose rate is even higher than that of Bridgend (such as Neath Port Talbot, Merthyr Tydfil, Caerphilly and others).

Finally, the implications of substance abuse, especially in relation to young people, are discussed by the local authorities in a number of official reports (see *Safer Bridgend*, 2007, 2009). Concern centres primarily on alcohol, which, due to its popularity amongst the young, is considered to be posing a greater risk than drugs, although the risks

deriving from the strong drug market of the Bridgend County are also acknowledged. Bridgend reportedly has the fourth highest rate for binge drinking in Wales (21,7% of over 16-year-olds admit to binge drinking at least once the week before) [(Hughes and Williams, 2008, cited in Safer Bridgend, 2009)]. Drug and alcohol misuse are linked to

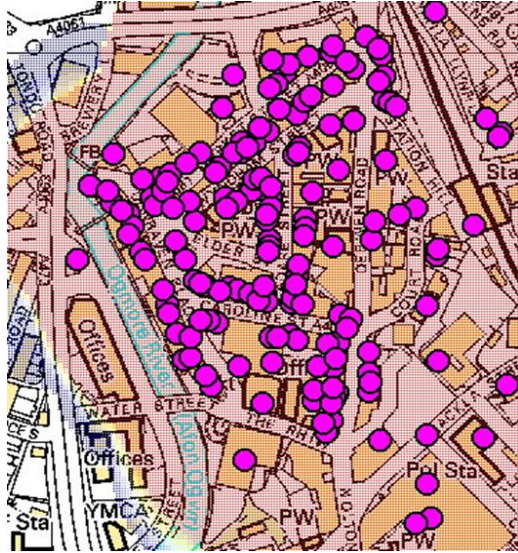


Figure 7.20: Distribution of incidents and crimes across Bridgend's town centre (Bridgend County Borough Council, 2008: 12)

mental health problems and homelessness and seen as having a direct impact on community life. Particularly, different forms of misbehaviour often take place in and around licensed premises and are attributed to youngsters having consumed an excessive amount of alcohol. As a result, Bridgend's town centre becomes a 'hot-spot' area presenting a disproportionate amount of public nuisance and disorder, anti-social behaviour and crime compared to the rest of the borough (Safer Bridgend, 2007). In fact, the range and frequency of

these different forms of violence is such that the local council has found it impossible to identify distinct 'hot-spots' within the town centre and has concluded that the entire town centre area constitutes a 'hot-spot' in itself (Bridgend County Borough Council, 2008; see Figure 7.20).

Taking all the aforementioned information into account, it becomes evident that both the town and the County of Bridgend have their own share of deprivation, which is often above the Welsh and the UK average. Low income, unemployment, drug and alcohol problems constitute an inevitable part of the Bridgend reality. Of course, this is not to say that Bridgend is the most deprived area of Wales, nor to defend its occasional construction by journalists as a wasteland. It is clear that Bridgend's labour market may not be the strongest in Wales, but it is not the weakest one either. Other local authorities (such as Merthyr Tydfil or Rhondda, Cynon and Taff) face as serious economic problems as Bridgend, if not worse, without their equally high suicide rate receiving the same amount of media attention as that of Bridgend. It is true that, on some occasions and especially after the expansion of police investigation to nine more hangings in the surrounding valleys (February 13, 2008), the suicide problem of other parts of South Wales also comes to the fore (see Davies, *The Observer*, 2008). However, this is mostly in

order to increase the dramatic value of the Bridgend story, since it is only due to their geographical proximity and their potential links to Bridgend that these additional suicide cases reach the threshold of newsworthiness.

Nonetheless, even if journalists at times attempt to increase the appeal of the story by over-emphasising the tragic impact of the suicides on the local community and by presenting Bridgend as a ‘cursed place’, their claims that there is a ‘deprivation’ aspect to the problem are not totally unjustified. As indicated by statistical evidence, local youngsters are often unemployed or with limited career prospects, rowdy, homeless, addicted to drugs and alcohol and generally have to put up with a number of local problems on an everyday basis. Although other parts of Wales are reportedly more deprived than Bridgend, this does not change the fact that the conditions which these young people live in are far from ideal. Consequently, even if there is nothing extraordinary about Bridgend, no Internet cult, no suicide pact or ‘dark secret’ to discover, its ordinariness coincides with that of other working-class towns in the Welsh valleys, whose level of deprivation tends to be above that of the average British town.

5. From Bridgend to the Bridgend generation

A. The ‘Social Breakdown’ sub-frame: Journalists’ attempts to present the Bridgend case as the ‘tip of the iceberg’, already discussed in relation to their constant search for online or offline links between the victims (Chapters Five and Six), are also evident in the BB frame. In this case, the local suicide phenomenon is considered a signal of a deeper social malaise which goes beyond the specific geographical context, but also beyond the Internet. Particularly, it is seen as a failure of society and its institutions to provide contemporary youth with a safe and meaningful existence, thereby driving them to suicide. That is not to say that the corresponding ‘Social Breakdown’ (SB) sub-frame overlooks local deprivation or the impact of technology on youngsters, but that it is not limited to these issues, since, as will be made clear in this section, it associates them with various other aspects of ‘Broken Britain’.

SB first appears in the original news reports of the *Mail* and the *Mirror*, though not as their primary point of focus (Table 7.D). In the entire Bridgend coverage, it features in 54 of the sample articles and what is remarkable is that it is not rebutted in any of them (Figure 7.21). This shows that, despite its limited prominence, the relevant SB discourse is still very potent. It could also be deemed a reflection of journalists’ uncertainty about the cause(s) of the Bridgend problem, which makes them reluctant to categorically reject its view as a result of a society in decline. Out of the preceding 54 articles, only 11

prioritise this SB perspective (Table 7.E). 9 out of these 11 articles are published in right-wing newspapers¹².

Table 7.D:
First appearance of the SB sub-frame

▪ 'The lethal 'glamour' factor' (<i>The Times</i> , Times2, January 25, 2008: 5)
▪ 'It just seems normal, fashionable almost...' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 24, 2008: 20)
▪ 'The passion plays of youth are often just wayward self-love' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , January 27, 2008: 29)
▪ 'Let's not tell our children there's a place called 'Suicide Town' (<i>The Observer</i> , January 27, 2008: 13)
▪ 'Beyond the digital divide lies a new world of intimacy' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 21, 2008: 33)
▪ 'When teenagers lose touch with reality' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 24, 2008: 43)
▪ 'Just upstairs, and horribly at risk' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , January 27, 2008: 42-43)
▪ 'The internet suicide cult?/They lived and died online' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 23, 2008: 1, 4-5)
▪ 'Wild child who surfed her way to suicide' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 23, 2008: 5)
▪ '400 Facebook friends, but who else did the web let into Laurent's life?' (<i>The Mail on Sunday</i> , July 6, 2008: 28)
▪ 'How many more of our children will succumb to the suicide cult?' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 25, 2008: 28-29)
▪ 'We must act on welfare reform' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 24, 2008: 26)
▪ 'We can't bring back hanging' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 24, 2008: 29)
▪ 'Modern Britain is so sickening' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 24, 2008: 84)
▪ 'Welsh school's suicide lessons' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 27, 2008: 29)
▪ 'Suicide town' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 23, 2008: 19)

Figure 7.21:
The presence of the SB sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles



¹² Right-wing average: 9 (articles where SB most prominent) / 5 (number of right-wing newspapers in sample) = 1.8.

Left-wing average: 2 (articles where SB most prominent) / 3 (number of left-wing newspapers in sample) = approx.0.7.

See also Footnote 7 in Chapter Five.

Table 7.E:
Sample articles in which SB is most prominent

▪ [‘If we think that anything goes, Eduardo songs are fair game’] * (<i>The Times</i>, The Game, March 3, 2008: 6) ▪ ‘Enough youth suicides to fill a school’ (<i>The Times</i>, March 19, 2008: 37)
* Incidental reference to Bridgend-related jokes, which are considered a signal of a deeper social malaise.
▪ ‘What hope can we offer suicidal teenagers?’ (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, February 20, 2008: 21)
▪ ‘Why are children so unhappy?’ (<i>The Independent</i>, March 11, 2008: 1-2)
▪ ‘A public concern’ (<i>Daily Mail</i>, February 21, 2008: 14) ▪ ‘Is today’s younger generation mollycoddled?’ (<i>Daily Mail</i>, February 26, 2008: 58)
▪ ‘We must act on welfare reform’ (<i>Sunday Express</i>, February 24, 2008: 26) ▪ ‘Modern Britain is so sickening’ (<i>Sunday Express</i>, February 24, 2008: 84)
▪ ‘Kid stress fear’ (<i>The Sun</i>, March 19, 2008: 2) ▪ ‘Sent to the front’ ** (<i>The Sun</i>, December 31, 2008: 28-29)
** The Bridgend case presented within a broader ‘Broken Britain’ context.
▪ ‘Bridgend boy hangs after boozing binge’ (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, March 1, 2008: 21)

B. Pursuing the cultural goal of instant fame at all costs: The Bridgend story owes a large part of its appeal to its generational dimension, building on adult, especially parental, fears about the young and on their perception as innocent and in need of protection. From the very beginning, the alleged desire of the victims to have a memorial website of their own is seen as a likely cause of the Bridgend suicides, something which consequently transfers the blame from the victims themselves to the Internet medium and allows further concerns about the risks of cyberspace to be expressed (see Chapter Five). However, in ‘Breakdown Britain’ (BB), this blame is, at least partly, transferred back to the deceased and suicide comes to be seen as the reckless act of a troubled youth, which seems to have no appreciation of the gift of life. Unlike ‘Internet Suicide’ (IS), BB and specifically ‘Social Breakdown’ (SB) does not favour a deterministic view of the problem, but underlines the agency of the Bridgend generation. Its members are portrayed as knowledgeable, obsessive users of technology, who value instant fame at all costs, even if that involves taking their own lives to acquire it (McCartney, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008).

As far as this allure of celebrity is concerned, SB bears ties to the ‘Cultures of Death’ (CD) sub-frame of ‘Suicide Contagion’ (SC). In this case, however, concern

centres on the potential glamorisation not of suicide and self-harm, but on that of glamour and celebrity per se. In other words, in the context of SB, premature death is not an end in itself, but a means to attain the cultural goal of success; a goal which is, according to Parnaby and Sacco (2004), nowadays no longer associated as much with the acquisition of financial prosperity as with that of instant fame. '[T]hrough death, you might become a celebrity – and our culture tells [teenagers] that's the only thing worth being', says Bel Mooney (*Daily Mail*, 2008: 14), pointing out that the roots of the Bridgend phenomenon go far beyond Bridgend itself. 'Can *our kids* really be dying for fame?', wonders Paul Routledge (2008: 31; my emphasis) in the title of his *Daily Mirror* article, which considers apropos Bridgend, the glorification of ephemeral and gratuitous fame on YouTube or teen magazines and its pernicious effect on today's youth. In a similar fashion, Fairbairn (cited in Johnston, *Sunday Express*, 2008a) sees the Bridgend suicides as a result of living in a celebrity-obsessed culture and growing up watching shows like 'The X Factor', 'Big Brother' or 'The Only Way is Essex', which give young people the impression that anyone can become famous effortlessly and in no time.

From a strain theory perspective, it is evident that, in the context of this sub-frame, suicide becomes a form of what Merton (1938) defines as 'innovation', that is, the illegitimate alternative for those with limited or no access to the legitimate means of success. Just like all members of their generation, Bridgend teenagers have also grown up in a media-saturated world, where becoming famous is regarded as the ultimate accomplishment. The mundane reality of Bridgend is in direct contrast to the glossy reality of the media. In an attempt to cope with the consequent frustration, the young people of Bridgend may resort to the carnivalistic cultural space provided by the Internet (see Presdee, 2000). Their online activities in that case can be regarded not merely as an escape from their bleak and boring hometown nor just as hedonistic fun, but as a response to a wider problem involving the insecurity and anxiety young people experience in late modernity. Building on Winlow and Hall's (2006) argument, young people living in a capitalist society can only construct their personal identities and achieve social status within the limits set by the consumer economy. Their prospects of work, education, relationships, consumption and leisure are largely determined by the rules of the market and therefore rather narrow for those living in a relatively disadvantaged area like Bridgend. They may seek fame in the physical world and in social networking sites, but the difficulties they face in its pursuit often lead them to (inter-personal or intra-personal) violence. The more they consider themselves unlikely to achieve this cultural

goal otherwise, the more likely they are to end up viewing suicide as the only way to do so (Routledge, *Daily Mirror*, 2008).

The links between the 'Local Deprivation' (LD) and 'Social Breakdown' (SB) sub-frames, underlining the potential impact of poor socio-economic conditions on youth's aspirations (Patterson and Pegg, 1999; Bernburg et al., 2009) are manifest here. 'A young person in a deprived area sees [reality TV] and it's psychologically destructive', argues author Loren Coleman (cited in Brewis, *The Sunday Times*, 2008: 10). 'They think: [...] [h]ow can I be a celebrity? Well, if I don't get onto Big Brother, an alternative is death'. Consequently, the desire to become famous may indeed constitute a common feature amongst all young people growing up in a celebrity-loving culture (Parnaby and Sacco, 2004), yet the strain experienced by those living in disadvantaged areas like Bridgend to materialise this goal is far greater. They are therefore the ones most likely to resort to desperate solutions (suicide included) in their pursuit of fame, without first thinking through the repercussions of their actions.

In terms of its construction of suicide as a means to acquire celebrity, SB is an extension of the 'Virtual Immortality' (VI) sub-frame of 'Internet Suicide' (IS), since it is frequently linked to and supported by the abundance of messages left in memorial sites with every new name added to the list of victims (Emerson, *Daily Mail*, 2008; Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008a). However, as the suicides keep coming and the subsequent inquests reveal that many of the victims were going through a troubled adolescence involving alcohol, drugs and underage sex (Bonnici, *Daily Express*, 2008c), the social ramifications of the South Wales deaths are reconsidered. The introduction of a generational dimension to the problem suggests that Bridgend youngsters' plunge into deviance and the consequent suicides are not solely a product of local deprivation, nor just of celebrity culture, but an indication of modern society failing people of their generation on multiple levels.

C. Product of a 'sickening' modern reality: Moving beyond the pursuit of instant fame, SB presents the Bridgend case as a typical example of how unhappy contemporary youngsters are with their existence. Rebutting the South Wales police claims that the media are to blame, the *Daily Mail's* editorial of February 21, 2008 considers the local suicides a major issue of public concern, which can in no way be hushed up and which we all have a moral responsibility to tackle as soon as possible. That is because, according to the *Mail*, the problem is hardly limited to Bridgend, but demonstrates the increasing

disenchantment of British youth with contemporary society. Suicide is, therefore, constructed as an ultimately expressive act. It is the act through which these young people express their disappointment and reject in the most explicit and tragic way possible the lives they are expected to live. This view goes, once again, back to Merton's (1938) concept of 'retreatism', but also echoes Eckersley's (1995) study on the effect of modernisation on youth's well-being. The same perspective is reflected in the prize letter of the week appearing in the *Sunday Express* of February 24, 2008, whose author (Hassall, 2008: 84) attributes the suicides to the 'sickening' reality of modern Britain and wonders: 'Do we need any explanation for the tragedy of young suicide victims in the Bridgend area? Contemplate the world in which adolescents are growing up and you won't be surprised that some wish to take their own lives'.

Through their construction as a result of a more widespread social decline, the Bridgend deaths are associated with a number of other issues of concern ranging from family and community breakdown to the existing consumerist culture and from the risks of secularism to the failure of the current educational system as well as that of the welfare state. These issues will be discussed in the following sub-sections:

C. I. Decline of traditional institutions: The role of informal social control, exercised by traditional institutions like the family, the community and the church, in suicide prevention is pointed out at a very early stage of the Bridgend coverage. In her *Times* article of January 25, 2008, Midgley (2008) stresses that the decline in religious observance and the disintegration of close-knit communities in the post-19th century era have relaxed the moral inhibitions around dying by one's own hand, thus leading to an increase in suicide occurrence. At the same time, Marsh (*The Times*, 2008) notes an alarming worldwide rise in suicide rates after 1971, which she links to social factors like the frustration caused by the blurring of traditional gender roles, the lack of role models and, generally, parents' lack of involvement in their children's lives. Likewise, social psychologist Arthur Cassidy explains how vulnerable youngsters are left at the mercy of their suicidal feelings, since neither their broken families nor the existing mental health services (see Chapter Eight) are in a position to provide them with adequate psychological support:

'If I bring young people to hospital here through the night, they are discharged the following day, back to the families. They don't have a nuclear family anymore, do they? Not too many. They are home with their mum, she's got a boyfriend or she's got

boyfriends...Back in that situation or they are back with their mates. There is no properly structured psychological support for them.'

(Arthur Cassidy, interviewed on May 13, 2010)

Even those clearly considering the Internet responsible for the Bridgend deaths at times also acknowledge that the teenage obsession with this new medium is the way through which contemporary youth attempt to counterbalance the lack of human contact from their everyday lives: Mooney (*Daily Mail*, 2008) refers to the alienation between family members, who may apparently live in the same physical space, but end up barely knowing each other, since they hardly discuss their problems and do not even share a meal together, unless it is in front of the TV or the computer screen. In an analogous fashion, psychologist Aric Sigman (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008) maintains that today's adolescents feel lonelier than ever and turn to cyberspace in search of a substitute for the intimacy that has been lost from their lives, without always realising the risks of online social interaction.

C. II. Educational failure and materialism: The view of the Bridgend deaths as symptomatic of the unease felt by today's youngsters is also prominent in the press coverage of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers' (ATL) annual conference of March 2008 (Freen, *The Times*, 2008; Garner, *The Independent*, 2008; Wooding, *The Sun*, 2008a). Particularly, the Bridgend issue is brought up at the conference in the context of a broader discussion on the social factors affecting children's well-being and consequently, their school performance. As pointed out by several speakers at the conference and also by a number of official reports (Primary Review, 2007; The Children's Society, 2006, 2007; UNICEF, 2007) cited in the news articles in question, the unprecedented levels of strain placed on children nowadays cause an 'epidemic of anxiety' (Garner, *The Independent*, 2008: 2), which practically deprives them of a carefree childhood and renders them more vulnerable to self-harm and suicide. The UK children are overall considered to be the unhappiest in the Western world. The roots of this unhappiness are traced back to the flaws of the existing education system, which does not tolerate failure and perpetuates social inequality. Family breakdown and the individualistic, materialistic and celebrity-glorifying culture these children grow up in are, once again, identified as additional contributory factors.

Aside from the ATL conference, readers like Ferrie (2008) and Revah (2008), whose letters appear in the corresponding section of the *Daily Mail*, also assess the

potential links between Western economic materialism and the Bridgend deaths. On the one hand, Ferrie (2008) acknowledges the existing consumerist culture, but sees young people as active agents within it rather than victims of it. He rejects the view that youth life has become tougher over the last few decades and accuses the younger generation of not appreciating enough the amenities they are provided with and of being ‘mollycoddled’. ‘They seem to know the *price* of everything but the *value* of nothing’, he concludes (Ferrie, *Daily Mail*, 2008: 58; my emphasis). On the other hand, Revah (*Daily Mail*, 2008) is much more sympathetic to the difficulties faced by modern youngsters. According to her, Bridgend-like phenomena are a product of adolescent alienation, which is, in its turn, a product of the existing economic system; a system promoting greed and creating fictitious needs, which, unless met, lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. Using a biblical metaphor precisely to underline youth’s vulnerable position within the existing ‘I consume, therefore, I am’ culture, she argues that the teenagers who took their lives in South Wales serve as ‘the sacrificial lambs in a modern amorality tale’ (Revah, *Daily Mail*, 2008: 58).

C. III. Permissiveness and the failure of the welfare state: The preceding perception of modern life as an ‘amorality tale’ (Revah, *Daily Mail*, 2008: 58) occasionally



Figure 7.22: *Daily Mirror*, March 1, 2008: 21

extends beyond consumerism to the general ramifications of living in an ‘anything goes’ society. The *Daily Mirror* sees the Bridgend coroner’s verdict that alcohol might have been responsible for Zachary Barnes’ suicide as an opportunity to underline the detrimental effect of binge drinking on young people (Smith Richard, 2008d: 21). As shown in Figure 7.22, this verdict is reported under the banner ‘Can it! Stop kids boozing’ and in the context of the *Mirror*’s campaign against underage drinking. At the same time, debating the acceptability of vulgar jokes around the Bridgend suicides and other equally sensitive

issues, a *Times* article (No author, 2008d: 6) argues that ‘in the end we get the jokes [...] we deserve’. In that way, making fun of and trivialising the seriousness of such problems

is regarded as yet another signal of a society in moral decay. Moreover, the noxious influence of modern society's permissiveness on its vulnerable and weak-willed members is also pointed out, apropos the Bridgend deaths, by Hassall (2008: 84) in the *Sunday Express*. Cheating and provocatively rich footballers, celebrities addicted to drugs and alcohol, neglected and poorly compensated for their injuries war heroes, anorexic models, corrupt politicians and an extremely lenient criminal justice system are some of the elements composing the appalling, according to Hassall (*Sunday Express*, 2008), social landscape of our time. The variety of issues she raises suggests that this list of problems is indicative rather than exhaustive and that, although the existing social breakdown can only be perceived through a close examination of its individual aspects, it is, in fact, far more widespread and multi-dimensional than words could ever describe.

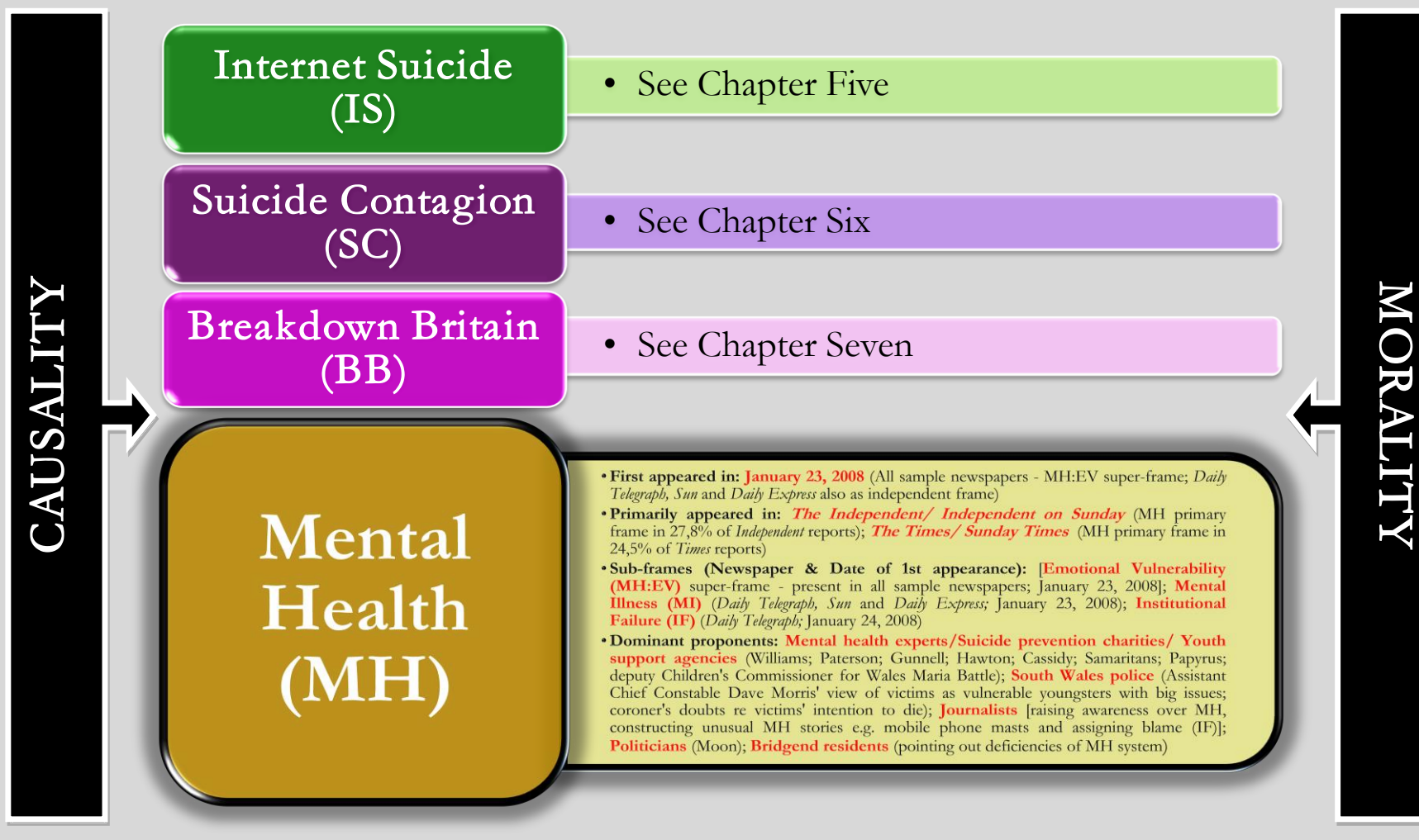
Finally, the view of the Bridgend suicides as evidence of a society which has clearly lost its way allows the *Sunday Express* to discuss the shortcomings of the welfare state. In its leader of February 24, 2008, Bartholomew (*Sunday Express*, 2008: 26) argues that the South Wales problem is hardly local, since it stems from the despair and purposelessness felt by today's 'lost' generation. He presents the latter as being largely alienated from society, lacking aspiration and self-respect and having a propensity for violence, be it inter-personal or intra-personal. This grim portrayal of modern youth is reminiscent of Murray's (2003: 127) 'undeserving', 'unrespectable', 'depraved', 'disreputable' or 'feckless' 'underclass'. The defining features of this underclass, that is, illegitimacy, criminality and reluctance to participate in the formal labour market, are seen as becoming more and more common amongst contemporary teenagers, encouraging a deviant and aimless lifestyle, which can, in extreme cases, lead to Bridgend-like phenomena. In relation to the various problems caused by the 'underclassification' of a large part of lower class youth, Bartholomew (*Sunday Express*, 2008) acknowledges the failure of post-war welfare policies. However, he sees youths themselves not as mere victims of these policies, but as having their own share of blame. Subscribing to Murray's (2003) right-wing perspective, he stresses that people, let alone young ones, should take back control of and, consequently, also responsibility for their lives. He deems the reform of the existing welfare system to be the most appropriate solution to the aforementioned problems. Maintaining a job, providing for one's own family and other life challenges bring self-respect and fulfilment, which an effortlessly-acquired and frequently undeserved welfare cheque clearly does not, Bartholomew (*Sunday Express*, 2008) concludes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the national press construction of the Bridgend suicides as a result of an alarming social malaise. As far as the Bridgend community is concerned, this malaise has been associated with the alleged socio-economic deprivation of the area. The poor living conditions of local youngsters are seen as having a detrimental effect on their aspirations, pushing them to different forms of deviance and, eventually, to suicide. The relevant claims have been assessed through the study of official regional statistics, which have confirmed that Bridgend is one of the most deprived areas of Wales. It has, therefore, been argued that, aside from the occasional sensationalist portrayal of Bridgend as a ‘cursed town’, journalists’ view of deprivation as a contributory factor to the local suicides is not totally unjustified. The expansion of concern from the strains placed on Bridgend youngsters to those placed on the ‘Bridgend generation’ in general has subsequently been documented. The perception of the Bridgend phenomenon as an expression of youth’s disenchantment with the ‘sickening’ modern reality has been discussed. As part of this discussion, a number of issues ranging from the existing celebrity-obsessed and consumerist culture to the decline of traditional institutions and from the flaws of the current education system to the failure of the welfare state have been addressed.

Each of the main frames analysed so far [‘Internet Suicide’ (IS), ‘Suicide Contagion’ (SC) and ‘Breakdown Britain’ (BB)] identifies a different element as the most likely cause of the local suicides, be it the Internet or other media, peer influence, deprivation or even a wider social breakdown. However, all three of them recognise that it was the noxious impact of such elements on mental well-being and the consequent emotional turmoil of the victims which eventually led them to suicide. Therefore, ‘Mental Health’ (MH) provides the basis on which the preceding frames mainly develop and operate, which is precisely why its analysis comes after theirs in order for its influence in shaping them to be more clearly delineated and understood. MH’s function as a super-frame overlaying the others, but also as an independent frame in the construction of the Bridgend problem will be examined in detail in Chapter Eight.

Figure 8.1
Main frame 4: Mental Health (MH)



CHAPTER EIGHT

A mental health issue?

‘People do not want to die, they want to end the pain they are experiencing. We need to reach out to them and explain that suicide is final, while the pain could well pass. What we have to tell them is that there are other ways to deal with your pain and encourage them to talk about it.’

(Programme manager of ‘Choose Life’¹³ Dougie Paterson, stressing the mental health ramifications of Bridgend-like phenomena, quoted in No author, *Daily Mail*, February 21, 2008e: 9)

‘As far as I’m concerned, [...] the NHS murdered my son by not giving him the help he needed in the first place. Why didn’t the GP implement counselling when he first went to her? Why didn’t they take him seriously?’

(Tracy Roberts, criticising the existing mental health system for leaving depressed individuals like her son, Anthony Martin, a prey to their suicidal thoughts, quoted in Caesar, *The Sunday Times magazine*, May 25, 2008: 49)

Introduction

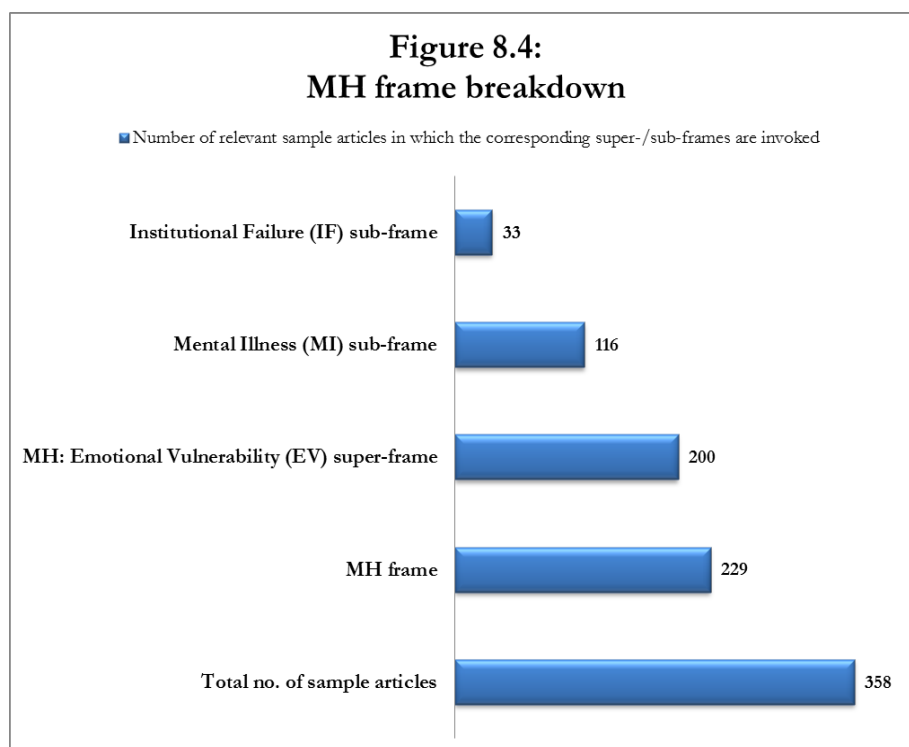
Sociologists like Conrad (1992, 2007) argue that over the past few decades there has been a ‘medicalisation’ of society, as a result of which various problematic behaviours are nowadays no longer regarded as sins or moral failings, but as illnesses or disorders. As such, they are assumed to be absolutely unintentional and beyond the individual’s control, which is why their cure is considered preferable to their punishment. Deviant behaviour is, according to Conrad and Schneider (1992), much more likely to be viewed as unwillful and ‘sick’ when the culprits are children because of their generally accepted status as innocent, dependent and not fully responsible for their actions.

Due to its medicalisation, the problem of suicide is, as mentioned in Chapter Two, primarily placed within a mental health context, since officials and the media tend to attribute it to psychological dysfunction, usually to depression (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002; Cross, 2010; Marsh, 2010). In fact, the potency of the corresponding discourse is such that this mental health understanding of the problem is established as the ‘truth’. This means, as Marsh (2010) explains, that the perception of suicide as pathological and tragic comes to be seen as self-evident, while any alternative interpretations of it, for example, as a conscious, noble or even heroic act, are marginalised. This marginalisation

¹³ Scotland’s exemplary suicide prevention strategy and action plan, introduced in 2002. For more information, see Scottish Executive, 2002.

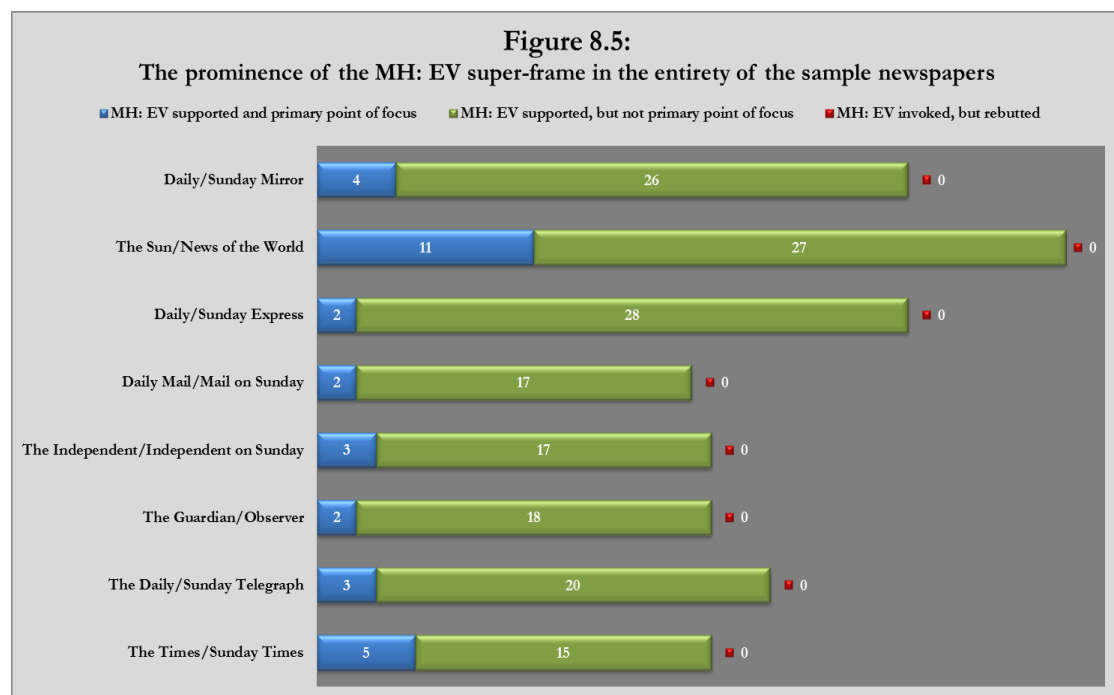
is reflected in Jamison's (1999) argument that any approach neglecting the psychopathological ramifications of suicidal behaviour is ethically unacceptable.

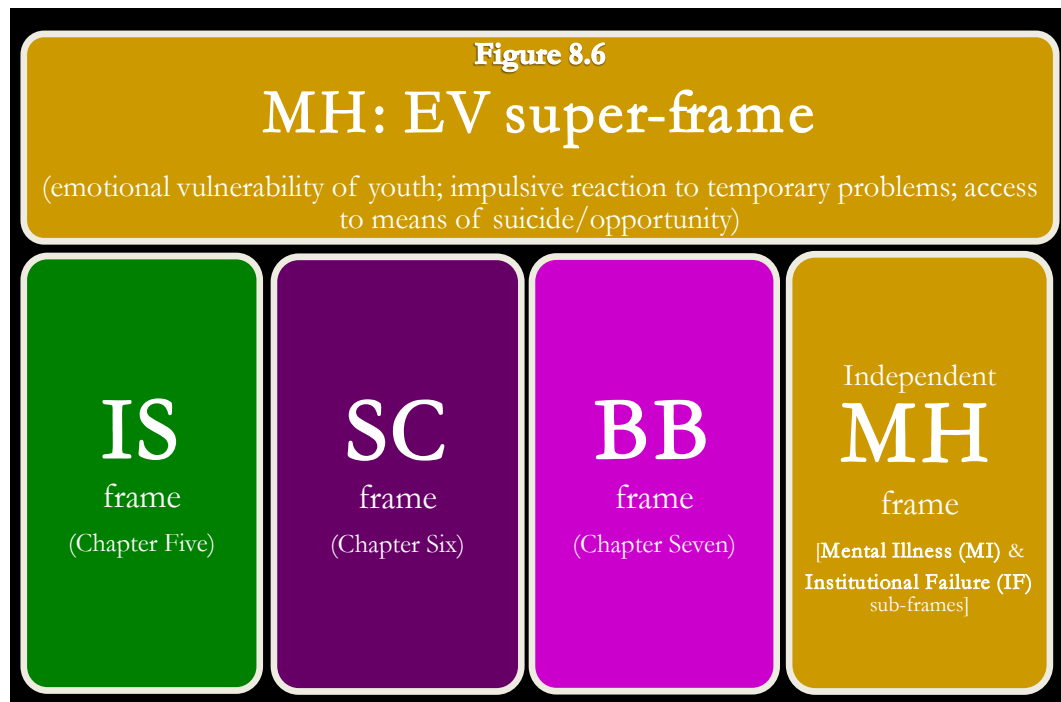
The constructionist perspective adopted in the current study does not intend to go as far as to challenge the perception of suicide as a mental health problem. As far as Bridgend is concerned and contrary to Marsh's (2010) view, I do agree with Jamison (1999) that any attempt to regard the deaths of more than twenty young people, who unexpectedly took their lives in the area, as not tragic, but possibly 'noble' or 'heroic' would be unethical. However, even without challenging the mental health implications of the local suicide phenomenon, a closer look into the way in which these were made sense of by the national press and into the role they played in the construction of the Bridgend problem is still important, as it sheds light on a number of serious questions: first of all, how prominent is this mental health aspect in the coverage of the Bridgend suicides? How often is it elevated to the main point of focus? Does it influence the formation of other frames and if so, in what way? Moreover, what is the assumed mental state of the deceased and to what degree is this state associated with their young age? Is the Bridgend case seen as an opportunity for journalists to discuss the pathology of suicide and the social stigma attached to it? Finally, how does this search for an explanation of the Bridgend problem within the domain of mental health affect the assignment of causal and treatment responsibilities (Iyengar, 1989)? All these questions will be addressed and examined in detail in the current chapter.



1. Emotional vulnerability of youth: 'Mental Health' as a super-frame

As shown in Figures 8.2 (Appendix V) and 8.4 (above), MH is a key theme in the national press coverage of the Bridgend deaths, appearing in almost 2/3 of the sample articles (229 out of 358). Of course, such a conception of suicide as a mental health problem is very common (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002) and therefore nowhere as newsworthy as the theories about an Internet cult or a local suicide epidemic and that is why MH is elevated to a primary frame in only a small minority of the articles in question (70 out of 358). The aspect of MH receiving the most attention is the emotional vulnerability (EV) of young people, being mentioned in 200 of the reports under study and the main point of focus in 32 of them (see Figures 8.4 and 8.5). Even if not always at the centre of the Bridgend debate, MH: EV plays a vital role in the construction of the local suicide problem by setting the context within which all its other, apparently more newsworthy, elements are examined and perceived. More specifically, the assumptions made about the mental state of the young Bridgend victims constitute the 'prism' through which their suicides are made sense of, laying the basis for the development of all the main frames and not just of the MH one. In that way, MH serves as a super-frame overlaying all the others, which would, in all probability, lack plausibility and appeal outside this EV background (Figure 8.6).





As already made clear in the previous chapters, it is precisely because young people are immature, impulsive, impressionable and generally vulnerable that they are allegedly in no position to fully realise the risks of cyberspace and are, consequently, egged on to suicide by ‘evil’ online ‘predators’. Although the Internet as a new medium is an easy target to demonise, it is occasionally acknowledged that pre-existing suicidal feelings are the primary reason why these teenagers visit suicide chatrooms and ‘recipe’ websites in the first place (see Gaunt, *The Sun*, 2008; Macintyre, *The Times*, 2008a; Sawyer, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008). At the same time, the disjunction between virtual and physical-world norms is seen as taking its toll on the ‘Facebook generation’s’ mental well-being, rendering its members (even more) impulsive and, quite often, suicidal (Street-Porter, *The Independent on Sunday*, 2008). In any case, whether online or offline, the risk of a Werther effect is directly linked to these youngsters’ mental inability to realise the finality of suicide and to their consequent eagerness to copy their friends in taking their own lives (Johnston, *Sunday Express*, 2008a).

Furthermore, the coroner’s verdicts, largely reported in the national press, reflect the difficulty, if not impossibility, of tracing the victims’ motives retrospectively (Atkinson, 1978), but, yet again, also the emphasis placed on the emotional dimension of their final act. For a number of deaths, especially those of Zachary Barnes, Allyn Price, Leigh Jenkins and Gareth Morgan, the coroner concludes that the victims did not

necessarily intend to die, but it is likely that the alcohol or drugs they had consumed affected their judgement to the point where they had limited or no consciousness or control of their actions (Bonnici, *Daily Express*, 2008c; Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008d; Yeoman, *The Times*, 2008). For the majority of the Bridgend victims, suicide is not considered a premeditated act, but an attempt to end their emotional turmoil at all costs. Particularly, the decision to end their lives is, more often than not, seen as being made on the 'spur of the moment' (Melanie Davies, quoted in Wark, *The Times*, 2008: 4) and as constituting a desperate and inconsiderate reaction to temporary problems: binge drinking, drug addiction, break-ups, arguments with friends, teenage pregnancies, family matters, the death of a loved one and unemployment are some of the 'big issues' these young people are faced with (Assistant Chief Constable Dave Morris, quoted in Booth, *The Guardian*, 2008b: 3) and presumably the source of great mental distress for them. Being apparently too inexperienced to handle such situations effectively by themselves, but also too reluctant to openly talk about them and ask for help, these youngsters end up considering suicide an acceptable or even socially expected response to their problems, especially after seeing their peers dealing with the same issues in such a way (Davies, *The Observer*, 2008; Marsh, *The Times*, 2008; Rayner and Savill, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008; Salkeld, *Daily Mail*, 2008b).

For all those vulnerable and impulsive victims going through a troubled adolescence, it is, given the aforementioned circumstances, questionable whether their suicide attempts, completed or not, indicate an actual determination to end it all or just a cry for help. According to psychiatric research (Hawton et al., 1993; Scoliers et al., 2009), the latter behaviour, defined as 'parasuicide', is hardly a rare phenomenon among distressed teenagers. The impulsivity of the suicidal act is associated with opportunity, since impetuous youngsters are seen as more likely to end up dead if the means of suicide are easily accessible to them at the moment when they are seized by the urge to take their lives (Sarler, *The Times*, 2008). With regard to the emotional rationale underlying Bridgend victims' decision to hang themselves, social psychologist Arthur Cassidy explains:

'It's not just as easy to go and take a rope or a belt and hang yourself [...]. It's a very impulsive behaviour. There are three sociological [...] factors in most of these hangings. One is that these young people feel impulsed. [...] They feel 'I just want to do it, I do it and in four seconds I'm dead'. Secondly, thwarted effectiveness. They feel they are not really effective with people. They cannot really function within the family structure, within the overall socio-cultural structure. Thirdly, they feel they are a burden on others. So, they feel 'I'm a burden to the family and a burden to me'. *Burdensomeness* and *thwarted*

effectiveness together with *impulsivity* would be three of the major contributory factors in most completed suicides that we have in the Western world.'

(Arthur Cassidy, interviewed on May 13, 2010; my emphasis)

This point of view is reminiscent of Joiner's (2005) study, which builds on Shneidman's (1996) 'psychache' model and associates self-accomplished death with 'thwarted belongingness' and 'perceived burdensomeness'. It is clear that Cassidy also recognises such emotional states as prerequisites for someone to engage in serious suicidal behaviour, while additionally underlining their interaction with impulsivity, especially in relation to individuals of young age like the ones that took their lives in Bridgend. Further expanding on the expressive nature of the choice of hanging as the suicide method preferred by the entirety of the Bridgend victims, he states:

'It's a masculine-oriented technique. [...] It's linked to high emotional pain. When the females did it, there seems to have been a group-norm effect; they are doing it because they know their friends have done it... There is also the fact that the further away from home one does it, the more delayed the discovery. That is a form of a decoy – a revenge against parents, or partners, or whoever you think has caused you pain.'

(Arthur Cassidy, quoted in Caesar, *The Sunday Times magazine*, 2008: 53)

In that way, Cassidy maintains that, despite often deriving from the impulsivity and susceptibility of adolescents, the suicidal act per se is not based on absolute randomness. On the contrary, it ultimately reflects the mental distress permeating the whole process of its accomplishment from the selection of the suicide method or location to the discovery of the body and the consequent grief of the victim's loved ones. Cassidy also introduces a gender dimension, which stresses the rather unusual inclination of Bridgend's female victims towards a violent, masculine-oriented suicide method like hanging, thus offering an additional explanation for the increased dramatic value and newsworthiness of the Bridgend story.

Finally, the BB frame also largely develops and operates within a MH framework. The allegedly deprived and uninteresting reality of Bridgend is presented as forcing local youngsters to give up their aspirations, thus condemning them to a miserable existence, which often pushes them over the edge (Brewis, *The Sunday Times*, 2008; Gordon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008). Similarly, the construction of the suicides in question as a problem of the 'Bridgend generation' suggests that, due to a number of factors discussed in detail in Chapter Seven, contemporary youngsters are under a lot of strain, which eventually takes its toll on their mental well-being. Although the risk of teenage depression is

occasionally brought up (Cameron, *The Independent*, 2008; Marsh, *The Times*, 2008), it is precisely this notion of ‘mental well-being’, which is at issue here. ‘Mental well-being’ is a broader concept, which does not necessarily coincide with that of ‘mental illness’, but refers to the impact of everyday situations on one’s state of mind (Parry, *The Times*, 2008). The young people of Bridgend and generally a large part, if not the entirety, of their generation are within this frame seen, once again, as emotionally vulnerable, overwhelmed by mundane problems and with a propensity to react in an impulsive way to them. Unhappy, alienated from their families and, to a high extent, disenchanted with the world they live in, these teenagers apparently experience great mental distress on an everyday basis (Garner, *The Independent*, 2008; Mooney, *Daily Mail*, 2008), which is likely to render them violent or suicidal and to thus result in Bridgend-like phenomena.

This EV perception of youth, which is prevalent in the four main frames, goes completely unrebutted (Figure 8.5), as it is supported by all the key claims-makers, including the Bridgend coroner, mental health experts, journalists and the victims’ families. On a responsibility level, the MH: EV super-frame encourages a sympathetic view of the suicide victims, taking the blame away from them. The prominent portrayal of the deceased as aspiring young people who had everything to live for reinforces the conception of their final act as a tragedy and a waste of human life. The selfishness and recklessness of the act itself is discussed in 30 out of the 358 sample articles, partly questioning the ‘victim’ status of those who took their own lives, but never to the point of actually rejecting the preceding MH: EV perspective (see Carroll, *Daily Mirror*, 2008; Caesar, *The Sunday Times magazine*, 2008; McCartney, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008; Moir, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008). On the contrary, in the vast majority of the Bridgend-related articles under study, this ‘victim’ status is considered almost self-evident. In fact, the extensive use of the term ‘victim’, when referring to the deceased, reveals an implicit tendency, on journalists’, but also, on society’s part in general, to assume that these individuals did not actually intend to kill themselves¹⁴, but were too vulnerable to cope with life’s ups and downs by themselves. In that sense, the emphasis placed on their young age does not just highlight the unexpectedness and tragedy of their deaths, but also presupposes a mental state involving a certain level of emotional vulnerability, susceptibility and impulsivity, which could have eventually led to their final act.

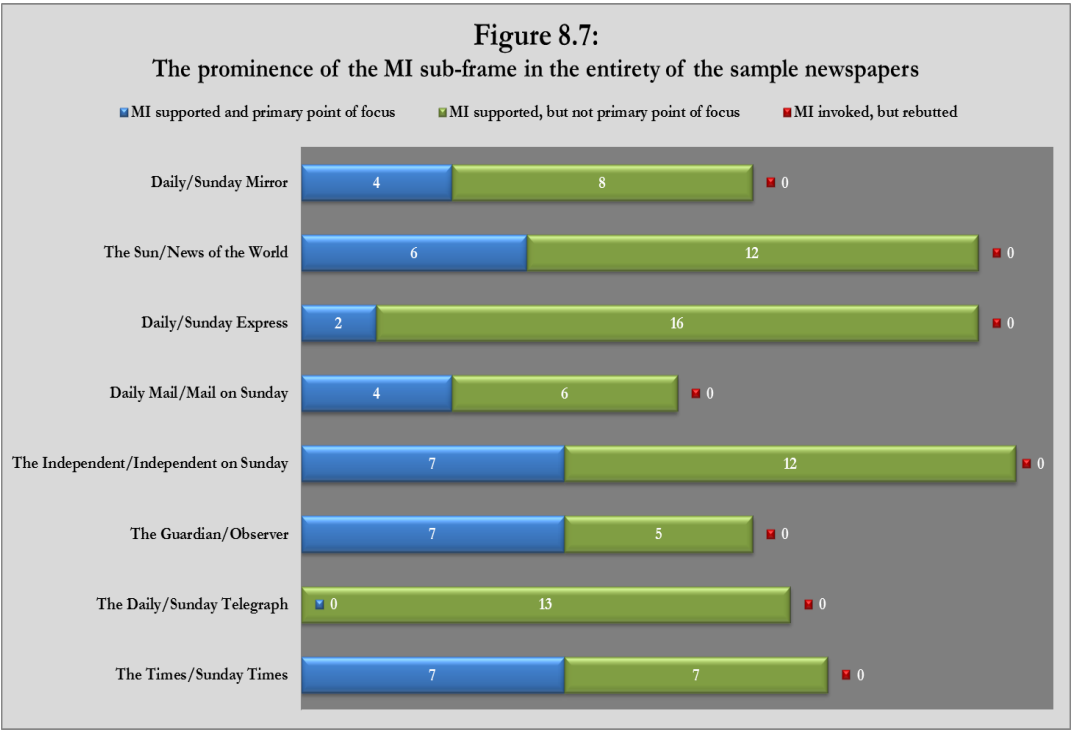
¹⁴ For more information on the problematic terminology of suicide, see Fairbairn (1995).

2. From ‘Emotional Vulnerability’ to ‘Mental Illness’: ‘Mental Health’ as a determinant of the story’s newsworthiness

Apart from being the super-frame overlaying all the others and presenting the Bridgend young victims as impulsive, impressionable and generally vulnerable and in need of protection, MH is at times elevated to a frame of its own. As an independent frame, MH deals with issues of mental illness and institutional failure (MI and IF sub-frames respectively). Attention here focuses on the mental health conditions some of the victims had been diagnosed with, especially in relation to official or voluntary bodies’ endeavours to improve the quality of the existing support services and, therefore, create a more effective safety net, which will prevent Bridgend-like phenomena in the future. In that way, there is an evident overlap between MI and IF, but, as will be explained later on, the second goes one step further and is more focused on imputing blame than the first. The current as well as the following section will look at MI’s influence on the perception of the cause(s) and appropriate treatment of the Bridgend problem.

Table 8.B:
First appearance of the MI sub-frame

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘Desperate town asks for National Lottery money to help stop spate of young deaths’ (<i>The Times</i>, January 26, 2008: 2) ▪ ‘Our love wasn’t enough to stop James killing himself’ (<i>The Sunday Times</i>, February 3, 2008: 3) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘Seven suicides blamed on internet craze’ (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, January 23, 2008: 3) ▪ ‘They took their own lives seven years apart. But were Simon and Natasha victims of the internet?’ (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i>, January 27, 2008: 22-23) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘Sensitivity and suicide’ (<i>The Guardian</i>, MediaGuardian, January 28, 2008: 6) ▪ ‘Calls to Samaritans soar after Bridgend suicides’ (<i>The Observer</i>, February 17, 2008: 9) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘When teenagers lose touch with reality’ (<i>The Independent</i>, January 24, 2008: 43) ▪ ‘Just upstairs, and horribly at risk’ (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, January 27, 2008: 42-43) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘A town on suicide watch as toll rises to 13 in just a year’ (<i>Daily Mail</i>, January 25, 2008: 23) ▪ ‘Goodbye, my Golden Boy’ (<i>Mail on Sunday</i>, Femail, February 17, 2008: 52-53) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘Seven die in suicide ‘craze’ (<i>Daily Express</i>, January 23, 2008: 10-11) ▪ ‘End of my dreams’ (<i>Sunday Express</i>, January 27, 2008: 9) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘Bebo mates ‘in suicide chain’ (<i>The Sun</i>, January 23, 2008: 9) ▪ ‘Bridgend alert missed’ (<i>News of the World</i>, April 27, 2008: 34) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ‘14th suicide in death town’ (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, February 6, 2008: 21) |



The MI sub-frame makes its first appearance in the original news reports of the *Telegraph*, the *Sun* and the *Express* (Table 8.B). It features in 116 articles in the entire Bridgend coverage, but only in 37 of them as the primary point of focus. The fact that 21 out of these 37 articles are published in broadsheets (all but the *Telegraph*) suggests that these are much keener than tabloids and mid-sheets to provide a MH explanation for the Bridgend problem that goes beyond the EV super-frame.

With regard to the different levels of media attention received by different victims, reference to Simon Cross’ (2010) work on cultural representations of mental distress needs to be made here. According to Cross (2010), the view of mental illness and suicide as pathological largely builds on the assumption that ‘mentally ill’ or ‘suicidal’ individuals are visibly different from ‘normal’ ones (see also Goffman, 1963) and constitutes the basis of the ‘violent madman’ stereotype that features prominently in the media. This view, he notes, not only allows the construction of newsworthy stories, but also reflects a belief that is deeply embedded in Western culture. From this perspective, one does not need to be a qualified psychiatrist to know that a person demonstrating a visibly ‘strange’ behaviour is mentally ill. In fact, even if a qualified psychiatrist argues otherwise, a layman is likely to trust what appears to be right in front of his/her eyes. However, as will be further discussed later on, this leaves those suffering from mental illness but not fitting the preceding stereotype at the mercy of their distressing and even self-destructive

thoughts. It is precisely these apparently ‘normal’ individuals suffering in silence and not showing any signs of distress until it is too late that are at the heart of the Bridgend narrative.

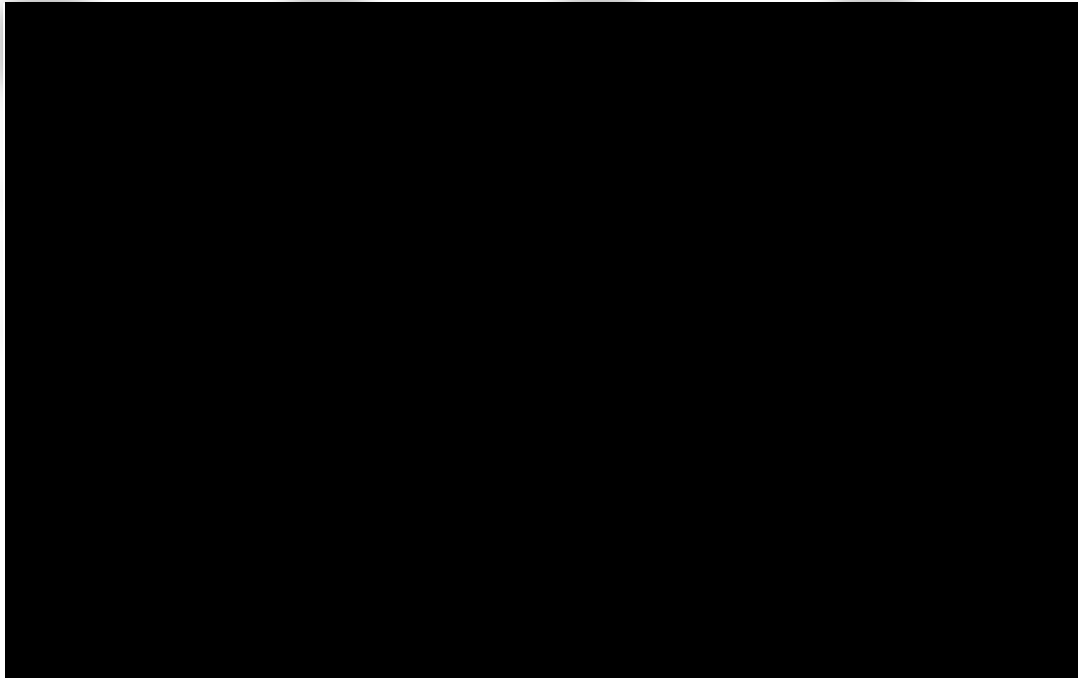


Figure 8.8: Assessing the newsworthiness of Bridgend’s female victims

When the violence related to mental illness is solely intra-personal such as in the case of self-harm and suicide, it tends to be regarded as a private matter that journalists are disinclined to cover (Jamieson et al., 2003). At the same time, the association of suicide with mental illness is so common that it impacts on the newsworthiness of the relevant events. Since suicide is more often than not attributed to a pathological mental disorder (Marsh, 2010), there is in media terms nothing new or unexpected about someone ending their lives due to being depressed. Consequently, suicide incidents tend to go unreported, unless there is a concurrent element taking it out of its ‘ordinary’ mental illness context and therefore increasing its newsworthiness such as the large number of victims or the celebrity status of the deceased (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002). Considering the news value of Bridgend as opposed to that of the typical suicide story, the readers’ editor of *The Observer*, Stephen Pritchard, states:

‘A paper would rarely report on a suicide, unless it was particularly significant. [...] There has to be some unusual element there to make it newsworthy. [The large number

of Bridgend victims], [t]hat's extraordinary, but individual suicides often don't make the news.'

(Stephen Pritchard, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

Likewise, assessing the key elements that made Bridgend such a powerful media story, journalist Carole Cadwalladr of the same newspaper concludes:

'It was a story about *ordinary* teenagers who were behaving in *extraordinary* and terrifying ways.'

(Carole Cadwalladr, interviewed on July 5, 2011; my emphasis)

The study of the Bridgend coverage reveals that the further we move across the MH continuum from the emotional fragility of young people to the pathology of mental illness the less newsworthy a suicide becomes. The Bridgend narrative largely builds on the apparent 'ordinariness' of the young victims, that is, on the assumption that they were happy, carefree and had everything to live for, which stresses the abruptness and tragedy of their suicides (see also Chapter Four). The Bridgend suicide victims who had been diagnosed as mentally ill are only a small minority compared to the ones having presented no signs of distress. Specifically, Angeline Fuller is portrayed as having had a history of depression and attempted suicide twice in the past (Coles, *The Sun*, 2008e). Likewise, Leigh Jenkins was being treated for depression, but his condition aggravated after the suicide of his friend, Allyn Price (Judd, *The Independent*, 2008). Finally, Anthony Martin was also depressed and self-harming and had made two previous suicide attempts by overdose (Cadwalladr, *The Observer*, 2009).

The mental illness of these victims and their previous suicide attempts take the shock factor away from the Bridgend story. The decision to end their lives is largely regarded as premeditated and their deaths as a not-so-unexpected consequence of their conditions. As a result, journalists often choose to downplay or at times completely overlook those elements and emphasise other, more newsworthy ones such as the allegation that Angeline and Leigh had been online shortly before killing themselves, which clearly implies that the Internet had something to do with their suicides (Smith Richard, *Daily Mirror*, 2008e; Paul and North, *Sunday Express*, 2008). In any case, such 'ordinary' suicides attributed to depression are frequently also presented as a product of Bridgend's suicide epidemic for dramatic purposes. However, they receive nowhere as much media attention as other 'out of the blue' suicide incidents. In fact, it is uncertain whether they would have made it to news visibility in the first place had they not been

linked to the latter and thus incorporated in the ‘Bridgend suicide mystery’ narrative. In that way, despite the increased newsworthiness of female victims, Angeline Fuller ranks last amongst those that made Bridgend front-page news (Figure 8.8) and it is unlikely that this is unrelated to her mental illness and previous suicide attempts. Similarly, due to his chronic mental health problems and the fact that he did not know any of the other victims, Anthony Martin does not fit the alleged ‘suicide pattern’, which renders the Bridgend narrative so appealing (Caesar, *The Sunday Times magazine*, 2008). Therefore, his name is rarely mentioned in Bridgend-related reports, appearing only in 8 out of the 358 articles under study.

The only occasion on which the otherwise common link between suicide and depression is considered newsworthy enough to appear on the front page in the

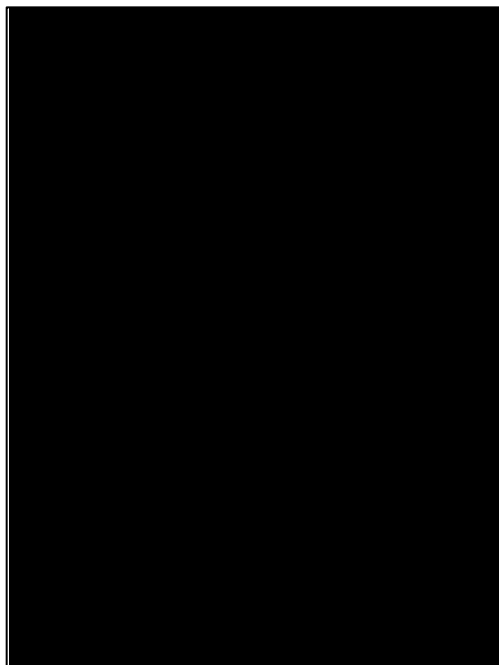


Figure 8.9: *Sunday Express*, June 22, 2008: 1

Bridgend coverage is in the context of the unusual ‘mobile phone mast’ story of the *Sunday Express*. On June 22, 2008 and while the national press interest on the South Wales deaths has largely subsided, the *Express* brings the issue back to the fore by running the front-page story of Figure 8.9, which claims to be offering an answer to the ‘Bridgend death riddle’ (Johnston, 2008b: 1). The article is based on the assertions of a government advisor, Dr Roger Coghill, who argues that all Bridgend victims lived far closer than average to mobile phone masts, whose radiation depleted the serotonin levels of their brains,

thus rendering them more prone to depression and, by extension, to suicide.

This ‘mobile phone mast’ theory goes back to the ‘risk society’ concept (Giddens, 1998; Beck, 2000, 2006), as it reflects a general concern about the unforeseeable and possibly unmanageable risks of technological progress. It underlines the potentially detrimental implications of this progress for the mental health of young people and thus bears ties to IS, which, through the emphasis it gives to the ‘dark side’ of the Internet (Chapter Five), also encourages a negative view of technology. Although MI constitutes the main theme of Johnston’s (*Sunday Express*, 2008b) story, it is the notion of risk pervading it and the significance it attributes to promptly identifying and protecting those

exposed to it which increase its news value and render it front-page material. What the article ultimately suggests is that if the suicides in Bridgend are caused by the radiation of mobile phone masts, then there may also be other geographical locations in which youngsters turn suicidal because of such emissions. In that way, the *Express* apparently undertakes the moral responsibility to warn its readers and raise public awareness over the issue. However, whether these ‘mobile phone masts’ claims provide a valid explanation for the Bridgend suicides or constitute yet another case of sensationalist reporting building on the existing public fear of technology (Yar, 2010) is questionable. Dr Coghill’s research is heavily criticised by *The Guardian*, the Mobile Operators Association and the Government’s Health Protection Agency (Goldacre, *The Guardian*, 2008) as misleading and not backed up by evidence. His scientific credibility is, therefore, seriously challenged. Condemning his unsubstantiated contentions as well as the *Express*’ decision to publish them, the Bridgend MP Madeleine Moon states:

‘What I’ve got a problem with is a newspaper saying that mobile phone masts cause people to take their lives, which is absolute nonsense! They didn’t even check out the credentials of the guy that they were quoting. They claimed he was a government advisor. He was not a government advisor. [...] They splashed the story over the front page and caused huge levels of panic in my communities as to what could be causing this. Absolute nonsense! Should I be angry? Of course, I should be angry; and that community should be angry; and that newspaper should recognise its responsibility.’

(Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

Such rebutting arguments encourage a shift of attention away from the risk of mast emissions itself to the misrepresentation of the Bridgend problem by journalists and the impact of irresponsible reporting on the local community [‘Media Responsibility’ (MR) sub-frame of ‘Suicide Contagion’ (SC); see Chapter Six].

3. Identifying and supporting distressed individuals: the prominence of ‘Mental Health’ in suicide prevention

Be it in the context of the super- or the independent MH frame, the concerns expressed in the wake of the Bridgend tragedy over the emotional vulnerability of young people and the risks of mental disorders underline the urgent and morally imperative need to provide support to such vulnerable individuals in order to prevent future suicides. The responsibility to avert further young deaths is primarily assigned to mental health professionals, but the crucial role of teachers and other lay people, especially parents, in

identifying those at risk and precluding them from materialising their suicidal thoughts is also pointed out (Frean, *The Times*, 2008; Madeley and Finnigan, *Daily Express*, 2008).

Mental health professionals practically 'own' the suicide problem, i.e. they define what this consists in and how it could be tackled. The director of mental health services for Bro Morgannwg NHS Trust Tegwyn Williams (cited in Coles, *The Sun*, 2008a), Professor of Epidemiology David Gunnell (cited in Hawkes, *The Times*, 2008), Professor of Psychiatry Keith Hawton (cited in Pritchard, *The Observer*, 2008) and several other medical experts are largely quoted in Bridgend-related articles and evidently considered the most qualified to explain what is going on in South Wales. This medicalisation of the Bridgend suicide problem suggests that the dominant view of mental health disorders as being always symptomatic and diagnosable and as concerning only a minority of troubled individuals is far from valid (Armson, *The Independent*, 2008; Parry, *The Times*, 2008). It is exactly this conception of the Bridgend events within a MH frame which eventually determines what the appropriate response to the problem is. This response revolves around proactivity and involves, amongst others, the efforts of the special task force, set up by the health authorities, the Bridgend council and the South Wales police, to ensure funding for the adoption of a national suicide prevention strategy (de Bruxelles, *The Times*, 2008c); mental health charities like the Street Pastors and the Samaritans patrolling the streets of Bridgend (Caesar, *The Sunday Times magazine*, 2008; Peake, *The Sun*, 2008); local schools like Ynysawdre Comprehensive providing counselling services to their students (Britten and Savill, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008b). Such mental health initiatives show that the proactive identification and emotional support of potentially suicidal youngsters come to be viewed as the ultimate priority in the aftermath of the 2008 deaths in the area.

In all newspapers under study, suicide prevention is directly associated with the need to encourage those at risk to openly discuss their problems and make them realise that it is natural to find everyday reality stressful and overwhelming at times, but suicide is not the answer to it. There is an evident consensus amongst journalists and mental health experts that issues related to mental disorders and suicide cannot be effectively dealt with unless the social stigma attached to them is eradicated. *The Independent on Sunday's* contribution to this discussion about the social ramifications of mental health problems is crucial: it largely presents mental health conditions and suicide as an alarming social problem which concerns us all and even runs a mental health campaign in an attempt to raise public awareness around them. Articles like those of Armson (*The*

Independent on Sunday, 2008) or Williams (*The Independent on Sunday*, 2008c) may indeed only address the Bridgend issue incidentally, but their significance lies in the fact that they obviously place it within an independent MH frame, which stresses the taboo against mental disorders and the social responsibility to protect those suffering from them. More specifically, Armson (*The Independent on Sunday*, 2008) criticises the tendency to ignore one's signs of distress until it is too late, but also to dismiss the act of suicide as abnormal and blame the deceased for being unappreciative of the gift of life, simply because people are unable to understand the mental agony he or she was going through while alive. In his turn, Williams (*The Independent on Sunday*, 2008c: 44) argues that, although mental health conditions are nowadays not as stigmatised as they used to be in the past, the stereotypes of the 'nutter', the 'loon' or the 'schizo' and, generally, of crazy people allegedly attacking members of the public for no apparent reason, are still present in everyday language and often reproduced through the media.

Further discussing the stigmatisation of mental illness and suicide, Caesar (*The Sunday Times magazine*, 2008) cites research by the Samaritans, which indicates that four in five young people who kill themselves have not previously consulted a doctor about their problems. It is precisely this reluctance to seek professional help which is regarded as problematic and as eventually pushing suicidal individuals over the edge. Apropos the Bridgend deaths, psychiatrist Tegwyn Williams (cited in Coles, *The Sun*, 2008a: 9) condemns the 'culture of silence' surrounding mental health issues, especially in relation to young males, who tend to avoid speaking publicly about their feelings. Both he and the deputy Children's Commissioner for Wales, Maria Battle (cited in Caesar, *The Sunday Times magazine*, 2008), stress the importance of emotional education, which includes teaching vulnerable youngsters how to cope with distressing situations, but also informing them about the mental health services that are available to them. At the same time, Walker (*The Guardian*, 2008) also refers to the social stigma attached to mental health conditions and suicide, which he sees as obscuring the understanding of the actual nature and extent of these problems and, ultimately, as impeding their resolution. That is not only because those suffering from such conditions avoid admitting it out of fear of being publicly humiliated, but also because this stigma of suicide results in a great number of them going unrecorded. In that way, Walker (*The Guardian*, 2008) draws attention to the dark figure of suicide, issue which, as already discussed in Chapter Two (Zilboorg, 1936; Surtees, 1992), is of key importance in grasping the gravity of the suicide problem. Unless absolutely certain about the victim's intention to die, he explains,

coroners tend not to issue suicide verdicts in an attempt to protect the grieving families from feeling remorseful for and disgraced by the premature death of their children.

The significance of a mental health response, which would counter-balance the despair occasionally felt by teenagers, would raise public awareness and would, most importantly, prevent Bridgend-like situations in the future, has also been a recurring theme in several of the interviews I have conducted. In particular, Rosemary Vaux of Papyrus regards reaching out to distressed youngsters and reassuring them that asking for help is not a sign of weakness as a crucial step towards tackling the problem:

‘The big thing is that people know that it’s OK to ask for help, boys in particular...[...] Three times as many boys take their own lives as girls. We want people to talk. [...] We want girls to be able to say to boys ‘Look, it’s OK to cry. It’s OK to seek help’. There’s often so much pressure that [boys] have to conform, that they can’t be seen to be ‘wounded’. [...] We go into schools and we talk about mental well-being. We don’t go and say ‘We’re all going to talk about suicide’, but we talk about mental health and well-being and that includes how you can feel. [...] We can all feel bad at times. We can all feel that life’s not fair, but we want [...] young people to know that if you feel like that, it’s quite normal. You’re not a ‘freak’, you’re not ‘pathetic’, but it’s important to get help [...] just so that you’re not alone.’

(Rosemary Vaux, interviewed on May 18, 2010)

A similar point of view is adopted by the former Bridgend Samaritans director, Darren Matthews, who also acknowledges the imperative need to promote a better public understanding of mental well-being. Moving beyond the tragic deaths of several local youngsters and the occasionally insensitive media reporting, he sees the Bridgend phenomenon itself and the media’s involvement in it as ultimately having an overall positive effect towards the achievement of the above-mentioned goal:

‘People don’t realise [...] how common these conditions are. So, by talking about them all the time, that’s part of breaking down the barriers, breaking down the taboo of suicide and other mental health issues really. [...] I certainly think awareness was raised [after Bridgend] about suicide and suicidal feelings and factors that contribute to it. One of the reasons why we did engage with the media is because there is an educational aspect as well and we saw that we need to educate people [...] to understand really [...] what can lead people to suicide and also, very importantly, what are the signs and symptoms that somebody may be suicidal. [...] We didn’t have the resources to do that, but by using the media as a channel, as a way into their private houses, we could then tell people what to be looking out for and that was very important in reducing the number of deaths. So, I think, if without media involvement, we could have ended up with more deaths.’

(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

Commenting on the same issue, the Bridgend MP, Madeleine Moon, argues that the seriousness of the youth suicide problem dictates pointing those at risk in the direction of mental health services, but insists that the media failed to do so in the Bridgend case. Unlike Matthews, she denies that the increased media interest in the Bridgend deaths was, in any way, beneficial:

‘No, I don’t think so at all! [...] Not without ever looking at what leads people to suicide, nor without ever pointing people in the direction of [...] Samaritans, Papyrus and mental health support services. They [journalists] are getting better at that, but, at the time, most of them didn’t do any of that. [...] Young people killing themselves... It’s a good story, isn’t it? But, actually, there is a very serious issue behind that, which is what we are failing to do as a society, that we need to be doing, that will reduce deaths in young people and, in particular, in young males. So, we need to find out why that is happening and what we can do about it; not talk about Joe Bloggs did this and, as a consequence, people are writing on his or her ‘wall’! It takes it away from, but it is a big issue and I suppose that was always my frustration; [not] actually looking at what could make a difference here...’

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

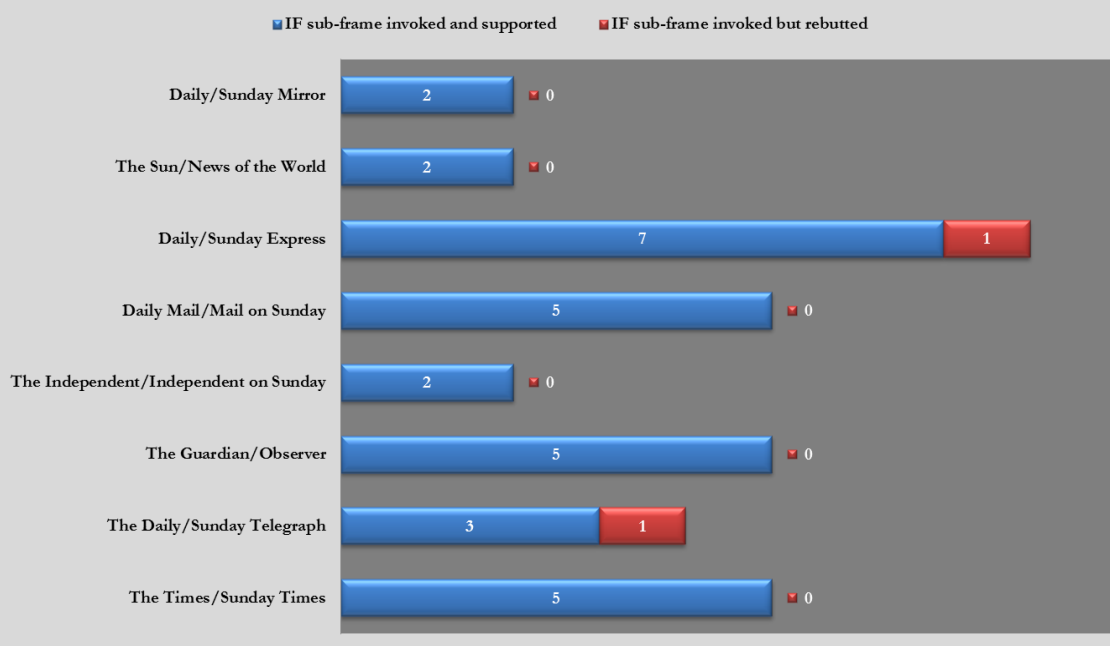
4. Institutional failure

The issue of institutional failure has been briefly considered in the context of the other three main frames [‘Internet Suicide’ (IS), ‘Suicide Contagion’ (SC) and ‘Breakdown Britain’ (BB)], mainly in relation to the police’s failure to see the supposed online or offline connections between the Bridgend victims and society’s failure to ensure younger generations’ well-being. However, the medicalisation of suicide (Conrad, 2007), and, in this case, of the Bridgend matter, raises concerns not just about who (or what) actively caused the problem, but also about who neglected to take the necessary actions to prevent it, thus leaving vulnerable teenagers at the mercy of their self-destructive emotions. Therefore, institutional failure is shaped more clearly within the MH frame, being elevated to a distinct sub-frame. This IF sub-frame makes its first appearance in the *Daily Telegraph* of January 24, 2008 (Table 8.C) and features only in a small minority of sample articles (33 out of 358) in the entire Bridgend coverage (Figure 8.10). Even if present and very rarely rebutted, IF is usually of limited prominence in these articles, as it constitutes the main point of focus only in one of them (Bonnici, *News of the World*, 2008d; see sub-section 4.B). Looking at the content of the sub-frame in question, the current section will discuss the alleged mishandling of the Bridgend situation by the competent health and political authorities.

Table 8.C:
First appearance of the IF sub-frame

▪ ‘Suicide: a teen’s way to instant fame’ (<i>The Sunday Times</i>, January 27, 2008: 10) ▪ ‘Schools on alert after 17th Bridgend suicide’ (<i>The Times</i>, February 20, 2008: 1) ▪ ‘The police say there’s no link but the people say otherwise’ (<i>The Times</i>, February 20, 2008: 6-7)
▪ ‘It just seems normal, fashionable almost...’ (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>, January 24, 2008: 20)
▪ ‘Suicide ‘axis’ crosses Welsh valleys’ (<i>The Observer</i>, January 27, 2008: 17) ▪ ‘Bridgend should not be demonised’ (<i>The Guardian</i>, February 22, 2008: 37)
▪ ‘Police warn of Bebo ‘internet suicide cult’’ (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, January 27, 2008: 35) ▪ ‘Just upstairs, and horribly at risk’ (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i>, January 27, 2008: 42-43)
▪ ‘Goodbye, my Golden Boy’ (<i>The Mail on Sunday</i>, February 17, 2008: 52-53) ▪ ‘The tragedy of Jenna, suicide town’s 17th victim/In a town shattered by a series of teenage suicides, another young girl takes her own life’ (<i>Daily Mail</i>, February 20, 2008: 1, 11)
▪ ‘End of my dreams’ (<i>Sunday Express</i>, January 27, 2008: 9) ▪ ‘Another girl hangs herself in death town/Suicide No14 in the town haunted by internet cult’ (<i>Daily Express</i>, February 6, 2008: 1, 5)
▪ ‘Coroner’s fury at suicide sites’ (<i>The Sun</i>, March 20, 2008: 17) ▪ ‘Bridgend alert missed’ (<i>News of the World</i>, April 27, 2008: 34)
▪ ‘There ARE links’ (<i>Daily Mirror</i>, February 21, 2008: 14)

Figure 8.10:
The presence of the IF sub-frame in the entirety of the sample articles



A. Mental health system deficiencies: The medicalisation of suicide consolidates the ‘victim’ status of the deceased and establishes mental health professionals as the most credible and qualified source to explain and tackle the problem (Conrad and Schneider, 1992). In the context of the MH: EV super-frame, mental health experts underline the impulsivity and susceptibility of youth and associate these traits with the potentially detrimental effect of outside factors, be it the Internet, suicide contagion or socio-economic deprivation (see Persaud, cited in Madeley and Finnigan, *Daily Express*, 2008; Sigman, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 2008). It is up to them to decide which of these factors is actually the main cause pushing so many Bridgend youngsters over the edge in order to treat those at risk accordingly in the future. What is of most importance here is that in all these cases there is a clear distinction on specialists’ part between assigning causal and undertaking treatment responsibility (Iyengar, 1989).

However, as MH is elevated to a frame of its own and especially within the IF sub-frame, this distinction becomes more and more blurred: the deficiencies of the existing mental health system come to the fore. As this section will indicate, this casts doubts on whether the Bridgend suicides would have reached epidemic levels in the first place had the victims’ mental health problems been identified and properly treated before it was too late. The perceived pathology of suicide and expertise of (mental) health authorities in such matters establish an increased professional and moral duty of the latter to protect those at risk (Marsh, 2010), but also greater accountability on their part (Jamison, 1999), rendering them a primary target of criticism in the aftermath of Bridgend-like tragedies.

In the Bridgend coverage, the flaws of the existing mental health system and their potential links to the local suicide problem are mostly discussed with regard to mentally ill victims, who ended up killing themselves after not receiving proper treatment for their condition. In that way, ‘Institutional Failure’ (IF) becomes an extension of the ‘Mental Illness’ (MI) sub-frame. The most noteworthy example here is that of Anthony Martin, who was, as mentioned earlier, suffering from chronic mental health problems. The claims of his mother, Tracy Roberts, appearing prominently in Caesar (*The Times*, 2008) and Cadwalladr (*The Observer*, 2009), offer an alternative and, to a large extent, overlooked view of the Bridgend issue; particularly, one which does not question the dominant discourse constructing suicidal behaviour as pathological, but challenges the otherwise unequivocal competence of health authorities to treat and prevent depressed youngsters from suicide (Conrad, 2007; Marsh, 2010). Roberts (quoted in Caesar, *The Times*, 2008: 49) openly accuses the National Health Service (NHS) of ‘murdering’ her son by

considering his condition too complex and risky to treat and, therefore, a ‘drain on resources’. This perception of Anthony’s suicide as ‘murder’ shows the absolute transfer of responsibility from the deceased to mental health professionals, which results in the latter’s failure to provide proper treatment to suicidal individuals being considered no different to actively causing their deaths.

Furthermore, aside from Anthony Martin’s case, which obviously offers a dramatised and personalised view (Chibnall, 1977; Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002) on the IF aspect of the Bridgend problem, the practical, mostly financial, difficulties related to suicide prevention and, generally, the deficiencies of the mental health system are also brought up in a number of other Bridgend-related articles. Though not openly accusing health officials for the suicides, the stepfather of David Dilling, Christopher Claypole (cited in Salkeld, *Daily Mail*, 2008a), as well as Bettws councillor and family friend of victim Sean Rees, Christopher Michaelides (cited in Alleyne, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008), maintain that better support mechanisms are required to prevent further youth suicides in Bridgend. At the same time, both Brewis (*The Sunday Times*, 2008) and Gordon (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2008) point out that, after the withdrawal of funding, there is only one out of the originally five youth focus groups still operating in the Bridgend area and providing counselling services to local youngsters. ‘There is clearly a problem in this town and yet there is no support’, says Adam Lloyd (quoted in Gordon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008: 20), who was a friend of victim Gareth Morgan. What is remarkable is that Adam does not just refer to the inadequacies of health authorities, but also to those of the voluntary sector. ‘Where are the Samaritans posters?’, he asks bitterly. ‘Maybe if Gareth had walked past one on the way home from here the night before he died, he might still be alive today.’ (Adam Lloyd, quoted in Gordon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2008: 20).

Discussing the shortcomings of the available mental health services and the improvements that need to be made to tackle Bridgend’s suicide problem, Darren Matthews of the Samaritans states:

‘Looking at mental health resources, there is still a huge waiting list for counselling services; a waiting list of many, many months long and that doesn’t help, because many people don’t get that far and they have taken their lives before they meet a counsellor. And certainly, [...] during the 2000-2008 period, there were people reported to have gone to mental health clinics asking to be admitted to a hospital, but yet they were turned away. [...] [T]hat’s a failing in the NHS and the services available to people and so, those are the things that need to improve to help prevent suicide in the future.’

(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

Likewise, social psychologist Arthur Cassidy associates the Bridgend problem with the nine-to-five approach of local health agencies, which he sees as absolutely inadequate and unable to have an actual impact on vulnerable youngsters' lives:

'[T]he statutory sector has seemed to be living in a different world because there are so many constraints in terms of funding and so, [...] they feel: 'Well, we have helped promotion, we work nine to five, we go to schools and that's that'. The problem is that [...] young people don't think like that. [...] [T]he reason why I pointed out they have to work 24/7 is that you have to realise how these young people live and work and think and behave in an environment and to do that, I think you have to be in the middle of the places where they work and operate. When I spoke about that to the Health Trust in Bridgend, I got the impression that they were not pleased. I think the feeling was 'We are the statutory services; we have a job to do; we are trained to do this'. I said 'Yes, you are trained to do this, [...] but where are you? Are you in the [South Wales] valleys? Do you understand the [context] people operate in? I don't think you do.' And, in fact, they didn't.'

(Arthur Cassidy, interviewed on May 13, 2010)

B. A political failure?: The flaws of the existing mental health system, which reportedly leave vulnerable individuals exposed to the risk of suicide and come under scrutiny in the aftermath of the Bridgend tragedies, are considered not just a health, but also a political matter. As a result, the IF sub-frame occasionally extends beyond the apparent responsibility of health authorities. A number of locals such as the father of Jenna Parry's boyfriend, Colin Jones (cited in Wharton, *Daily Express*, 2008), also link the high suicide rates in the Bridgend area to the lack of resources in the field of mental health and the inadequate youth support services, but attribute such deficiencies to the mismanagement of available funds and the overall neglect of the issue by the local council (see also Stephen, *Daily Mail*, 2008). In contrast, Moir (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2008: 21) does not consider the Bridgend authorities responsible for the suicides per se, but argues they are actually doing their best to deal with the problem. Nonetheless, she criticises the uncertainty and 'corporate hopelessness' radiating from their official statement and expresses her doubts as to whether this statement, with all its pompous announcements, constitutes the beginning of an official response to the local suicides or the end of it. In that way, although she welcomes the apparent mobilisation of the local authorities and sees it as well-intentioned, she implicitly questions their competence to materialise their suicide prevention action plan. She views their approach as too theoretical and thus unable to make a real difference in the lives of vulnerable local youngsters by convincing them that suicide is not the answer to their problems.

Moreover, the lack of a Welsh suicide prevention strategy is seen as yet another indication of IF, which allowed the Bridgend phenomenon of 2008 to happen. Former Samaritans director Darren Matthews (cited in Johnston, *Sunday Express*, 2008a) reveals that the charity had called for the introduction of such a strategy four years before, but at the time their calls went unheard by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), which decided to take action only when it was apparently too late. The public attention, which the Bridgend suicide problem received in 2008, resulted in the adoption of a national action plan in 2009. ‘Talk to Me’ (WAG, 2009), as it is entitled, aims to reduce the incidence of suicide and self-harm in Wales and is principally based on the exemplary ‘Choose Life’ (Scottish Executive, 2002) initiative, which has proven to be very effective in Scotland (Syal, *The Times*, 2008; see also Chapter Nine). Despite the evident consensus that the discussions around planning, funding and eventually, implementing this strategy constitute a positive development in fighting the Bridgend problem, there is also a strong feeling of regret for the number of suicides that could have been prevented had the Welsh political forces decided to step in before the tragic events of 2008 (Salkeld, *Daily Mail*, 2008b; Coles, *The Sun*, 2009b). Stressing the impact of deprivation on local youngsters’ mental well-being, Darren Matthews of the Samaritans argues that the Welsh authorities have been disinclined to admit that the depressing existence of those living in Bridgend often leads them to suicide. That is, according to him, because such an admission would equal assuming responsibility for the failure of governmental policies, which have caused deprivation in the first place, thus increasing the occurrence of suicides in the Bridgend area:

‘[T]he situation perhaps wouldn’t have been as bad had there been a national suicide prevention strategy in place [in 2008] or even a local strategy. Part of the problem as well [...] is deprivation. If the government looks at suicide and really admits there is a problem, then all sorts of doors will open because it could be seen as a failure of government policy that has led to deprivation and poverty. So, it’s a failure of their policies that has contributed to these deaths.’

(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

But even after the adoption of the ‘Talk to Me’ action plan, Matthews is doubtful about its ability to produce the desired results:

‘The Welsh national suicide prevention strategy is a waste of time, really. First of all, I don’t think there is any money for it. My personal view is that it was only done to keep people quiet and [...] to [show] that the Welsh Assembly were actually doing something, when really they aren’t that interested.’

(Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

The neglect of the WAG to promptly introduce a national suicide prevention action plan is also brought up by the Bridgend MP, Madeleine Moon, who, however, denies it was due to funding limitations:

‘Funding has not been the issue. Sometimes in Wales, politicians make decisions on the basis of ‘If England is doing it, we are not going to’ and they felt that they didn’t need a formal strategy; that [the suicide problem] could be dealt with any other ways. Unfortunately, it didn’t work. [...] In England, it was very much on people’s agenda [...] and there was a [...] tight focus invested in areas where there was known to be particular risk, [...] a real focus on child-based mental health.’

(Madeleine Moon, interviewed on March 10, 2010)

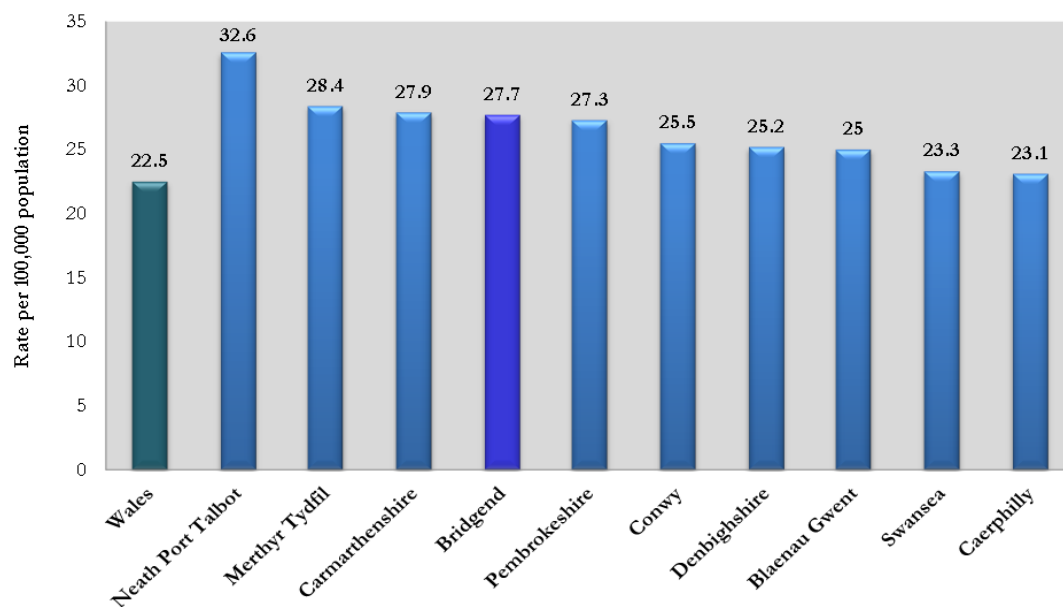
Regarding the belated adoption of the Welsh suicide prevention strategy, Bonnici¹⁵ (*News of the World*, 2008d) also accuses the authorities of overlooking and, to a certain extent, of even covering up the seriousness of Bridgend’s suicide problem. He suggests that officials had been aware of the worrying rise of suicide rates in the Bridgend area since 2005 and yet did nothing to tackle the problem, allowing it through their neglect to develop even further and evolve into the ‘suicide epidemic’ which attracted national media’s interest three years later. His claims are based on the confidential report of Rogers and Page (2005), entitled ‘Thematic Review of unexpected deaths in the Mental Health Directorate in Bro Morgannwg NHS Trust’. The report in question reveals that the suicides of those who had received mental health services from Bro Morgannwg NHS Trust during the year preceding their deaths increased by 300% between 2004 and 2005. Bonnici (*News of the World*, 2008d) presents this shocking increase as a Bridgend problem and directly associates it with the 2008 burst of youth suicides in the area, emphasising how institutional inaction let the situation get out of control. Nonetheless, a closer look at the actual report shows that this alarming percentage does not just refer to suicide victims of young age and also that the identified problem is not limited to Bridgend, but apparently extends to a large part of South Wales. Through the perception of this rate within a Bridgend context, continuity with previously published stories on the matter is established and a greater dramatic effect is achieved, elements which play a crucial role in the construction of a narrative likely to attract readers’ attention (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Chibnall, 1977). This is not to deny that Bridgend has its share of suicides, but to stress, once again, the journalistic tendency to homogenise incidents (Hall

¹⁵ Tony Bonnici’s name does not appear in The *News of the World* article of April 27, 2008, entitled ‘Bridgend alert missed’, but he informed me of his authorship during our personal communication on June 22, 2011.

et al., 1978; Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002) of self-inflicted death occurring in a much wider area and present them under the label 'Bridgend suicide problem' for newsworthiness purposes (see also Chapter Six).

Referring specifically to Bridgend in their report, Rogers and Page (2005: 7) argue that its male suicide rate is extremely high: between 2000 and 2003, it reaches 27.7 per 100,000, which is the fourth highest rate in Wales (Figure 8.11) and the tenth highest male suicide rate across all English and Welsh regions. They acknowledge that the area where one lives can have an effect on his/her mental health and, therefore, link the Bridgend suicide problem to local deprivation. At the same time, however, they admit that the high occurrence of suicides in the Bridgend area may also be 'due to inadequacies within the health systems and care pathways' (Rogers and Page, 2005: 32). Concluding, they underline the importance of properly training clinical staff to assess and manage the risk of suicide and self-harm and call for the adoption of a multi-agency suicide prevention strategy. As pointed out by Bonnici (*News of the World*, 2008d), this call failed to materialise at the time and was apparently considered a priority by the authorities only after the 2008 suicides and the accompanying media interest in the problem.

Figure 8.11:
The highest male suicide rates by Government Office
Region and local authority in Wales, 2000-2003
 (Source: Rogers and Page, 2005: 30)



Commenting on the disquieting content of Rogers and Page's (2005) report, Bonnici, who (co-)authors the preceding *News of the World* as well as many other *Daily Express* articles on the case, underlines the authorities' reluctance to provide him with a copy of it. He also criticises their endeavour to shift attention away from their own inadequacy to handle the situation and their tendency to disclaim all responsibility by blaming the media:

'These people [officials] had been told two years before that there was a potential for Bridgend to be a suicide cluster. [...] There was very, very little done to react to that. It took a Freedom of Information request to get that report out of them. They could have given it to me as soon as I asked for it, but they didn't. [...] If they had nothing to hide, why didn't they just hand it over? They didn't. [...] So, as far as I'm concerned, they were trying to find someone else to blame for this and, in fact, there was absolutely no evidence that the media themselves were to blame for the suicides. This was something that came later and they just jumped on it. Of course, it would have been very convenient for them had the media not reported it. But it would still mean more and more kids killing themselves and them still sitting there, taking their time trying to formulate a strategy, while teenagers were dying.'

(Tony Bonnici, interviewed on June 22, 2011)

As far as IF's limited prominence in the national Bridgend coverage is concerned, Bonnici identifies the mishandling of the situation by the authorities as one of, if not, the most important aspect of the local suicide problem, but admits that this was not the reason why the latter became front-page news:

'[Institutional failure] is not the reason why [Bridgend] became a big story. It became a big story because of the sheer numbers of young people killing themselves. [...] The authorities [...] had actually known Bridgend was potentially going to be a suicide cluster. So, the argument is: why weren't [they] doing anything? But that wasn't the main thrust of anyone's story; that wasn't the main reason why people were interested in it in the first place. That was an aftermath.'

(Tony Bonnici, interviewed on June 22, 2011)

In the same interview, Bonnici reveals that the article he had originally written on the 2005 confidential report of Rogers and Page (2005) never made it to the *Daily Express* and was only published in the *News of the World* in a much shorter version (Bonnici, 2008d). This decision to either not publish the article in question (*Express*) or publish it after cutting it down by 85% (94 words of the *News of the World* report compared to the 634 words of the original, unpublished one) offers an insight into the editorial process of prioritising news stories based on their perceived newsworthiness (Fulton, 2005a).

Therefore, the shortened version of Bonnici's article, appearing in the *News of the World* of April 27, 2008 and particularly, at the bottom of page 34 of that date's paper, does not just criticise officials for missing the warnings of health experts, but also clearly shows the limited media interest in this angle of the story. In that sense, although IF is present in a number of Bridgend-related articles (33 in total), it is in the vast majority of them [all but Bonnici's (2008d) *News of the World* story] not deemed newsworthy enough in itself to be the main point of attention. On the contrary, it usually operates in the context of other main frames, drawing attention to yet another factor that could have contributed to the Bridgend suicides and thus underlining the complexity of the problem. Bonnici himself does not explicitly argue against the newsworthiness of the IF aspect per se, but the background information he provides on the changes made to his *News of the World* piece before publication leave little doubt about it. At the same time, he attributes the increased media interest in Bridgend to the large number of suicide victims (see preceding quote) and also emphasises the importance of personalising the story:

'I'm sure that the authorities would perfectly like [Bridgend-like problems] to be seen as a statistic. Because just saying that thirteen people have committed suicide is a lot less powerful than saying that these children, these teenagers have died. [...] It is far more powerful to say that and, of course, they would rather that we just see them as numbers.'

(Tony Bonnici, interviewed on June 22, 2011)

Consequently, it becomes evident that unless stressing the mistakes made in the case of a specific suicide victim (for instance, Anthony Martin), the study of the purely bureaucratic details of the mishandling of the Bridgend situation by the authorities is unlikely to attain the desired dramatic effect on its own. In other words, unless presented alongside other, more newsworthy aspects of the problem, IF is more likely to be downplayed by journalists, since a primary focus on it would, in all probability, undermine their aim to construct a human-centred and unambiguous story, which readers would find easy and interesting to follow (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2011).

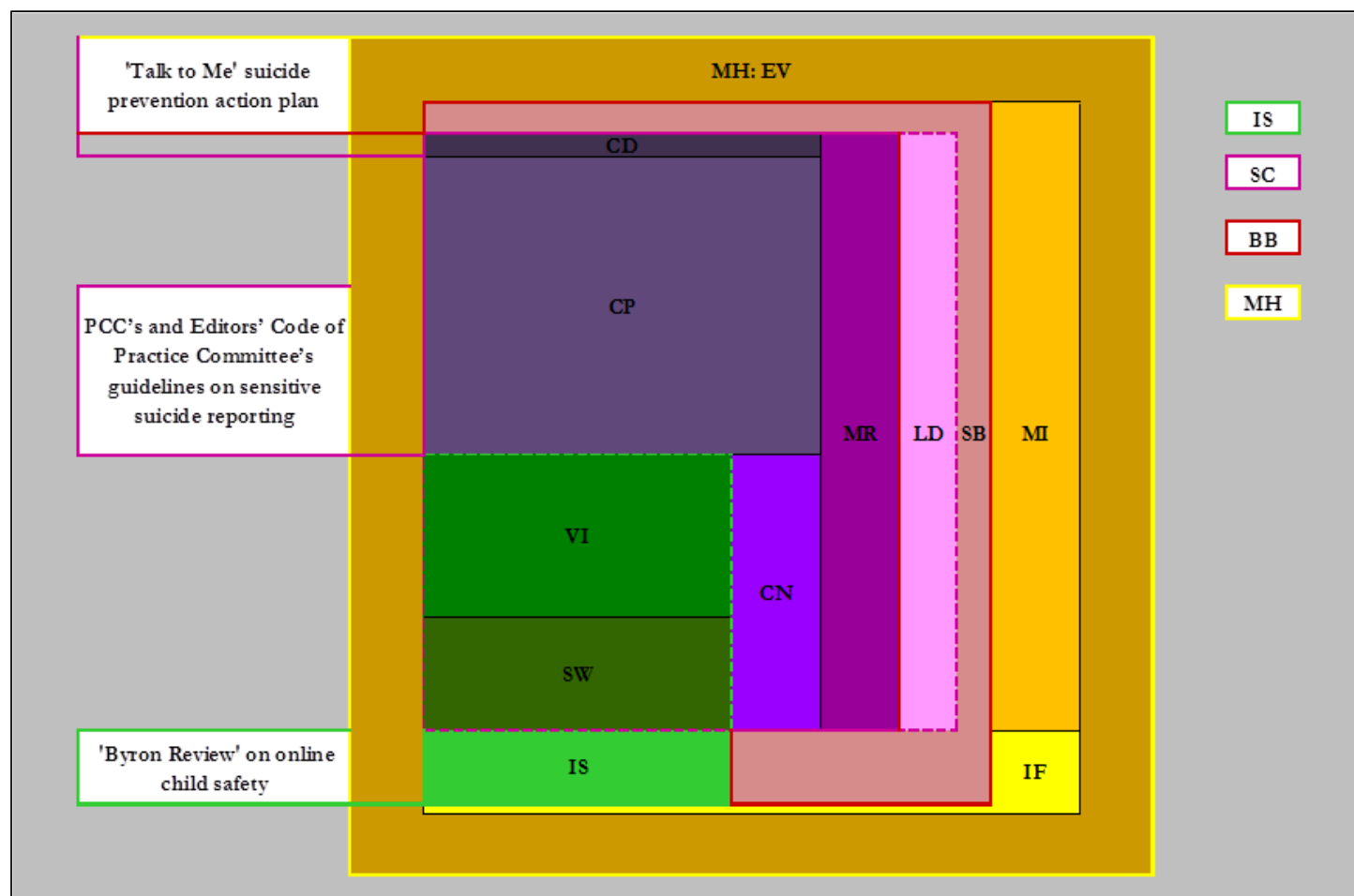
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the medicalisation of the Bridgend suicide problem by the British national press, particularly, at the way in which the local deaths were seen as an opportunity to underline the seriousness and stress the mental health ramifications of

youth suicide. First of all, the emotional vulnerability of the deceased has been discussed. It has been argued that, due to their young age, these are largely perceived as inexperienced, impulsive and, generally, emotionally fragile, which seals their ‘victim’ status and elevates ‘Mental Health: Emotional Vulnerability’ (MH: EV) to a super-frame overlaying the others. The transition from this super-frame to an independent MH frame has subsequently been documented and the limited newsworthiness of suicide incidents presented strictly within a ‘Mental Illness’ (MI) rather than an EV context has been pointed out. The key role of mental health experts in defining the nature and appropriate responses to the South Wales problem has been acknowledged and the importance of proactivity and stigma elimination for suicide prevention has been highlighted. Finally, the extent to which the Bridgend situation could be viewed as a result of medical and political authorities’ failure to deal promptly and effectively with it has been considered.

The current chapter completes the study of the four main frames, after which it is evident that the British national press’ involvement in constructing Bridgend as a social problem and in raising public awareness around it has been crucial. Nonetheless, the social problems process is not limited to the media arena, nor does it end with the recognition of the existence of the Bridgend problem (Loseke, 2003a; Best, 2008). In the aftermath of the Bridgend deaths and given the high levels of attention drawn to the issue, the authorities adopt a series of measures and develop action plans aiming to tackle it. Therefore, the identification of the increased local suicide rates as problematic and particularly, their conception as a problem of one cause rather than another has policy implications which have already been briefly mentioned, but need to be further looked at for the full spectrum of the Bridgend problem to be covered. Adopting a holistic perspective, the following chapter will bring together the findings of the media analysis that has preceded it and discuss the aftermath of the Bridgend experience in terms of the influence that the increased 2008 news attention and public concern over the issue has had on policymaking.

Figure 9.1:
The Bridgend suicide problem as framed in the national British press and the main policy responses to it



CHAPTER NINE

Bridgend and beyond

‘If the media hadn’t descended on Bridgend, there would not be a national suicide prevention strategy today.’

(Former Bridgend Samaritans director Darren Matthews, interviewed on July 8, 2011)

‘I think the positive thing out of [Bridgend] would be much more awareness of how dangerous sometimes teenage use of social media can be; a lot more awareness amongst the press on how they should cover [suicide]; and one would hope that coming out of that would be a prevention of a future Bridgend inasmuch as were a pattern to start to develop, it wouldn’t necessarily be identified as ‘a pattern’. [...] It wouldn’t be ‘Bridgend No.2’ headlines.’

(*The Observer*’s readers’ editor Stephen Pritchard, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

Introduction

This chapter will bring together the key findings of the preceding analysis and further discuss the thesis’ theoretical, methodological and empirical value. It will build on this analysis, but at the same time go beyond it by analysing policymaking as the last stage in the evolution of the Bridgend case over time. I will study policies introduced in the post-Bridgend era and regarded, at least partly, as a response to the events of 2008. Such policies do not necessarily adopt a Bridgend-specific perspective, but often place the local suicide problem within a wider context, thus showing how this problem is ultimately made sense of. They indicate the level to which each of the previously examined frames has succeeded in convincing the public and the competent authorities that this is ‘the way things [really] are’ (Fulton, 2005a: 230), while providing a clearer insight into the broader issues that come to the fore apropos Bridgend. In that way, the study of these policies complements that of the relevant news reports that has preceded it and is deemed essential to the purposes of the thesis. This discussion of the policy implications of Bridgend does not aim to suggest that the local suicide problem is solved as soon as the corresponding strategies are introduced nor to overlook that their implementation is ongoing and that their objectives are frequently in need of revision. On the contrary, its principal goal is to underline the significance of this high-profile case, which is so powerful that it eventually becomes an important point of reference not just in the media, but in the policy arena as well.

Aside from the immediate policy responses to the problem and in order to offer as clear an insight as possible into the issues brought to the fore in the aftermath of Bridgend, I will also evaluate the long-term ramifications of the 2008 events both on a local and a media level. Particularly, the ‘signal’ value (Innes, 2004) of the Bridgend case and its gravity in the years following its construction as a problem in the national press will be assessed. In the light of the Bridgend experience, suicide reporting in the post-Leveson era, and specifically the role of media professionals in not just covering, but also de-stigmatising and ultimately preventing suicide, will be discussed. Recommendations towards promoting a better grasp of the risks involved and a more sensitive approach to suicide and mental illness amongst them will be made. Finally, the limitations of the present study will be considered and, in their light, suggestions for future research will be presented.

1. The press construction of the Bridgend suicides as a social problem

This thesis has offered an in-depth analysis of the claims-making process through which the Bridgend suicides were constructed as a social problem by the national British press. Bridgend constitutes a unique case study because it has brought attention to the connections between suicide and the media and allowed these to be explored. It has been shown that these connections are nowadays more complex than ever not just because of news journalists’ crucial role in framing and raising awareness (Best, 2008) over the issue, but also because of the possibility of a Werther effect (Phillips, 1974; Sonneck et al., 1994; Etzersdorfer et al., 2001). The different factors potentially contributing to the Bridgend suicide cluster have been considered, but the primary focus of this research has been on the Bridgend case as an extraordinary media phenomenon. The media focus of the thesis does not aim to overlook the gravity of the local suicide problem, but to stress that in our highly mediated era the boundaries between ‘media’ and ‘actual’ reality are very fluid, if existent at all (McRobbie, 1994; Osborne, 1995; Manning, 1998). Moreover, the selection and study of a single extraordinary case does not aspire to represent the ‘norm’, but is important to be considered on its own merits (Benedict, 1992, cited in Greer 2003).

The large number of local suicide victims undoubtedly adds to the significance of the Bridgend case, but its exceptional empirical value mainly lies in the great and sudden media interest in it, the element of media reflexivity it presents and its policy implications which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. The Bridgend story was to a large extent reported as a ‘causal mystery’ (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002) with

officials and journalists desperately trying to determine the nature of the problem. At the same time, it presented some distinctive features that differentiated it from typical suicide stories and rendered it a fruitful case study: firstly, the fact that it involved a problematic social condition that suddenly came to the local and subsequently national press' attention after a decade of being present in the Bridgend area offered an insight into the elements contributing to the gradual increase of the story's newsworthiness. Secondly, unlike other suicide stories, Bridgend was not a one-off news story but a rolling one that remained in the news for several months and largely unfolded while in the media spotlight with more and more local youngsters taking their own lives during that time. Thirdly and most importantly, the uniqueness of the Bridgend case consists in the fact that after the authorities publicly accused the media of adding to the problem and journalists responded, the case evolved from a spatio-temporally specific phenomenon to a wider debate about the ethical parameters for the news reporting of suicide. This element of media reflexivity and the consequent dialogue over sensitive suicide reporting and press standards in general are not present in other suicide stories. The Editors' Codebook (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2014) refers to the challenges with which journalists covering the South Wales events were faced and recognises the magnitude of the Bridgend case in the field of suicide reporting. As will be further discussed in the following sections, this dialogue over press standards in relation to the reporting of suicide is of great importance in the post-Leveson era. The explicit reference to the Bridgend suicides as an example of speculative and sensationalised coverage in the Leveson (2012a) report also stresses the exceptional value attributed to this particular case on a policy level, thereby attesting to its landmark status and its likely influence on future suicide reporting (see also section 2.B and 3).

A number of other studies have looked at the clustering of suicides (Exeter and Boyle, 2007; Larkin and Beautrais, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; Gould et al., 2014), the influence of traditional and new media on suicidal behaviour (Phillips, 1974; Etzersdorfer et al., 2001; Whitlock et al., 2006; Biddle et al., 2008; Smithson et al., 2011) and the newsworthiness of suicide (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002; Jamieson et al., 2003; Pirkis et al., 2007). However, these studies focus largely on the aetiology of suicide, homogenise the individual suicide incidents and do not adequately capture the full spectrum of the media's role in the construction of the suicide problem. This is precisely the gap in the literature that this thesis has addressed. It has built on the preceding studies but at the same time gone a step further by looking at the evolution of the Bridgend suicide

problem over time. It has not just provided an analysis of the content of the Bridgend-related reports but also shed light on the news production process that preceded their publication; it has documented the rising concern around the issue that led to its transition from the local to the national press; it has discussed the impact that each new suicide had on the Bridgend narrative and drawn on additional sources of information (such as official suicide and deprivation statistics) to assess the validity of the claims made in the relevant news reports; finally, it has acknowledged that the Bridgend coverage did not take place in a vacuum, but had tangible consequences involving the adoption of different policies seeking to tackle (what were perceived as) the causes of the 2008 events (see section 2).

Building on Walklate and Petrie's (2013) approach, I have brought together the academic, media and policy narratives constructed around the Bridgend case. I have already explored, and will further consider, the interconnections between these narratives in order to evaluate the influence that the Bridgend experience could have on the framing of subsequent cases of youth suicide clusters. The thesis has developed a theoretical framework which draws on two different sets of literature: a) psychological and sociological research on the aetiology of suicide and b) media and social problems research. By doing so, it advances contextual constructionist theory in relation to the construction of suicide as a media product and a social problem in the 21st century.

On the one hand and because of its media focus, the thesis primarily provides an in-depth understanding of the increased risk of imitative suicides faced by young people in our multi-mediated world and the media's role in the construction of the problem of youth suicide. The elements that make a story newsworthy (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2011) have been discussed with regard to the media's agenda-setting role (Cohen, 1963) and its importance for the 'social problems game' (Loseke, 2003a). I have drawn parallels between constructing an appealing news story and constructing a social problem, suggesting that these two processes are not distinct from each other but overlap, since they both involve a rhetorical exercise that aims to draw the public's attention. It has been argued that, due to the emphasis often placed on the 'dark side' of cyberspace and its unforeseen consequences especially for young people (Livingstone, 2009; Wykes, 2010), the notion of 'risk' identified as a cardinal news value by Jewkes (2011) has nowadays largely been 'technologised' to the point that 'technology' should be regarded as a cardinal news value in itself. At the same time, the relationship between traditional and new media has been explored. More specifically, the

contemporary fluidity between the online and offline worlds and the potential benefits from establishing flexible and resilient identities online (Turkle, 1997; Seymour and Lupton, 2004; Hardey, 2002a, 2002b) have been acknowledged. Given that traditional media like the press have nowadays ‘extended’ their hegemony in the digital domain (Curran et al., 2012), their tendency to demonise the Internet seems unfounded or even hypocritical. This tendency has been attributed not necessarily to traditional media’s hostility towards the Internet per se, but to the fact that as a new medium the latter constitutes an easy target. The risks from its use have not yet been fully explored and it is precisely this uncertainty that allows the construction of relevant dramatic and unexpected news stories likely to attract the public’s attention.

On the other hand, suicide has, within the established constructionist framework, always been considered in context. Aside from media discourse, this contextual constructionist approach also takes into account the actual nature of suicide, without regarding the examination of the psycho-social factors potentially contributing to it as ‘ontological gerrymandering’ (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985). It offers an insight into numerous issues outside which the understanding of the Bridgend deaths, both as a local and a media phenomenon, would be incomplete. These include: the view of suicide as a result of ‘psychache’ (Shneidman, 1996; Joiner, 2005) or of a deeper social malaise (Durkheim, 2002 [1897]); the impact of socio-economic deprivation (Boxer et al., 1995; Bernburg et al., 2009) and the strains of modern existence (Eckersley, 1995); the inability of suicide statistics to capture the actual extent of the problem (Zilboorg, 1936; Surtees, 1992); the risk of imitation (Phillips, 1974; Etzersdorfer et al., 2001; Pirkis et al., 2006) and the potential influence of new media on suicidal behaviour (Whitlock et al., 2006; Barak, 2007; Biddle et al., 2008; Eichenberg, 2008). Building on these theorists, I have identified the complexity of the suicidal act and documented the various challenges a young person in the 21st century is faced with, especially when growing up in a socio-economically deprived area (Patterson and Pegg, 1999) like Bridgend.

With regard to the emotions involved in the process of social problem construction, I have adapted Loseke’s (2003b) argument about the ‘sympathy for victims/condemnation for victimisers’ dichotomy to the contextual constructionist approach of my thesis. Because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter of youth suicide and the coincidence between the roles of the ‘victim’ and ‘victimiser’ in the face of the deceased, it has been argued that the aforementioned dichotomy needs to be reconsidered. More specifically, it has been suggested that this manichaeistic view of the

issue, which is to a large extent still dominant and consistent with the demand for easy to understand, unambiguous, human-centred stories (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2011), does not adequately capture the wide range of emotions involved in the construction of the suicide problem. The morally tinged language used by different claims-makers in the context of the 'social problems game' (Loseke, 2003a) and particularly their use of it to assign causal and treatment responsibilities (Iyengar, 1989) has been analysed in depth. At the same time, however, through its contextual perspective, this thesis suggests that beyond the key stakeholders there are a number of other individuals whose emotions also need to inform the social problems game. These emotions do not just involve one's feelings right before deciding to take his/her own life, but also: long-lasting feelings of distress often associated with the disjunction between the culturally accepted goals and the legitimate means to achieve them (Merton, 1938); the banality of late modernity and the thrill of exploring the boundaries between life and death (Lyng, 1990; Hayward, 2002; Ferrell, 2004); the stigma of mental illness responsible for the sufferers' hesitation to seek help, for grieving families' attempts to present the suicides of their loved ones as accidental deaths (Zilboorg, 1936) and even for coroners' reluctance to issue a suicide verdict when the available evidence is inconclusive (Surtees, 1992); finally, journalists' confusion over the risk of a media-incited Werther effect and the significance of sensitive suicide reporting (Jamieson et al., 2003).

By shedding light on this plethora of emotions involved in the social problems game, my intention has been to promote a view of the problem of suicide as a problem of suicidal individuals, i.e. to bring attention back to the people affected by the social condition identified as a problem. The social problems game indeed includes 'competitions and strategies for winning' (Loseke, 2003a: 20), the study of which is, as has been pointed out throughout the thesis, very important. However, while focusing on winning the 'game', participants (and by extension social scientists studying this claims-making process) risk losing sight of its ultimate purpose, which is to actually tackle the identified social problem. Reversing Woolgar and Pawluch's (1985) argument, I have regarded the risk of such a 'phenomenological gerrymandering' as being far more serious than that of the 'ontological gerrymandering' they warn contextual constructionists of and running counter to the objectives of this project. It is therefore essential that, alongside the relevant claims, the potential impact of the proposed actions on the people affected by the problem is also considered. This is a goal that, as far as my thesis is concerned, has been achieved through the adoption of a contextual constructionist

approach that recognises the significance of the news reports under study but at the same time goes beyond their content.

Moreover, the need to study suicide in context has played a key role in the development of the methodological framework of this project and dictated the use of a mixed-methods design. The thesis builds on and further advances Altheide's (1987, 1996) 'ethnographic content analysis' (ECA) model by offering an insight into the various emerging themes and frames, while stressing the way in which these interact with each other and are brought together into a coherent whole (Hartley, 1982; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998). The in-depth study of the different frames and sub-frames used by the press to make sense of the Bridgend events and their perception as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, has captured the intricacies of the case and the evolution of the corresponding 'social problems game' (Loseke, 2003a) over time. To the same end, my media analysis has been enriched by in-depth interviews with key claims-makers and the close examination of relevant statistical and policy reports. At the same time, building on Fincham et al.'s (2008) work, this project has provided an ethical basis for engaging with primary and secondary suicide-related data, considering the potential impact of such research on the individuals directly involved as well as on the analyst himself/herself.

Through the study of the Bridgend case, this thesis has provided a paradigm for the study of social problem construction. This paradigm operates on two levels: a) a horizontal level, focusing on the transition of the Bridgend issue across the different stages of the claims-making process (from local to national press to policymaking) and b) a vertical level, where I have looked at the different themes pervading this process and forming the frames through which the local suicides were explained. In support of Hall et al.'s (1978) study, the search for the roots of the Bridgend problem in the regional press has revealed a process of convergence through which the suicides of more and more young male victims in the area were associated with each other and viewed as evidence of a wider phenomenon. It has also shown a largely unquestioned acceptance on local journalists' part of the definitions provided by sources ranking high in the 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967), which, as will be further discussed later on, was frequently not the case for national journalists covering the Bridgend issue. It was mainly due to the local coroner publicly expressing his anxiety over the rising occurrence of youth suicides within his district that Bridgend came to be seen as the 'suicide capital of the UK' (Norman, *South Wales Echo*, 2008: 6).

Entailing a series of sudden and unexplained young deaths in the area, the Bridgend events were of considerable significance, dramatic, violent, unpredictable and thus, newsworthy (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2011) in themselves. But it was mainly due the appeal of the first female victim (Naylor, 2001), the extraordinariness of her decision to die by hanging (Platt, 1992) and the possibility it offered to present all the individual local incidents within a familiar cyber-deviance context (Wall, 2001, 2010; Yar, 2010) that the issue became front-page news across the UK. Returning to the aforementioned argument that 'technology' should be elevated to a cardinal news value, the emphasis placed on the alleged Internet aspect of the Bridgend problem confirms that cyberspace comes to be seen as an inherently deviant, carnivalistic medium (Yar, 2010). Consequently, it is more likely than its 'physical' counter-part to offer suitable material for the construction of novel and negative news stories, based on the notion of risk and often involving young people. As pointed out by journalist Zach Newmark in our interview (see Chapter Five), it was this construction of the Bridgend deaths as the result of an '*Internet* suicide cult' (my emphasis) that was primarily responsible for the media attention the issue attracted in 2008. In that sense, had the original Bridgend story been about a 'Suicide cult' rather than an '*Internet* suicide cult' (my emphasis), it is questionable whether it would have been as newsworthy.

The study of the frames used by the national press to make sense of the Bridgend issue as well as their sub-frames has stressed the dynamic nature of the claims-making process and the intricacies of the suicide problem. As shown in Figure 9.1, these frames and sub-frames evolve over time and frequently overlap with each other, thus shedding light on different aspects of the local suicide phenomenon. Four main frames have been identified: 'Internet Suicide' (Chapter Five), which reflects a climate of fear and uncertainty around the 'dark side' of cyberspace; 'Suicide Contagion' (Chapter Six), which focuses on the possibility of a Werther effect; 'Breakdown Britain' (Chapter Seven), which explores the social implications of the Bridgend suicides, regarding youth's engagement in deviant behaviour as symptomatic of a society in malaise (Garland, 2008; Jewkes, 2011); finally, 'Mental Health' (Chapter Eight), which views suicide as pathological (Cross, 2010; Marsh, 2010) and stresses the emotional vulnerability of those at risk. All four of these frames revolve around two key elements: 'causality' (what caused the Bridgend suicides?) and 'morality' (moral character of the deceased/moral responsibility to prevent further loss of young lives). This finding is consistent with Coyle and MacWhannell's (2002) analysis of suicide stories. In the Bridgend case, however,

because of the increasing number of suicide victims and the long duration of the relevant news coverage, these elements do not just pervade the individual suicide stories but establish a sense of continuity between them. They underline the urgency of the situation and the need for answers and ultimately serve as the thematic axes around which the Bridgend narrative is built. This narrative is of great intertextual value (Barthes, 1974; Kristeva, 1986 [1967]; Manning, 1998; Ferrell et al., 2008), since it echoes various texts of the crime genre and seeks to intrigue, to shock or even entertain the audience just like any murder mystery or thriller movie would. Its appeal consists in that it blends three levels of concern, considering the potential causes and implications of the Bridgend suicides in relation, firstly, to the deceased and their families, secondly, to the Bridgend community and, thirdly, to society as a whole. However, not all of the above-mentioned frames are equally capable of blending these micro, meso and macro concerns effectively to construct a plausible and unambiguous story, which is why those that are the most capable attract far more media attention than the rest. ‘Suicide Contagion’ (SC) is the dominant frame in the entire Bridgend coverage because it places much greater emphasis than the other frames on the potential online or offline links between the deceased. The increased newsworthiness of this frame lies precisely in its potential to present the relevant suicides as an individual, local and simultaneously broader social problem.

In support of Cohen’s (2002 [1972]) argument that deviant behaviour often leads to the creation of an exploitative culture, it has been suggested that the Bridgend case was exploited and that this exploitation was threefold: firstly, its commercial exploitation consisted in the journalistic attempts to create a powerful story (Fulton, 2005a) out of the relevant events in order to attract readers’ attention and thus increase newspaper sales. The competitive nature of the journalistic profession and the opportunity to construct an exceptionally appealing narrative out of the South Wales events were brought up by several of my interviewees (Madeleine Moon, Ed Caesar, Carole Cadwalladr). Secondly, as far as the ideological exploitation of Bridgend is concerned, the study of the relevant news coverage revealed the struggle for ideological dominance which takes place in the media arena (Gramsci, 1971) and influences the progression of the ‘social problems game’ (Loseke, 2003a). The analysis offered in this thesis indicates that Bridgend provided media professionals and other interested parties taking advantage of the power of the media with the opportunity to address and promote a very specific understanding of the following key issues: Internet regulation, appropriate suicide reporting, deprivation and social breakdown and, finally and most importantly, mental illness. Thirdly and to a

lesser extent, the Bridgend suicide problem was, despite its grave and disquieting nature, also the target of inappropriate and even vulgar jokes. These jokes were in their turn linked to a deeper social malaise, being regarded as a signal of a permissive society where ‘anything goes’ (No author, *The Times*, 2008d).

The commercial and ideological exploitation of the Bridgend case was largely made possible through the frequently sensationalist portrayal of the situation in the relevant news reports. As is often the case in suicide reporting (Frey et al., 1997; Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002), the complexity of the Bridgend problem was often overlooked to the point where this came to be seen as a problem of a single cause rather than of a constellation of contributory factors. Most importantly, this sensationalist coverage mainly involved the construction of Bridgend as a ‘suicide town’, the unsubstantiated ‘Internet suicide cult’ theory and the overall speculation about the alleged ‘dark secret’ behind the local youth suicides. The analysis of the relevant news reports in this thesis showed that although this sensationalist account of the Bridgend suicides was more common in tabloids and mid-sheets (with the *Daily Mail* clearly taking the lead), broadsheets (especially the *Daily/Sunday Telegraph*) were occasionally as keen to offer an equally sensationalist view on the issue. Considering the Bridgend case as a media phenomenon, it is evident that the relevant national press reporting could have been less speculative, less graphic, less intrusive and essentially of a lesser volume. The concerns expressed at the time by suicide prevention charities like Papyrus (2008) about this intense media interest in the matter being likely to trigger a Werther effect were legitimate. However, whether or not any of the Bridgend suicides were indeed a result of such a Werther effect is uncertain. Any attempt to answer this question inevitably leads to even further retrospective speculation over the victims’ motives. Nonetheless, what actually is certain is that this increased media attention was in itself not groundless. Bridgend had, according to official figures, been a socio-economically disadvantaged area with a higher than the Welsh average youth suicide rate for a whole decade (NPHS for Wales, 2008) and an even more alarming rise in local suicide incidents in recent years (ONS, 2012b). Even if the Bridgend issue was to a certain extent misrepresented by journalists for the sake of newsworthiness, it was far more than what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) would define as a ‘media panic’. The thesis revealed that the pertinent national news coverage established Bridgend as a problem in the public’s consciousness, thus putting pressure on the authorities to respond to it. In other words, the post-2008 co-ordinated attempts to tackle the problem were principally a product of the national

media's reporting, which, despite its shortcomings, brought so much attention to the serious, yet overlooked for ten years, matter of local youth suicides that it was impossible for the authorities to remain inactive about it any longer.

Although journalists are responsible for finally bringing the issue to the public's attention, their framing of it echoes to a great degree that of officials and experts, who are the primary definers (Hall et al., 1978) of the Bridgend problem. Arguments by the Bridgend MP, the local coroner, the police or local government officials and mental health specialists are, due to the high status of those who make them (Becker, 1967), given the most prominence in the relevant national press reports. It is therefore these actors that ultimately determine the course of the claims-making process since the Bridgend coverage follows the police investigation and the actions taken to prevent future deaths. The medicalisation of the issue of suicide (Cross, 2010; Marsh, 2010) is in the case of the Bridgend coverage confirmed by the 'super-frame' function of 'Mental Health' and results in mental health professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists 'owning' (Best, 2008) the Bridgend problem: they are considered the authoritative source to define the nature of the problem and, by extension, the measures required to tackle it. Nevertheless, the study of the Bridgend-related reports in this thesis has revealed that this 'ownership' does not necessarily reduce the press' role to an uncritical reproduction of the definitions provided by the latter. The Bridgend case study adds to the existing literature (Cricher, 2003; Cross, 2010; Greer and McLaughlin, 2010) suggesting that, even if media professionals do not act as primary definers themselves, they can often challenge the definitions of the authorities or further elaborate on them. Apart from reporting on the progress of the police investigation and the strategies adopted to support those at risk, the national press undertakes a watchdog role, ensuring the matter is effectively being dealt with by officials and pointing out institutional failures if it is not. In that sense, news reporters blame the police for failing to see the allegedly obvious links between the Bridgend victims and for attempting to scapegoat the media instead. They also shed light on the deficiencies of the mental health system which may have contributed to the South Wales problem. Additionally, the 'Breakdown Britain' frame is primarily based on journalists' rather than officials' claims about the problem.

The claims-making process through which the Bridgend problem was made sense of in the national British press mostly favoured a conservative ideology. This conservative ideology, which advocated greater control over the Internet, better regulation of traditional media and the safeguarding of traditional moral values and

institutions, added to the newsworthiness of the Bridgend story. This finding is consistent with Jewkes' (2011) list of news values. At the same time, the left-wing ramifications of the Bridgend experience have also been acknowledged. The South Wales case advanced the exploration of the existing links between suicide and poor socio-economic conditions (Boxer et al., 1995; Stack, 2000; Maskill et al., 2005), stressing the increased risk for the disadvantaged classes. It highlighted the flaws of the current educational system, which allegedly perpetuates social inequality (The Children's Society, 2006, 2007; UNICEF, 2007). Finally, it allowed those working in mental health services and especially suicide prevention charities to bring attention to the risks deriving from the shortage of resources invested in the field and the social marginalisation of the mentally ill (Rogers and Page, 2005; CCfW, 2007). These issues will be further discussed in the following section, which looks at how the Bridgend situation influenced policymaking.

2. Policy responses to the Bridgend problem

A. **'Talk to me':** As made clear in the previous chapters, aside from journalists' attempts to establish online or offline links between the individual victims, the local suicide

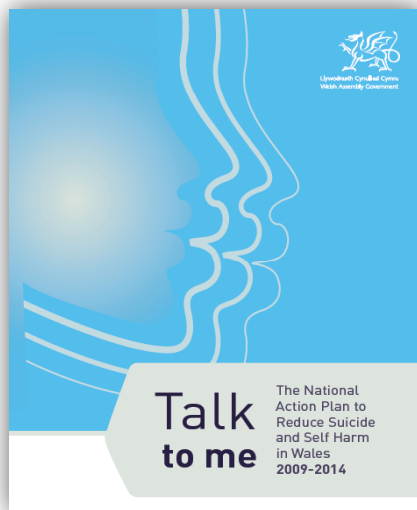


Figure 9.2: 'The recent sad deaths from suicide in young people in South Wales has highlighted the need for us to pull together the significant amounts of suicide prevention policy and initiatives in place into a single action plan', stated the Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services Edwina Hart (2008: 1), announcing the development of the 'Talk to me' national suicide prevention action plan, which was finally launched in November 2009.

problem is associated with the living conditions of Bridgend and the lack of support to vulnerable youngsters. Particularly, the study of the 'Mental Health' frame in Chapter Eight has pointed out an assumption that had the authorities been more prompt in adopting a national suicide prevention strategy, Bridgend's suicide outbreak of 2008 might have been prevented ('Institutional Failure' sub-frame). By the same token, had the Bridgend matter not received so much media attention in 2008, it is questionable whether such a strategy would have eventually been adopted. The Bridgend coroner Philip Walters (quoted in Salkeld, *Daily Mail*, 2008b: 41) stated at the time: 'I hope that these events in Bridgend will be a catalyst to give us a national suicide prevention strategy covering the whole of Wales for young deaths'. The subsequent policy

developments precisely confirm this catalyst function of the Bridgend case. In February 2008, when the press' interest in the Bridgend suicides had reached its peak with new suicide incidents occurring in the area almost every week, the then Minister for Health and Social Services in the WAG, Edwina Hart (2008), released a statement, acknowledging the urgent need to tackle the problem and announcing the production of a suicide prevention action plan for Wales. This action plan, largely based on the exemplary Scottish 'Choose Life' model and entitled 'Talk to me' (Figure 9.2), was finally launched in November 2009. What is remarkable, however, is that, despite the repeated calls for such a plan appearing in the national press in early 2008, when it was finally adopted, it received a very limited amount of news attention, being reported only in one out of the eight newspapers under study (see Coles, *The Sun*, 2009b). That is because by that time the press interest in the Bridgend story had subsided, either due to journalists' impression of having fulfilled their duty after compelling an official response to the issue or, most likely, due to their fatigue with it:

'To a certain extent, many of the stories that were written actually did mean that a lot more resources were put in to dealing with the issue [...] and that would have had an effect. [That was] 'job done' [for journalists].'

(Tony Bonnici of the *Daily Express*, interviewed on June 22, 2011)

'It wasn't to do with the national news media suddenly growing a big heart and thinking 'We should leave everyone alone'. It is the natural cycle of things. They were interested for a little bit and then they weren't.'

(Ed Caesar of *The Sunday Times*, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

The 'Talk to me' action plan, published by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) in 2009, does not make any specific mention to the Bridgend events of the year before, but considers the problem of suicide and self-harm on an all-Wales basis. Nonetheless, the suicide prevention framework it establishes largely involves issues that were brought into perspective through the extensive coverage of the 2008 deaths such as the social stigma attached to mental health problems, the impact of socio-economic deprivation on one's mental well-being and the appropriate coverage of suicide. More specifically, the dominance of the medical discourse surrounding suicide (Marsh, 2010) is manifest throughout the report. However, just like Joiner (2005), the 'Talk to me' scheme views the suicide problem as having both a psychological and a social aspect. Relationship problems, loss of employment, substance misuse and other personal problems are seen as causing great emotional distress and thus potentially leading the

individual to suicide. At the same time, the possibly detrimental impact of various socio-economic factors, including poverty, homelessness, social inequality and general social exclusion, on one's mental state, especially in the midst of the current economic recession, is also acknowledged. Contrary to its occasional simplified media portrayal as a private and mono-causal matter (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002), suicide is in the policy document in question perceived as a psychosocial phenomenon of a complex and multi-factorial aetiology. With regard to the imperative need to prevent future suicides, the importance of a proactive rather than reactive approach is, once again, underlined here. The provision of improved mental health services to distressed and suicidal individuals is identified as a vital step towards tackling the problem, but what is viewed as even more crucial is, as the title of the report ('Talk to me') indicates, to convince those individuals to open up and seek help before it is too late. The strategy (WAG, 2009) suggests that this goal can only be attained through a change in public attitudes to mental health issues, self-harm and suicide. Particularly, raising awareness and educating the public around these matters is considered essential to the elimination of the stigma attached to them. The media are regarded as playing a key role towards this end, which is why their involvement in this suicide prevention initiative is valued as a prerequisite for its success. At the time of writing (December 2014), the draft suicide prevention strategy 'Talk to me 2' has been published for consultation. The new strategy builds on the 2009 action plan but adopts a more realistic approach, focusing on a smaller number of attainable objectives in suicide prevention for the following five years. Amongst these objectives is, once again, to 'support the media in responsible reporting and suicidal behaviour' (WAG, 2014: 14). The document does not adequately explain what this 'responsible reporting' actually consists in but refers to the Editors' Codebook (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2014) for further guidance on the subject. The policy influence of the Bridgend case on future suicide reporting will be discussed in the following section.

B. Bridgend and future suicide reporting: an example to avoid? The analysis of the relevant press reports in the previous chapters has pointed out that the Bridgend suicides were not only a local phenomenon with a direct impact on community life, but also a media one, which challenged journalists' ethics and professional standards with regard to how such a sensitive topic should be covered. The scientifically acknowledged risk of triggering a Werther effect through suicide reporting (Phillips, 1974; Sonneck et al., 1994; Etzersdorfer et al., 2001; Pirkis et al., 2006) has been a central theme in the Bridgend

coverage. Building on Cross' (2008) argument, the Bridgend case raised serious questions about the purpose and ultimately the necessity of reporting suicide: it highlighted the blurred boundaries between information what is in the public's interest to know (for instance, that a young person's body was found in Bridgend) and what interests the public in a voyeuristic way (such as a graphic account of the discovery of the body or speculation about the agony of the victim's last hours). The coverage of the 2008 suicides in South Wales also showed the PCC's inexperience in handling such urgent and delicate situations. '[P]erhaps if we had got there sooner we could have done more', admitted the then Chairman, Sir Christopher Meyer (quoted in PCC, 2009c: 5), while discussing the Commission's response to the press' sudden and overwhelming interest in Bridgend.

Even if the Bridgend coverage was at times excessive and inappropriate, reaching the levels of a media frenzy (Papyrus, 2008), on a policy level there were still important lessons to be learnt from its shortcomings. As argued by the readers' editor of *The Observer*, Stephen Pritchard, Bridgend is, in terms of its news coverage, elevated to a landmark case, whose flaws become an example to avoid; particularly, one which to a large extent determines how analogous suicide events will be reported in the future:

'I absolutely guarantee that every editor will be slightly jumpy about the subject of Bridgend in the future, or a similar one, because of the fallout from Bridgend. So, I think that the whole Bridgend example...we have actually got a lot of benefit in some respects, in the way that the media think twice the way it covers stories like that.'

(Stephen Pritchard, interviewed on June 23, 2011)

Likewise, without overlooking the tragic consequences of the South Wales case, the PCC's Head of Complaints, Scott Langham, also underlines its significance in respect of future suicide reporting and most importantly of the Commission's commitment to handle subsequent Bridgend-like situations more effectively:

'[I]n terms of actually bringing the whole issue of suicide into focus, discussing the issues surrounding it, discussing what the [Editors'] Code [of Practice] says, the briefing note [on reporting suicide], the issue of proactivity...people often say that it takes mistakes to learn about what happened and how you can go about things in a better way and I do think in that sense there is a positive aspect coming from [the Bridgend experience]; but I wouldn't like to accentuate the positives from such an awful situation.'

(Scott Langham, interviewed on June 8, 2010)

As mentioned in the previous statement, in order to ensure responsible reporting in delicate suicide cases in the future, the PCC (2009a, 2009b) re-examined and further elaborated on Clause 5(ii) of the Editors' Code of Practice (avoidance of 'excessive detail' about the suicide method) in a special report on the subject, which was included in its

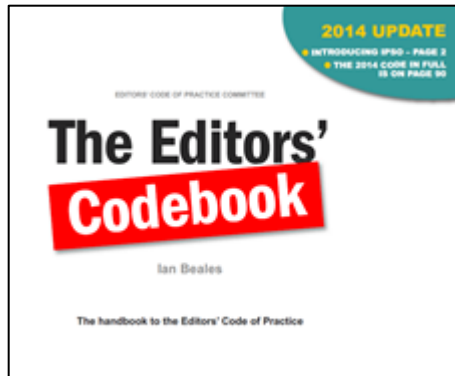


Figure 9.3: The Editors' Codebook by the Editors' Code of Practice Committee (2014) includes a briefing note with guidelines for sensitive suicide reporting based on the lessons learnt from the Bridgend experience. But are such discretionary measures adequate to prevent similar situations in the future?

Annual Review of 2008. At the same time, the Editors' Code of Practice Committee published a briefing note with guidelines on how a sensitive topic like suicide should be covered, which appeared in the preceding PCC report as well as in the Editors' Codebook (see PCC, 2009a and Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2014 respectively). As far as Clause 5(ii) is concerned, the PCC (2009a) points out that the publication of gratuitous or gruesome detail, either on a textual or a visual level, could possibly glamorise or trivialise suicide, thus increasing the risk of copycat incidents. Given

the potentially harmful effect of suicide-related news stories on vulnerable individuals (Phillips, 1974; Sonneck et al., 1994), journalists are encouraged to abstain from using graphic images and from presenting suicide in a positive light. They are also advised to include the contact details of suicide prevention charities offering support to those at risk in their articles. Moreover, the publication of victims' photographs acquired from friends or social networking sites without their families' consent is criticised for adding to the latter's distress and so is their constant republication in ensuing reports. Finally, in the aftermath of the Bridgend experience, the cumulative effect of excessive media attention (Papyrus, 2008), which consists of but at the same time goes beyond the repeated individual breaches of the Code, is identified as yet another problematic issue to be taken into account when reporting suicide.

The Editors' Code of Practice Committee's (2014: 51) briefing note on covering suicide (also appearing in PCC, 2009a: 17) acknowledges that the clause on 'excessive detail' and generally all the guidelines mentioned in the preceding paragraph are rather subjective, thus underlining the crucial role of the editing process in achieving the goal of appropriate reporting. 'There can be no hard rules in such subjective areas. These and similar measures can only be discretionary', it concludes. 'But the lessons of Bridgend are

that, by bearing them in mind, editors faced with difficult judgments at critical times could avoid causing unintended offence or exposure to accusations of insensitivity'. Discussing this subjectivity and the level to which it undermines the PCC's mission by allowing an 'anything goes' reporting in Bridgend-like situations, the Public Affairs director of the PCC, William Gore, recognises the need for proactivity. He stresses the importance of establishing a consistent set of principles through the PCC's adjudications as well as of properly training media professionals on how to cover suicide in a more sensitive way:

'Everything in the Code is subjective and, therefore, the PCC has to do two things: first of all, it has to establish case law (sic) in all of these various areas. [...] [O]ne of the problems around Bridgend was that there wasn't any case law, because that part of the Code did only come in in 2006. I don't think we made any rulings, or possibly one ruling, in that area, just because there hadn't been any complaints. So, it is absolutely right to say that editors were uncertain, and I think, to a certain extent, remain uncertain, about precisely what 'excessive detail' means. So, as well as setting up a case law, we have tried to do that by either initiating our own complaints on some occasions, encouraging people in the suicide prevention sector to complain to us and so on...As well as doing that, we have also made sure that, when we do our training programmes for journalists, which is something we do increasingly, we include aspects on suicide reporting. It is one area, where, I think, we have to be proactive.'

(William Gore, interviewed on May 21, 2010)

However, even though the adoption of such proactive measures primarily aims to prevent cases of insensitive suicide reporting, achieving this goal is not always possible. The study of the Bridgend case has shown that a more effective safety net for vulnerable individuals who suddenly find themselves caught up in a media story needs to be established. The protection that the PCC offers to these individuals is reactive rather than proactive, since the Commission requires first-party involvement in order to act, i.e. that the person affected by the allegedly insensitive report makes a complaint. Nonetheless, proactivity is still important here in terms of the PCC getting its message across and rendering the public aware of its services so that when and if the time comes, those who unwillingly become the centre of overwhelming media attention will know where to turn for help. The emphasis placed on this need to proactively inform the public about what the PCC can do to help when media reporting appears to be getting out of hand is often associated with the failings of the Bridgend coverage:

'[T]he PCC can offer assistance in various ways to individuals who find themselves caught up in a media story. [...] In part, the recognition that we needed to do more in

this area stemmed from our experience of how suicides in and around Bridgend in 2008 were reported, both locally and nationally.’

(PCC, 2010: 9)

‘I think if we had gone down there [in Bridgend] earlier, people would have been more aware perhaps of what they could do, about how they could complain [...] It is something which we clearly have to improve on in terms of the future and I think, if we had our time again, it would be a different way of doing things, certainly.’

(PCC Head of Complaints, Scott Langham, interviewed on June 8, 2010)

‘[It is important to make] sure that individual members of the public and also organisations are aware of our services, so that they can bring things to our attention when they see them. [...] I think if we had a situation like Bridgend again, [...], we’d be much quicker off the mark. We would make greater efforts to contact all the relevant people. [...] [N]ow we are more aware and I suppose my point of view is the positive lesson to have come out of this tragic situation: that we are, I think, better prepared to actually start contacting people, who might pass on what we can do to help at a much earlier stage.’

(Public Affairs director of the PCC, William Gore, interviewed on May 21, 2010)

The Bridgend experience and the role of the PCC in ensuring responsible suicide reporting were also brought up in the context of the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press, which constituted a response to the News International phone-hacking scandal and led to the publication of the Leveson report in November 2012. During this Inquiry, questions were raised about the PCC’s competence to ensure appropriate reporting and generally about the aims and efficacy of the current system of non-statutory media regulation. In his report, Lord Justice Leveson (2012b) concluded that the Commission had failed in its mission to ensure responsible and ethical reporting and should therefore be replaced by a new independent self-regulatory body. Following his recommendations, the PCC entered in March 2012 a transitional phase to prepare for its future abolition and replacement. At the time of writing (December 2014), the status of media regulation in the UK is unclear: in reaction to the system of recognition and review of the new press regulator established through Royal Charter and despite David Cameron’s warnings that refusal to sign up to the latter could possibly lead to compulsory statutory regulation in the future, the majority of UK newspapers set up a new regulatory body, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) [Nelson, *The Spectator*, 2013]. However, this new body, which officially succeeded the PCC in September 2014, is largely regarded as a ‘sham regulator’; that is because it

satisfies only a minority of Lord Leveson's recommendations; it is not sufficiently independent from the industry; finally, it bears close resemblance to its predecessor (Media Standards Trust, 2013; Deans, *The Guardian*, 2014; Greenslade, *The Guardian*, 2014). In November 2014, another self-regulator, the Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS), was set up as an alternative to IPSO, particularly one that aims to ensure greater compliance with Leveson's criteria (Heawood, 2014; Tambini, 2014). The situation is currently rather fluid, so it remains to be seen whether IPSO, IMPRESS or any other regulatory body that may be created will apply for recognition and generally whether the regime of media regulation envisaged by Lord Leveson in his 2012 report will after all be fully implemented in the near future.

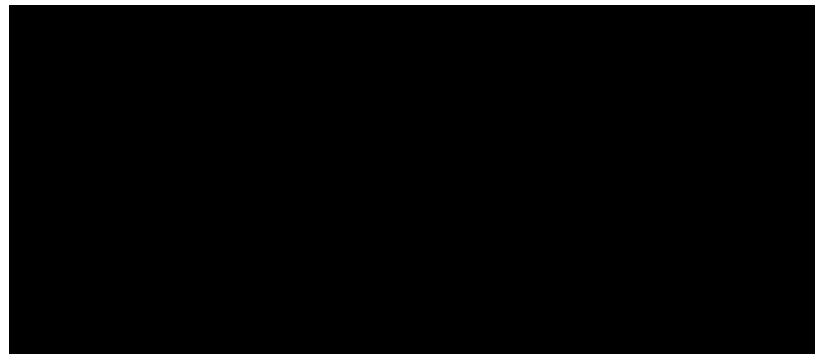
As far as suicide reporting is concerned, the abolition of the PCC does not render its work in the field and, by extension, its study in the current project any less significant. The new press regulator will be presented with the same challenges as its predecessor and expected to use the lessons learnt from the PCC's failings to deal with analogous sensitive cases more effectively. The Bridgend issue is only briefly addressed in the Leveson report (2012a: 448), which considers it a typical example of the 'intrusive and damaging press attention directed at the grieving families of suicides'. Journalists' attempts to establish links between the victims and present the local suicides as a result of a cult or a death pact are regarded as 'sensationalised reporting' based on 'unfounded speculation' (Leveson, 2012a: 448). Although the possibility of such reporting causing a Werther effect is not explicitly mentioned, this is extensively discussed in the Samaritans' submission to the Leveson Inquiry (2011), which the final report makes reference to. The organisation acknowledges that journalists have become much more aware of the risks related to suicide reporting and approach the issue much more responsibly in the post-Bridgend era. Nevertheless, it is argued that in order for the lessons learnt from Bridgend to have longevity and prevent the occurrence of similar crises in the future, a press regulator with teeth is needed. The influence of this suggestion on the recommendations made by Lord Leveson (2012b) is more than evident. With regard to what responsible coverage consists in, the Samaritans' view is that the word 'excessive' should be removed from the Editors' Code of Practice (PCC, 2009b) so that journalists are ultimately required to question whether any detail about the suicide method needs to be included in their reports. Additionally, media professionals reporting on delicate Bridgend-like situations should, according to the Samaritans, be aware that the risk of imitative suicides may not just derive from individual press reports, but also relate to the

prominence, volume and sensationalism of the overall coverage. These issues will be further discussed in section 3.

C. Tackling the risk of Internet suicide in the post-Bridgend era: Although there was no evidence to suggest that any of the Bridgend victims had accessed pro-suicide websites before taking their own lives, the original construction of their deaths as the product of an ‘Internet cult’ brought attention to this serious, yet previously overlooked, online risk. The key policy document studying the level and ramifications of juvenile exposure to the ‘dark side’ of cyberspace and published in the wake of the Bridgend deaths is psychologist Tanya Byron’s (2008) review of Internet child safety entitled ‘Safer Children in a Digital World’. The report itself does not explicitly refer to nor does it constitute a direct response to the Bridgend phenomenon. In fact, it had been commissioned by the Government in September 2007, that is, long before the high youth suicide rates of Bridgend were identified by the national British press as a matter of concern. However, what is important to note here is that, in the post-January 2008 era, which marks an increase in press interest and public anxiety over the numerous local deaths, these official efforts to curb suicide websites and the release of the Byron review coincide with and are often reported alongside the Bridgend events. The Government’s work against such sites ‘has been given renewed impetus after widespread public concern about a cluster of teenage suicides in Bridgend, South Wales’, write Frean and Ford (2008: 1) in their article for *The Times*, while a similar point of view is adopted by Wooding (*The Sun*, 2008b), Slack (*Daily Mail*, 2008) Moss (*Sunday Mirror*, 2008) and No author (*The Independent*, 2008f). The links established by the press between the authorities’ fight against pro-suicide websites and the Bridgend case reinforce the inferential structure (Lang and Lang, 1955) within which the local suicide problem comes to be seen as Internet-related, thereby demonstrating, once again, the potency of the original IS frame (see Chapter Five).

The potentially detrimental influence of pro-suicide websites on young and vulnerable individuals constitutes a recurring theme in Byron’s (2008) report. This is a theme which, as she states before the House of Commons’ Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2008b: 138), became a matter of public concern in the wake of the Bridgend phenomenon and which she thus felt the need to address in her review of online child safety. ‘The tragic cases that were going on in Bridgend’, she says, ‘during the course of this review obviously brought the whole issue around suicide and suicide websites very

much to the forefront of everyone's minds, and so alongside my call for evidence there was a huge amount of evidence and suggestions and concern coming into me for that'. She recognises that cyberspace may serve as a supportive, stigma-free environment for suicidal individuals to openly express their emotions and discuss their personal difficulties with other users going through similar situations. Nonetheless, at the same time, she maintains that online discussions between such like-minded and equally vulnerable individuals could easily get out of hand. Similarly to Whitlock et al. (2006) and Smithson et al. (2011), she underlines the risk of such online communications turning into an 'echo chamber', where users reinforce each other's feelings of self-destruction and ultimately come to consider suicide an acceptable or even appropriate response to their problems (Byron, 2008: 87).



Figures 9.4 (left) and 9.5 (right): The Byron review (left) constitutes a key policy document in the field of online child safety, which stresses, amongst others, the risk posed by pro-suicide websites. The report itself (Byron, 2008) does not make any reference to the South Wales deaths. However, its publication and all consequent governmental actions occur while concerns over Bridgend's alleged 'Internet suicide cult' are still prominent in the press, which is why articles like that on the right (Wooding, *The Sun*, 2008b: 4) associate the two, presenting the former as a direct response to the latter.

Following the widely reported publication of Byron's (2008) review, the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) was launched on September 29, 2008. The Council brings together over 180 organisations and individuals, working in partnership to raise public awareness and ensure better control over potentially harmful online material (UKCCIS, 2009). Moreover, responding to public concern over the potential links between suicide and the Internet, the Ministry of Justice (2008) released a statement on September 17, 2008, announcing its decision to update the Suicide Act of 1961. In this statement, the Justice Minister at the time, Maria Eagle, maintained that modernising the language of the relevant legislation was necessary in order, firstly, to make clear that encouraging suicide is as illegal online as it is offline, and, secondly, to reassure the public that cyberspace is not a lawless environment. The proclaimed changes were introduced

through Section 59 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 and came into effect on February 1, 2010.

3. Lessons learnt? The long-term significance of the Bridgend case

The preceding discussion has shown that the measures taken in response to the Bridgend issue largely draw upon the main frames used by journalists to make sense of the local suicide incidents. Given that policy implementation generally takes time, the effectiveness of these, only recently adopted, measures cannot yet be fully assessed. There probably still is room for improvement but in any case their introduction in the aftermath of the Bridgend phenomenon clearly constitutes a step forward in the right direction, which was to a great extent brought about through the post-2008 extensive news coverage of the matter. Both the authorities' and national journalists' reaction to the Bridgend problem was rather belated, but, when the subject matter is as serious and delicate as youth suicide, assigning the blame for its long-lasting neglect is secondary to working towards its resolution. From this point of view, as Cohen (2001) would argue, even a belated reaction to the chronic and disturbing situation in question, involving many youngsters taking their lives in the Bridgend area over a span of ten years, is preferable to no reaction at all.

The Bridgend experience, even as an ensemble of flawed official and media practices, has raised a number of pressing issues not just in relation to the local suicide problem, but to the suicide phenomenon in general. Journalists' increased interest in the case and especially the different perspectives adopted by different newspapers offer an insight into the wide range of psychological and social factors that could, often through their accumulation (Joiner, 2005), have such an impact on one's mental well-being as to drive them to suicide. The public became more aware of and consequently concerned about suicide clusters in the wake of the Bridgend deaths. Research (Gould, 2001; Joiner, 2005) has shown that youth suicides often happen in clusters, a point also made by several of my interviewees such as social psychologist Arthur Cassidy and suicide prevention charities' representatives like Rosemary Vaux (Papyrus) and Darren Matthews (Samaritans). As a 'suicide cluster', the Bridgend situation is therefore hardly a new and uncanny occurrence. However, its unfolding in the midst of the, at times overwhelming, national press attention provided lay people reading the corresponding reports with a better understanding of how such clusters operate and what needs to be done about them. The Bridgend coverage brings the issue of mental health to everyone's doorstep.

The relevant events suggest that mental health problems are far more serious and widespread than they are frequently assumed to be. They can easily lead vulnerable individuals to suicide, but identifying who is at risk is not always feasible. That is mostly due to the fact that those suffering from such problems are usually reticent about admitting them and asking for support out of fear of being stigmatised (Samaritans, 2008).

At the same time, the criticisms of the Bridgend coverage not just by officials or the victims' families but also by journalists themselves stress the potentially detrimental influence of elevated media attention on susceptible or already suicidal recipients. When their attempts to demonise new media backfire and they find themselves accused of exacerbating the South Wales problem, many media professionals hasten to deny all responsibility, but there are also some (mainly from left-wing broadsheets) who acknowledge the risk of causing a Werther effect through their articles. The debate over media responsibility, taking place in the wake of the Bridgend events, indicates that, although there is a consensus that suicide needs to be reported sensitively, different newspapers have different views on what this sensitivity consists in. Despite any such disagreements, this debate can only be seen as a positive development in the field of suicide reporting, since it casts light on the intricacies of this particular subject matter. Due to the pressures of journalists' highly competitive profession and their consequent, never-ending quest for newsworthy stories, it is uncertain whether the Bridgend experience with all its shortcomings will suffice to actually ensure more appropriate suicide coverage of similar situations in the future. It is, however, likely, as the readers' editor of *The Observer* Stephen Pritchard (interviewed on June 23, 2011) pointed out, that journalists and editors will be reviewing suicide-related articles more thoroughly before publishing them in the post-Bridgend era, which is still a very important step to the attainment of this goal. The reporting of subsequent to Bridgend high-profile suicide cases like those of football manager Gary Speed and nurse Jacintha Saldanha was regarded as fairly responsible, possibly due to a 'Leveson effect' on the press' behaviour (Peckett, 2011; Halliday, *The Guardian*, 2012; *The Times*, 2011). Nevertheless, the same cannot be argued for the recent suicide of actor Robin Williams, the news coverage of which was heavily criticised by the Samaritans (2014) and mental health charity Mind (2014). Due to its volume and focus on graphic detail, it brought once again to the fore the concerns expressed in the aftermath of the South Wales deaths (Boseley, *The Guardian*, 2014; Hamilton, *The Guardian*, 2014), thus proving that further work is required

in the field of suicide reporting and that the 2008 Bridgend experience is nowadays as relevant as ever.

This thesis has made clear that, through its rise to national news visibility, its wide coverage and the organised efforts to tackle it, the Bridgend issue has been elevated to a high-profile, 'signal' case, whose significance goes beyond the specific spatio-temporal context. This 'signal' function (Innes, 2004) means that, as a local and most importantly a media phenomenon, Bridgend becomes a point of reference and, as such, it is expected to influence the way in which apparently similar subsequent cases are made sense of and handled. It serves as a 'warning signal' about the level and distribution of the risk of suicide among vulnerable and impressionable young people, which, according to the press construction of the Bridgend problem, includes the risks posed by: an online or offline glamorisation of suicide; poor socio-economic conditions and a wider social decline; finally, mental health problems, their stigmatisation and the inadequate support provided to those suffering from them. The association between the South Wales suicides and these risks is so strong that the Bridgend case ultimately comes to be seen as an example to avoid, both on an official and a media level. More specifically, this association promotes the view that the local suicide crisis could have been prevented had the risks in question been managed more effectively and therefore that this is exactly what needs to be done in the case of future Bridgend-like tragedies. In that sense, the Bridgend case does not solely warrant the adoption of reactive measures to deal with the South Wales suicide problem, but also stresses the need for proactivity, which will allegedly prevent analogous tragedies from occurring or, at least, from reaching this level of seriousness in the years to come. As already explained, this proactive perspective often justifies the calls for greater or better social control, for example, in relation to Internet and press regulation or to the identification and supervision of suicidal individuals by parents, educators and mental health professionals.

As for the Bridgend problem *per se*, the thesis has focused on the study of its evolution within the four-year period between 2006 and 2009, that is, the two years preceding and the two following its elevation to national news prominence. Nevertheless, social problems do not necessarily operate in such tight time frames (Best, 2008) and so, though outside the scope of this project, it is important to at least briefly consider the state of the Bridgend matter in the subsequent years. In order to do so, it is essential to go back to the 2012 ONS report on the Bridgend suicides discussed in Chapter Six (ONS, 2012b; Figure 6.17), this time looking more closely at what happened after rather

than what led to the increased media attention of 2008. The fact that the ONS, which normally measures suicide rates on a national level, decided to publish a report specifically about the Bridgend situation demonstrates, once again, the concern over and, by extension, the importance of this particular issue. The report shows that, despite the organised efforts to fight the local suicide problem through the adoption of the strategies examined in the previous chapter, this remains to a large extent unresolved today. The significant reduction in the number of local suicide incidents in 2008 and 2009 (11 and 4 respectively compared to 20 both in 2006 and 2007), possibly resulting from the mobilisation around the issue after it became national news, did not last long. In 2010, when Bridgend was no longer in the spotlight, its suicide rate climbed back up to the alarmingly high levels of the previous years (20 suicides). Though it would be unreasonable, given the complexity of the problem, to expect the adopted policies to magically solve it overnight, such figures suggest that a prompt review of the policies in question might be necessary, since they do not seem to be producing the desired results. As mentioned earlier, such a review is currently taking place as part of the consultation for the imminent adoption of the ‘Talk to Me 2’ suicide prevention strategy (WAG, 2014), which sets more focused and realistic objectives than the 2008 action plan it builds on. It remains to be seen whether this new strategy will be able to meet these objectives and make a real difference in the lives of suicidal individuals in Wales.

As far as the national press’ attention span is concerned, the more one moves beyond the first few months of 2008, during which the Bridgend issue featured prominently in the news, the more journalists’ interest in it subsides. Nowadays, there are still occasional reports, which, confirming the case’s ‘signal’ function, incidentally bring up Bridgend. They present it as a phenomenon which may have run its course, but still has a lot to offer to the discussion of relevant topics such as other suicide clusters (Whipple, *The Times*, 2010) or news reporting, journalistic standards and the role of the press regulator (Whittam Smith, *The Independent*, 2010; Boseley, *The Guardian*, 2014; Hamilton, *The Guardian*, 2014). But as for the post-2010 national press reports having the Bridgend suicides as their primary theme, these are few and usually rather short and sporadic (see Coles, *The Sun*, 2010; Fletcher, *Daily Mirror*, 2011) in comparison to those of the years before. Such changes in the emphasis placed on the Bridgend problem indicate a decrease in the story’s newsworthiness over time and correspondingly a probable media fatigue with it. Returning to the discussion about what makes an issue front-pages news (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2011), Bridgend

stories published today apparently lack the unexpectedness and novelty they had in early 2008. Defending their involvement in the case, media professionals argue that, as soon as the issue was brought to the fore and there was an official response to it, their mission was completed (see section 2.A in this chapter). However, in the light of the aforementioned return to a disturbingly high local suicide rate after the journalistic interest in the 2008 events died out (ONS, 2012b), a new wave of media attention may be needed to stress that the matter is still far from resolved and that further preventative measures may be necessary.

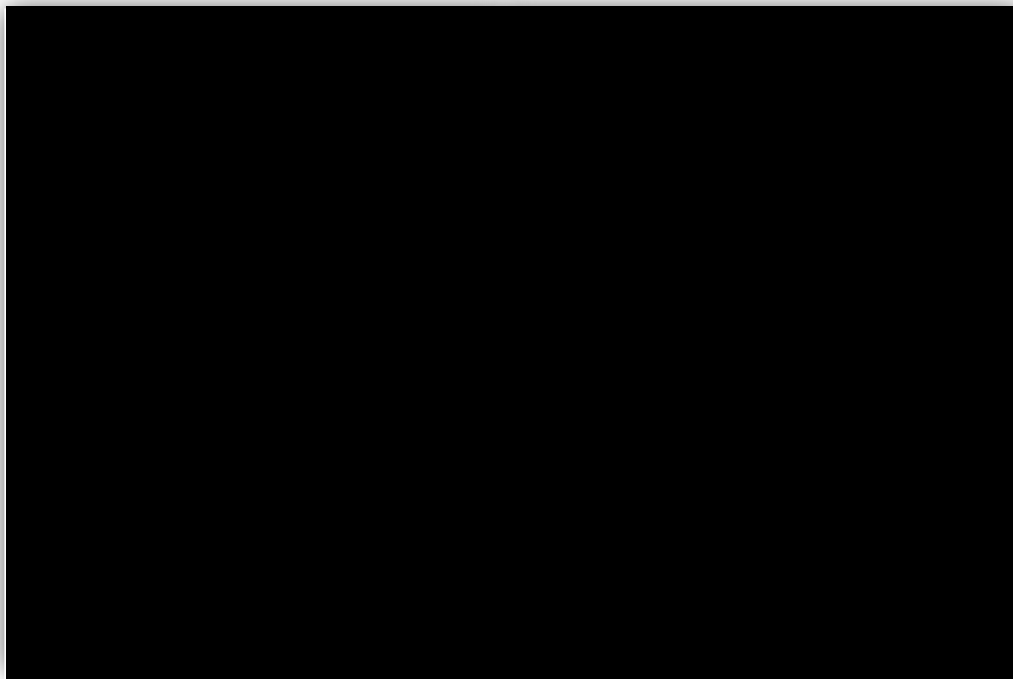


Figure 9.6: Revisiting the Bridgend suicides four years after their rise to national news prominence (Driscoll and Tresniowski, *People* magazine, 2012: 76-77).

Nonetheless, this need for further attention requires that the Bridgend matter is approached with utmost caution by journalists, who can, as pointed out in this thesis and in agreement with the arguments of Jamieson et al. (2003), Pirkis et al. (2007) and Liem et al. (2010), help promote a deeper public understanding of suicide through responsible, non-sensationalist reporting. A recent and therefore noteworthy exception to the rule of Bridgend's declining news prominence is the May 2012 *People* magazine article on the matter entitled 'A tragedy in Wales: a small town mystery' (Driscoll and Tresniowski, 2012). This is of interest here as it constitutes a rare case of journalists in print media acknowledging that even today the Bridgend situation remains critical. The authors' attempt to re-examine the Bridgend problem four years after the 2008 events could *prima facie* be regarded as a positive step towards reviving the media interest in it.

Nevertheless, even if well-intentioned, this attempt is poorly executed, since the way they approach the issue is largely reminiscent of the common, yet emotionally powerful, ‘causal mystery’ narrative (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002) of the then coverage. Just like many other reports at the time, the *People* article focuses on discovering the ‘dark secret’ behind the local suicides, which it presents as taking place in a single town rather than a wider region (see Figure 9.6). At the same time, it mentions that the area’s suicide toll between 2007 and February 2012 counts 79 victims without, however, citing the source of this figure. With regard to the age range of young victims, the article expands its upper limit to 30 in order to construct a more dramatic story by linking together, through a process of convergence (Hall et al., 1978), as many individual tragedies as possible. Finally, it contains a plethora of visuals as well as detailed accounts of the corresponding suicidal acts and the discovery of the victims’ bodies.

Bringing attention back to the Bridgend suicides by constructing them, once again, as the product of an unexplained and shocking epidemic is, at this stage and given the 2008 experience, unlikely to help tackling the problem. That is because such reporting simplifies the matter, encourages speculation and increases the risk of imitative deaths (Jamieson et al., 2003). Building on the works of Liem et al. (2010) and Walklate and Petrie (2013) and in accordance with the contextual constructionist approach adopted in this thesis, it has been argued that it is very important for journalists covering suicide to explore the mental health and socio-economic context in which the act takes place. Based on this argument, it is precisely local deprivation and mental health that any fresh media interest in Bridgend should principally focus on instead of the alleged suspicious links between the victims. However, such complex issues do not always provide suitable material for the construction of unambiguous and appealing news stories (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2011). As pointed out by the Samaritans (Leveson Inquiry, 2011), even though progress has undoubtedly been made in the field of suicide reporting in the wake of the Bridgend phenomenon, this should never be taken for granted. The aforementioned criticisms of the recent coverage of Robin Williams’ death (Boseley, *The Guardian*, 2014; Mind, 2014; Samaritans, 2014) precisely suggest that the risk of irresponsible reporting is always present when a suicide of an exceptional news value occurs (such as, in this case, the suicide of a celebrity). In line with Jamieson et al.’s (2003) work, it is argued that the norms of newsworthiness based on which reporters decide to cover some suicides rather than others and especially the most extraordinary ones are very difficult to challenge. It is therefore essential to help journalists report

suicide responsibly within the confines of these norms. But what does this responsibility consist in exactly and most importantly how can it translate into appropriate journalistic practice in the post-Leveson era?

Bridgend-like situations reflect the challenges of the journalistic profession that the Leveson Inquiry aimed to address. They present reporters with the challenge of constructing powerful suicide stories, while downplaying the elements that would actually make such stories newsworthy or increase their newsworthiness. Jamieson et al. (2003: 1656) is right to suggest that 'it is unreasonable to expect journalists to avoid giving suicide prominent coverage', especially in exceptional cases where there is a high number of victims (e.g. Bridgend) or where the deceased is a public figure (e.g. Robin Williams). Nevertheless, given the risk of triggering a Werther effect (Phillips, 1974; Sonneck et al., 1994; Etzersdorfer et al., 2001) on vulnerable and susceptible individuals, the way in which they approach the matter in their reports is of vital importance. It has been maintained that the above-mentioned risk of imitative deaths cannot be dismissed as a 'conceptual red herring' and that the latter view by Cross (2008) overlooks the possibility of a 'contagion' rather than a mere 'copycat' effect. The difficulties in assessing the potential impact of the media on suicidal behaviour do not justify such a dismissal but actually render the need to explore this impact further all the more pressing. At the same time, however, this thesis has supported Cross' (2008) argument that suicide reporting raises important questions regarding what is 'in the public interest' and what 'interests the public' in a voyeuristic way and highlighted the need for the line between the two to become as clear as possible. The study of the Bridgend phenomenon has pointed out that the media play a crucial role in raising public awareness around suicide and mental health problems, something which is also acknowledged by the 'Talk to Me' suicide prevention strategy (WAG, 2009). This awareness is essential for the elimination of the social stigma associated with these matters, which is, in its turn, essential for the provision of adequate support to those at risk and ultimately for the prevention of future suicides (Hawton and Williams, 2001; Samaritans, 2008; WAG, 2009). The links between suicide reporting, public awareness and suicide prevention were brought to the fore apropos the Bridgend case. But what was mostly made evident in the wake of the local deaths and due to the shortcomings of the corresponding coverage was the imperative need for these links to be strengthened and improved.

Through its in-depth analysis of the Bridgend coverage, this thesis has documented the specific aspects of news reporting that could, according to suicide research (Phillips,

1974; Sonneck et al., 1994; Gould, 2001; Etzersdorfer et al., 2001; Pirkis et al., 2006), push impressionable young people over the edge. These include the romantic and sensationalist portrayal of suicide, the simplification of its causes and generally the overwhelming volume of media attention. More specifically, the study of the South Wales case has shown that, while the avoidance of ‘excessive detail’ about the suicide method provided in the relevant clause of the Editors’ Code of Practice (PCC, 2009b), is essential to the prevention of imitative incidents, it is not always adequate to guarantee sensitive reporting. The inadequacy of the clause lies, firstly, on its exclusive focus on the suicide technique and, secondly, on the subjectivity of the term ‘excessive’, which has no set meaning but is at journalists’/newspapers’ discretion to interpret. The Samaritans (Leveson Inquiry, 2011) make a valid argument about the removal of the word ‘excessive’. However, given the sensitivities involved and the wider spirit of the clause in question, an expansion of its scope beyond technical to any gratuitous detail of suicide may prove to be more effective in promoting responsible suicide reporting.

The study of the Bridgend case in this thesis suggests that, while it is in the public interest to report suicide and the media can help raise awareness over the issue, the information provided by the relevant press reports should be kept to a minimum. In that sense, the graphic descriptions of the victim’s final moments or the discovery of his/her body, frequently found in suicide news stories (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002) including the Bridgend coverage, may indeed create a more appealing narrative, but it is questionable whether they add anything to the understanding of the relevant events and therefore whether they are actually necessary. There is a thin line between presenting the permanent consequences of a suicide and providing an over-dramatised, sensational and simplistic account of it. In line with Jamieson et al. (2003) and Walklate and Petrie’s (2013) work, it has been argued that, under the demands of newsworthiness, this line can easily be crossed. Responsible suicide reporting needs to emphasise the toll that suicide takes upon victims and their families as well as the deeper psycho-social factors potentially contributing to the problem instead of promoting dark, newsworthy theories about ‘Internet cults’ or ‘suicide epidemics’. In pursuit of this goal of responsible suicide reporting, the Samaritans (2008) offer much more detailed guidance than the PCC. Their guidelines on how to report or not report suicide are consistent with the findings of the media analysis of this thesis with regard to the shortcomings of the Bridgend coverage. A common assumption that many of the Bridgend-related articles under study built on was that suicide incidents occurring in geographical and temporal proximity to one another

were connected. It has therefore been suggested that this process of ‘convergence’ (Hall et al., 1978) should be avoided and that journalists should consider each suicide case in its own right. Moreover, as this thesis revealed, the dramatic effect of the Bridgend narrative lied largely on the apparent ‘normality’ of the deceased that rendered their suicides completely unexpected and incomprehensible since none of them had shown any signs of distress while alive. However, instead of being constructed as ‘mysteries’, Bridgend-like situations could be used by journalists to challenge popular beliefs surrounding suicide such as that only people obviously depressed are likely to take their own lives or that people feeling suicidal always have an actual desire to die (see also Liem et al., 2010; Samaritans, 2008; Cross, 2010). Finally, the possibility of a ‘trigger’ effect could be dealt with more effectively if reporters openly encouraged those contemplating suicide to seek help and provided them with the contact details of mental health support organisations (Jamieson et al., 2003; Samaritans, 2008). This practice was followed in several Bridgend-related articles, but it could potentially make an even greater difference in suicide prevention if it were to be more widely implemented in the future.

Despite the frequent difficulties in reconciling the goals of newsworthiness and sensitive suicide reporting, the media have the potential to reach out to a wide audience and therefore promote a better public understanding of mental health and suicide-related issues. The thesis subscribes to Hawton and Williams’ (2001) view that, unlike the deeper psychological and social factors contributing to suicide, media reporting can be easily modified and its modification could help save lives. Building on Jamieson et al. (2003), Pirkis et al. (2007), Liem et al. (2010) and Pirkis and Blood (2010), it is argued that the media need to be more actively involved in suicide prevention, but this involvement requires a close collaboration between journalists and suicide experts. In order to handle Bridgend-like situations more effectively, to acquire greater awareness of the relevant risks and to have a clearer idea of what responsible reporting involves, it could be beneficial for media professionals to receive specialised training on how to cover suicide. Through this training, journalists would be in a better position to identify the elements that, if included in their reports, could potentially glamorise suicide; to balance between the public’s ‘right to know’ and the risk of harm to vulnerable groups; to show that suicide is not inevitable by emphasising its treatable precursors. ‘We[journalists] need to ask ourselves whether our coverage will make it more likely that [vulnerable readers] will attempt to take their lives or more likely that they will seek help. [...] [E]xcellent guidelines can help us make the right decisions’, states the readers’ editor of *The Observer*,

Stephen Pritchard (quoted by the Samaritans, 2008: 6). The PCC (2009a) and suicide prevention charities like Papyrus (2008) or the Samaritans (2008) offer such guidance and often organise seminars on suicide reporting. Although the contribution of such initiatives to suicide prevention is undeniable, their limitations, which were brought to the fore by the study of the Bridgend case, also need to be considered. Such limitations suggest that the development of more permanent links with such organisations may be more likely to produce the desired results in the future.

Acknowledging the shortcomings of the previous regulatory regime, Lord Justice Leveson's recommendations (2012b) aim to promote a higher standard of ethics and professionalism in press reporting. To this end, the new press regulator (IPSO, IMPRESS or any other body that may seek recognition for this role in the future) is expected to set a new standards code and have the power to fine those breaching it. However, at the time of writing (December 2014), IPSO (2014), which has been joined by most British newspapers and magazines, has adopted the PCC's Editors' Code of Practice unchanged. This suggests that the concerns over whether IPSO actually aspires to ensure more effective press regulation than its predecessor or is nothing more than 'old wine in a new bottle' (Greenslade, *The Guardian*, 2014; Martinson, *The Guardian*, 2014) are not totally unjustified. In the light of the imminent changes in press regulation, it remains to be seen how the new model, whose final form is still debated, will shape media responsibility in relation to the coverage of mental health problems and suicide. Particularly, it will be interesting to see whether the new regulator will after all be successful in establishing a more effective framework of protection for vulnerable individuals and their families and ensure the sensitive and sensible treatment of these issues by media professionals. The efficiency of the new regime to attain this goal will ultimately be judged based on its ability to prevent or, when that is not possible, at least, impose sanctions for the following practices: irresponsible reporting, likely to trigger imitative deaths; inaccurate reporting, misrepresenting the subject matter; and finally, intrusive reporting, intensifying the distress of the people involved. For the time being, however, journalists' uncertainty over how to handle suicide tactfully in the post-Leveson era seems to have made them reticent about covering the issue altogether, even when it is clearly in the public interest to do so. This serious concern was raised in the editorial of *The Times* of December 23, 2011 as regards the (limited) press interest in Gary Speed's death. It is a reasonable concern, which is likely to increase if the current unclear situation of press regulation persists for much longer. Any such 'Leveson effect' stress

the urgent need to clarify the ethical parameters of suicide reporting, thus rendering the conclusions drawn from the study of the Bridgend case in this thesis all the more significant.

4. Thesis limitations and suggestions for future research

The present thesis has looked at the evolution of the concern over the Bridgend suicides from the local to the national press in the four-year period between 2006 and 2009 and its eventual translation into policy. Its findings derive exclusively from the examination of the relevant Bridgend events through the selected news reports and interviews and in the specific time frame. Due to the adopted case study design, these findings are not directly applicable outside this context (Bryman, 2012), no matter how apparently similar to Bridgend another case might be. For that reason, there is no doubt that this project can benefit from further constructionist research both on the Bridgend problem per se and on the wider issues that came to the fore in its aftermath.

As far as Bridgend-specific research is concerned, this could involve studying the post-2008 construction of the local suicide problem in magazines, TV or radio news programmes, online news blogs and local newspapers. Since the current thesis has primarily focused on assessing the role of the national press in the construction of the Bridgend problem, a similar in-depth analysis of the stories that appeared in other media outlets during the same time period would allow comparisons to be made with the findings of this thesis and more complete conclusions to be drawn regarding the news coverage of the Bridgend case. On a national press level, subsequent research could examine Bridgend-related articles published after 2009 to evaluate the amount of news attention recent local suicides and preventative initiatives have received as well as the extent to which their conception has been influenced by that of the 2008 events. In terms of the Internet, a content analysis of the Bridgend victims' memorials on online social networks like Bebo and Facebook could offer a better understanding of the Internet Suicide (IS) frame. It would allow a more effective assessment of the claims about the alleged risk of glamorising suicide through such memorials and their potential contribution to the local suicide phenomenon.

As for the wider implications of the current research, this could serve as a paradigm for and be advanced through future projects focusing on news media's role in the social problems process, mostly, but not exclusively, with regard to suicide and mental health-related issues. The view of Bridgend as a landmark case in the field of suicide reporting has been at the core of this thesis, which is why comparative studies

assessing the impact it has potentially had on the media portrayal of subsequent suicide clusters would be of great importance. Particularly, such studies could determine whether similar to Bridgend phenomena have been approached in the same way by journalists, both in terms of the way they have been explained and of the actual (in)sensitivity of their coverage. Finally, the Bridgend story has reflected the growing anxiety over and the corresponding newsworthiness of the 'dark side' of cyberspace, highlighting the potentially detrimental effect suicide-related online material could have on impressionable and vulnerable individuals. The potential links between suicide and the Internet as well as the media interest in them need to be further explored in the post-Bridgend era. This could entail researching the media construction of the IS risk by looking at the way in which a possible Internet involvement is perceived in different suicide cases. In that case, the analysis could even extend beyond the content of news articles and also include that of pro-suicide websites in order to provide a clearer idea of the social interaction taking place in them and, ultimately, measure the threat they potentially pose.

Concluding remarks

The Bridgend situation could have been handled differently and possibly more effectively by the authorities and the media. However, since there is no magic way to undo what has already happened, it is essential to acknowledge any shortcomings, come to terms with this unfortunate experience and learn from it for future reference rather than try to leave it behind as soon as possible and, in a sense, pretend it never took place. Officials and local residents are reluctant to discuss the matter and, given the 2008 events, their reaction is, to a large extent, understandable, yet not the appropriate way to move forward.

Some of, if not the, most important issues that the Bridgend case has brought attention to are the limited awareness over mental health problems, the tendency of vulnerable individuals to bottle up rather than openly express their suicidal feelings in order to avoid stigmatisation and the deficiencies of the existing mental health support system. As the South Wales phenomenon has pointed out, the more these issues remain unaddressed, the more the risk of aggravating to the point where they eventually get out of control increases. The Bridgend coverage has been far from perfect, but, despite all its flaws, it has, at least partly, brought these issues to the fore and encouraged a broader dialogue around the causes and suitable responses to the local suicide problem.

Nonetheless, temporary attention is not enough to successfully tackle the problem, since the attainment of this goal requires time and constant diligence.

Journalists' interest in Bridgend may have faded by now, but this does not mean that the problem is not still there. On the contrary, statistics indicate that, after a considerable decrease following the extensive media reporting of 2008, local suicides returned to their usual rate. Therefore, it is crucial to make sure that this apparently well-intentioned hesitation to publicly talk about the Bridgend issue, aiming mainly to protect the people involved from any further pain, does not reach the point of denial. Failure to admit there was and still is an actual suicide problem in the area that goes beyond any media responsibility equals depriving the 2008 Bridgend experience of its importance. Such failure could only perpetuate the 'conspiracy of silence' and the corresponding stigma around the problem, which are largely responsible for causing it in the first place, thus impeding its resolution.

In order to avert the risk of history repeating itself either in the Bridgend or any other similar case, it is necessary to no longer regard suicide and mental illness as taboo issues and responsible reporting can greatly contribute to this end. 'Talk to me' is the message of the national suicide prevention strategy for Wales (WAG, 2009) and, though it is still questionable whether it will meet its objectives or not, it is worth recognising that the approach it adopts is in the right direction. That is because the problem of suicide can only be adequately dealt with through a broad public discussion on it. This discussion essentially entails convincing suicidal individuals and especially young people to share their emotions and anxieties and ask for support. Nevertheless, given the intricacies of the matter, this aim can only be fully achieved within a wider framework of communication and co-operation between political and health authorities, coroners and police officials involved in the investigation of sudden deaths, suicide prevention charities, journalists, educators and parents. When it comes to reaching out to those at risk and getting the preceding message across to them, media professionals are in a privileged position compared to most of the other parties, which is why no suicide prevention initiative should neglect to take advantage of this power of theirs. What the South Wales tragedy has ultimately pointed out is the significance of the connections between suicide reporting, awareness and prevention. These connections do not just deserve, but actually need to be further explored and developed in the post-Bridgend era so that similar crises are pre-empted or, at least, more promptly and efficiently contained in the future.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I
Identification system and list of sample articles

Table I.A: Identification system			
Period A: 1/1/2006-22/1/2008			Period B: 23/1/2008-31/12/2009
Regional newspapers	National newspapers		National newspapers
<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> ➤ GG 01-46	<i>The Times</i> ➤ TI(X) 01-02 <i>The Sunday Times</i> ➤ STI(X) N/a		<i>The Times</i> ➤ TI 01-12, 15-29, 31-43, 45-49 <i>The Sunday Times</i> ➤ STI 13-14, 30, 44
<i>South Wales Echo</i> ➤ SWE 01-19	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> ➤ DT(X) 01-02 <i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> ➤ STE(X) N/a		<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> ➤ DT 01-05, 08, 10-11, 14-18, 20-26, 28-30 <i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> ➤ STE 06-07, 09, 12-13, 19, 27
<i>Western Mail</i> ➤ WM 01-06	<i>The Guardian</i> ➤ GU(X) N/a <i>The Observer</i> ➤ OB(X) N/a		<i>The Guardian</i> ➤ GU 01-30 <i>The Observer</i> ➤ OB 01-10
<i>Wales on Sunday</i> ➤ WOS 01	<i>The Independent</i> ➤ IN(X) 01 <i>The Independent on Sunday</i> ➤ INS(X) N/a		<i>The Independent</i> ➤ IN 01-03, 06-07, 09-15, 19-20, 22, 24-27, 31-36 <i>The Independent on Sunday</i> ➤ INS 04-05, 08, 16-18, 21, 23, 28-30
	<i>Daily Mail</i> ➤ DM(X) 01-03 <i>Mail on Sunday</i> ➤ MOS(X) N/a		<i>Daily Mail</i> ➤ DM 01-09, 11-24, 26, 28, 30-37 <i>Mail on Sunday</i> ➤ MOS 10, 25, 27, 29
	<i>Daily Express</i> ➤ DE(X) 02-04 <i>Sunday Express</i> ➤ SE(X) 01		<i>Daily Express</i> ➤ DE 01-04, 06-08, 10-12, 15-21, 26-27, 30-33, 35, 37 <i>Sunday Express</i> ➤ SE 05, 09, 13-14, 22-25, 28-29, 34, 36, 38-39
	<i>The Sun</i> ➤ SU(X) 01-02 <i>News of the World</i> ➤ NW(X) 01-03		<i>The Sun</i> ➤ SU 01-67 <i>News of the World</i> ➤ NW 01-10
	<i>Daily Mirror</i> ➤ MI(X) 01, 03-04 <i>Sunday Mirror</i> ➤ SMI(X) 02		<i>Daily Mirror</i> ➤ MI 01-06, 09-11, 13-34, 36-43, 46-50 <i>Sunday Mirror</i> ➤ SMI 07-08, 12, 35, 44-45

For each of the sample articles, a unique identifier was generated. This identifier comprises of a textual and a numerical part: the first represents an abbreviation of the title of the newspaper in which the article appeared and the period of publication (Period A or B; see Table I.A). The second indicates the article's order in the sequence of Bridgend-related stories published in that particular newspaper during the corresponding period of interest. In that sense, identifier GG05, for example, refers to the fifth Bridgend-related report of the *Glamorgan Gazette* in the period of interest, which, for this as well as all the other regional papers of my sample, is Period A. The Bridgend-related reports published in any of the

national newspapers under study before January 23, 2008 were numbered separately from those published after that date. In their case, the letter (X) was added at the end of the original national press identifiers. This produced a new set of identifiers which are still demonstrative of the newspaper of publication, but also make clear that this publication took place in Period A. In that way, MI(X)04, for instance, refers to the fourth Bridgend story of the *Daily Mirror* from Period A, while MI04 to the fourth Bridgend story of the same newspaper, but, this time, from Period B.

Table I.B:	
Newspaper articles analysed for the purposes of the current thesis	
Period A: 1/1/2006-22/1/2008	
Regional newspapers	
Identifier	Article title/Newspaper/Date of publication/Page number
<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>	
GG01	'Farewell to tragic Jonathan' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , February 2, 2006: 3)
GG02	'Tragedy for twins' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , March 23, 2006: 9)
GG03	'Man killed himself' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , March 30, 2006: 17)
GG04	'Hanged man feared debt' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , March 30, 2006: 24)
GG05	'Parents 'devastated' by their loving son's death' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , April 6, 2006: 3)
GG06	'Parents' ultimate step after son's suicide' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , April 6, 2006: 10)
GG07	'Family hits out at suicide video' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , June 15, 2006: 11)
GG08	'Suicide rate one of worst' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , June 29, 2006: 14)
GG09	'Bank 'hounded son to suicide' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , October 12, 2006: 2)
GG10	'Police appeal for missing teenager' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , October 26, 2006: 2)
GG11	'Fears growing for missing Dale' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , November 9, 2006: 25)
GG12	'Man rescued after failed suicide attempt at river' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , November 16, 2006: 9)
GG13	'Mum's appeal' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , November 23, 2006: 16)
GG14	'Man found hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , November 30, 2006: 3)
GG15	'Police appeal' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , November 30, 2006: 16)
GG16	'Missing teenager' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , December 7, 2006: 8)
GG17	'Mother's plea for information on Dale' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , December 28, 2008: 2)
GG18	'Christmas is busy for Samaritans' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , January 4, 2007: 3)
GG19	'Missing teen found hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , January 11, 2007: 1)
GG20	'Body is released to Dale's family' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , February 8, 2007: 7)
GG21	'Second teen found dead' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , February 22, 2007: 3)
GG22	'Man found hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , March 1, 2007: 4)
GG23	'Mother's plea' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , March 15, 2007: 1)
GG24	'A celebration of Thomas's life' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , March 15, 2007: 9)
GG25	'Bodybuilding dad found dead' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , May 10, 2007: 13)
GG26	'Family's tears for young father' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , May 24, 2007: 5)
GG27	'Hanging adds to sad statistics' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , June 7, 2007: 2)
GG28	'I'm sorry it had to end this way' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , June 7, 2007: 5)
GG29	'Justice must be seen to be carried out' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , June 7, 2007: 24)
GG30	'Missing Dale hanged himself in warehouse' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , August 9, 2007: 10)
GG31	'Bodies found' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , August 16, 2007: 3)
GG32	'Gang fight in Bridgend' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , August 23, 2007: 7)
GG33	'Fiancé found hanged' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , August 30, 2007: 3)
GG34	'Father tells of 'amazing' son's life/Sisters are left bewildered' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , September 6, 2007, 4-5)
GG35	'Mum found son hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , September 6, 2007: 20)

GG36	'Tributes to 'shy and lovely boy' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , September 13, 2007: 19)
GG37	'Call for action after deaths' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , September 20, 2007: 7)
GG38	'Wife found husband hanged on stairs' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , September 20, 2007: 7)
GG39	'Man was found hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , September 27, 2007: 2)
GG40	'Tragic bedsit death' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , October 11, 2007: 11)
GG41	'Rising toll/Shocking suicide rates for Bridgend borough' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , January 3, 2008: 1-2)
GG42	'Hanging tragedy' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , January 3, 2008: 2)
GG43	'Let's lend a listening ear' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , January 3, 2008: 28)
GG44	'Friends pay tribute to 'gentle giant' Gareth' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , January 10, 2008: 2)
GG45	'Man found hanging a week after friend/You need someone to talk to' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , January 17, 2008: 4)
GG46	'Son found stressed dad's body' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i> , January 17, 2008: 6)
South Wales Echo	
SWE01	'Welsh youth suicide rates 'disturbing' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , February 6, 2006: 11)
SWE02	'Man, 40, used gas canister to kill himself' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , June 8, 2006: 1)
SWE03	'Suicide rates soaring' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , August 31, 2006: 16)
SWE04	'Friend dies in hanging tragedy' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , February 21, 2007: 3)
SWE05	'Sinister rumours and the last days of Dale' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , August 7, 2007: 20)
SWE06	'Why are youngsters hanging themselves?' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , August 15, 2007: 6)
SWE07	'Bride-to-be finds fiancé hanging' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , August 29, 2007: 1)
SWE08	'Mum: 'Don't leave loved ones in agony' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , September 26, 2007: 19)
SWE09	'Doubts cast on hangings' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , October 9, 2007: 23)
SWE10	'AM unveils plan for mental health law' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , October 18, 2007: 26)
SWE11	'Man found dead' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , December 28, 2007: 3)
SWE12	'Dead man named' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , December 29, 2007: 3)
SWE13	'He was looking forward to being a dad...now I'm planning his funeral'/ 'Briggsy couldn't wait for our baby to be born'/Friends pay tribute to Paul (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 9, 2008: 1, 4-5)
SWE14	'Father 'had intended to take his life' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 15, 2008: 15)
SWE15	'Thomas Davies and three of his friends killed themselves. Now a task force has been set up to find out why so many of our young people are taking their own lives/Why are so many of our youngsters killing themselves?' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 17, 2008: 1, 6-7)
SWE16	'Talking is a step in the right direction' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 17, 2008: 32)
SWE17	'Girl's sudden death' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 19, 2008: 5)
SWE18	'We're here to provide support' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 21, 2008: 22)
SWE19	'Girl, 17, is found hanged at home' (<i>South Wales Echo</i> , January 22, 2008: 4)
Western Mail	
WM01	'Let's help young like these to prevent tragedy' (<i>Western Mail</i> , February 7, 2006: 13)
WM02	'Welsh schools not doing enough to stop bullying, expert says' (<i>Western Mail</i> , February 14, 2006: 4)
WM03	'Retro report - February, 1997: Appeal for Samaritans volunteers as suicide rate in Wales soars' (<i>Western Mail</i> , February 17, 2006: 18)
WM04	'Family blame internet suicide sites for brother's death' (<i>Western Mail</i> , June 8, 2006: 6)
WM05	'Schools urged to give pupils more help to cope with grief' (<i>Western Mail</i> , May 3, 2007: 32)
WM06	'Go away and sleep on the streets' (<i>Western Mail</i> , November 17, 2007: 4)
Wales on Sunday	
WOS01	'Ring of hatred' (<i>Wales on Sunday</i> , November 25, 2007: 28)
National newspapers	
The Times/Sunday Times	
TI(X)01	'Grieving parents follow son to death' (<i>The Times</i> , April 1, 2006: 22)
TI(X)02	'Boy, 15, lay down in front of train after gay taunts' (<i>The Times</i> , June 2, 2007: 12)
The Daily/Sunday Telegraph	
DT(X)01	'Parents of suicide son take their own lives' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , April 1, 2006: 9)

DT(X)02	'Student's suicide after overdraft was withdrawn' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , October 11, 2006: 11)
<i>The Independent/Independent on Sunday</i>	
IN(X)01	'Hatred and bigotry in the playground' (<i>The Independent</i> , September 6, 2007: 46)
<i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i>	
DM(X)01	'Student found hanged 'was worried over debts' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 28, 2006: 6)
DM(X)02	'Son's suicide led devoted parents to kill themselves' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , April 1, 2006: 20)
DM(X)03	'Student's deadly debt: The day after HSBC called in his £1,000 overdraft, he hanged himself in despair' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , October 11, 2006: 19)
<i>Daily/Sunday Express</i>	
SE(X)01	'Suicide of bullied boy' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , January 29, 2006: 36)
DE(X)02	'Tragedy of family in triple suicide' (<i>Daily Express</i> , April 1, 2006: 31)
DE(X)03	'Man's suicide with helium for balloons' (<i>Daily Express</i> , June 8, 2006: 35)
DE(X)04	'Student killed himself over a GBP 1,000 overdraft' (<i>Daily Express</i> , October 11, 2006: 9)
<i>The Sun/News of the World</i>	
NW(X)01	'Bullied to death' (<i>News of the World</i> , January 29, 2006: 15)
NW(X)02	'Sister's grief over 'bully' pupil' (<i>News of the World</i> , February 5, 2006: 12)
SU(X)01	'Parents' suicide as son found hanged' (<i>The Sun</i> , April 1, 2006: 31)
SU(X)02	'£20 'DIY helium' suicide' (<i>The Sun</i> , June 8, 2006: 26)
NW(X)03	'16 reasons why we MUST beat the bullies' (<i>News of the World</i> , November 18, 2007: 41)
<i>Daily/Sunday Mirror</i>	
MI(X)01	'Debt lad in suicide' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 28, 2006: 23)
SMI(X)02	'Bullied to death: Jon, 15, was the boy everyone picked on at school. He put an end to his hell by lying down in front of a train' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i> , January 29, 2006: 11)
MI(X)03	'My girlfriend killed herself by driving off a cliff. Torn apart by grief I did a copycat' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , May 9, 2006: 20)
MI(X)04	'Suicide by Internet kit' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , June 8, 2006: 15)
Period B: 23/1/2008-31/12/2009	
National newspapers	
<i>The Times/Sunday Times</i>	
TI01	'Natasha, 17, is the seventh victim in town hit by series of copycat suicides' (<i>The Times</i> , January 23, 2008: 13)
TI02	'Fashionable website where teenage suicides are a cause for celebration' (<i>The Times</i> , January 24, 2008: 11)
TI03	'The Bridgend suicides: a mystery that goes beyond the internet/The Bridgend enigma' (<i>The Times</i> , Times2, January 25 2008: 1, 4-5)
TI04	'The lethal 'glamour' factor' (<i>The Times</i> , January 25 2008: 5)
TI05	'What beauty is there in a young life snuffed out?' (<i>The Times</i> , January 25, 2008: 23)
TI06	'Classmates seek help as another girl in Bridgend tries to commit suicide' (<i>The Times</i> , January 25, 2008: 33)
TI07	'Land of the online death pact fights to save lives from the web' (<i>The Times</i> , January 25, 2008: 33)
TI08	'Grade waits in the wings for ITV plot to develop' (<i>The Times</i> , January 25, 2008: 65)
TI09	'Scramble to curb suicide websites/Websites that may encourage teen suicides face new curbs' (<i>The Times</i> , January 26, 2008: 1-2)
TI10	'Desperate town asks for National Lottery money to help stop spate of young deaths' (<i>The Times</i> , January 26, 2008: 2)
TI11	'Concerns over BBC website for children' (<i>The Times</i> , January 26, 2008: 2)
TI12	'Darkness visible' (<i>The Times</i> , Body & Soul, January 26, 2008: 2)
STI13	'Suicide: a teen's way to instant fame' (<i>The Sunday Times</i> , News Review, January 27, 2008: 10)
STI14	'Our love wasn't enough to stop James killing himself' (<i>The Sunday Times</i> , News Review, February 3, 2008: 3)
TI15	'Teenager who planned to marry is welsh town's 14 th young suicide' (<i>The Times</i> , February

	6, 2008: 13)
TI16	'Internet death cults? Or is it a humdrum cause closer to home?' (<i>The Times</i> , February 9, 2008: 24-25)
TI17	'How about a life-affirming epidemic?' (<i>The Times</i> , February 12, 2008: 15)
TI18	'Raise £1 billion a year for charity? Piece of cake' (<i>The Times</i> , February 13, 2008: 17)
TI19	'Confusion and sadness in Bridgend at suicide of two more youngsters' (<i>The Times</i> , February 16, 2008: 3)
TI20	'Weight of opinion has the final say' (<i>The Times</i> , February 18, 2008: 42)
TI21	'Schools on alert after 17 th Bridgend suicide' (<i>The Times</i> , February 20, 2008: 1)
TI22	'The police say there's no link but the people say otherwise' (<i>The Times</i> , February 20, 2008: 6-7)
TI23	'Suicide is catching – and we must beware how we respond to it' (<i>The Times</i> , February 20, 2008: 7)
TI24	'Welsh to adopt 'Choose Life' strategy that cut deaths by 13%' (<i>The Times</i> , February 20, 2008: 7)
TI25	'Choose Life' (<i>The Times</i> , February 21, 2008: 16)
TI26	'Suicide not linked to internet, say friends' (<i>The Times</i> , February 21, 2008: 31)
TI27	'You can't be dead just for a little while' (<i>The Times</i> , February 21, 2008: 31)
TI28	'Death on the railway near Bridgend' (<i>The Times</i> , February 22, 2008: 31)
TI29	'Two Bridgend suicide victims had just split up with their partners' (<i>The Times</i> , February 23, 2008: 29)
STI30	'Talking Heads' (<i>The Sunday Times</i> , News Review, February 24, 2008: 12)
TI31	'Yes, I got it wrong – and then an 'innocent' man was jailed for life' (<i>The Times</i> , February 25, 2008: 24)
TI32	'Good times, tough times' (<i>The Times</i> , Times2, February 27, 2008: 16)
TI33	'Pupils set suicide notes as classwork' (<i>The Times</i> , February 27, 2008: 25)
TI34	'Bridgend teenager had drunk heavily' (<i>The Times</i> , March 1, 2008: 28)
TI35	'If we think that anything goes, Eduardo songs are fair game' (<i>The Times</i> , Sport-The Game, March 3, 2008: 6)
TI36	'Enough youth suicides to fill a school' (<i>The Times</i> , March 19, 2008: 37)
TI37	'Deaths of 3 young men cannot be called suicide, says Bridgend coroner' (<i>The Times</i> , March 20, 2008: 25)
TI38	'Mother faces trauma as girl's hanging recounted on internet' (<i>The Times</i> , March 20, 2008: 25)
TI39	'Hanging is not the way to go gently into that good night' (<i>The Times</i> , March 25, 2008: 17)
TI40	'Children's social network pages 'must have privacy lock' (<i>The Times</i> , April 2, 2008: 4)
TI41	'In the professional press' (<i>The Times</i> , April 8, 2008: 5)
TI42	'Another hanging death in Bridgend' (<i>The Times</i> , April 10, 2008: 25)
TI43	'No suicide pact, say police after another teenager is found hanged in Bridgend' (<i>The Times</i> , April 21, 2008: 11)
STI44	'Death valleys' (<i>The Sunday Times magazine</i> , May 25, 2008: 44-53)
TI45	'X marks the spot' (<i>The Times</i> , August 18, 2008: 15)
TI46	'Suicides lead to call for website control' (<i>The Times</i> , August 28, 2008: 8)
TI47	'Britain's Teenage Suicides' (<i>The Times</i> , The Knowledge, September 6, 2008: 63)
TI48	'Radio choice' (<i>The Times</i> , Times2, September 12, 2008: 25)
TI49	'With great pleasure' (<i>The Times</i> , October 12, 2008: 71)
<i>The Daily/Sunday Telegraph</i>	
DT01	'Seven suicides blamed on internet craze' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 23, 2008: 3)
DT02	'Coroner to study websites linked to suicide craze' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 24, 2008: 9)
DT03	'It just seems normal, fashionable almost...' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 24, 2008: 20)
DT04	'Twice as many suicides as first thought, says coroner' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 25, 2008: 13)
DT05	'Suicide websites face curbs' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , January 26, 2008: 11)
STE06	'They took their own lives seven years apart. But were Simon and Natasha victims of the

	internet?' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , January 27, 2008: 22-23)
STE07	'The passion plays of youth are often just wayward self-love' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , January 27, 2008: 29)
DT08	'Suicide cult' may have claimed new victim' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 6, 2008: 8)
STE09	'Bridgend railway death' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , February 10, 2008: 2)
DT10	'More deaths in suicide 'cult'/ 'We don't understand what is going on in Bridgend' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 16, 2008: 1, 5)
DT11	'Boy, 10, hangs himself after talking to his mother about craze' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 16, 2008: 5)
STE12	'Investigation: suicide cults exposed as Bridgend grieves/Town racked by despair as cousins add to death toll' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , February 17, 2008: 1, 8)
STE13	'Exposed: the predators telling children how to kill themselves' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , February 17, 2008: 8)
DT14	'Who on earth would listen to this batty 'suicide guru'? (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 18, 2008: 22)
DT15	'Seventeenth teen is found dead but police insist: there is no suicide pact' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 20, 2008: 6)
DT16	'What hope can we offer suicidal teenagers?' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 20, 2008: 21)
DT17	'Grieving parents ask: Why did you leave us, butterfly?' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 21, 2008: 5)
DT18	'Suicides spread like a contagion...If one happens in a community, it's as if permission has been granted' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 23, 2008: 23)
STE19	'Special occasions the week that was...' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , February 24, 2008: 28)
DT20	'Teenage suicides' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 26, 2008: 21)
DT21	'Welsh pupils asked to write 'suicide note' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , February 27, 2008: 11)
DT22	'Coroner: YouTube clip 'incited suicide' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , March 20, 2008: 15)
DT23	'Woman commits suicide in Bridgend' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , April 10, 2008: 5)
DT24	'Bridgend mourns 19 th young suicide victim' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , April 21, 2008: 13)
DT25	'One man's delay is another's final journey' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , May 5, 2008: 20)
DT26	'Man may be 20 th suicide' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , May 8, 2008: 15)
STE27	'Man found hanged in Bridgend was friend of dead teenager' (<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> , June 8, 2008: 8)
DT28	'Tourist death may be town's 22 nd suicide' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , June 10, 2008: 12)
DT29	'Third man from the same Bridgend street in apparent suicide' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , June 18, 2008: 12)
DT30	'Facebook spells end of lasting friendships, says expert' (<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , July 4, 2008: 5)
<i>The Guardian/Observer</i>	
GU01	'Police suspect internet link to suicides' (<i>The Guardian</i> , January 23, 2008: 8)
GU02	'Taskforce to look into possible links between youth suicides' (<i>The Guardian</i> , January 24, 2008: 6)
GU03	'Why did they die so young? Police re-examine files on 13 tragedies' (<i>The Guardian</i> , January 26, 2008: 9)
OB01	'Let's not tell our children there's a place called 'Suicide Town' (<i>The Observer</i> , January 27, 2008: 13)
OB02	'Suicide 'axis' crosses Welsh valleys' (<i>The Observer</i> , January 27, 2008: 17)
GU04	'Sensitivity and suicide' (<i>The Guardian</i> , MediaGuardian, January 28, 2008: 6)
OB03	'The dangers of trivialising suicide' (<i>The Observer</i> , February 3, 2008: 32)
GU05	'Two cousins die from town hit by spate of young suicides' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 16, 2008: 8)
OB04	'Calls to Samaritans soar after Bridgend suicides' (<i>The Observer</i> , February 17, 2008: 9)
GU06	'There is no 'suicide chain' in Bridgend' (<i>The Guardian</i> , G2, February 19, 2008: 3)
GU07	'Girl becomes 17 th suspected suicide/Suspected suicides in Bridgend area reach 17 as schoolgirl found hanged' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 20, 2008: 1, 3)
GU08	'Academics back Bridgend families in blaming media' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 21, 2008:

	11)
GU09	'Beyond the digital divide lies a new world of intimacy' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 21, 2008: 33)
GU10	'The media's role in Bridgend' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 21, 2008: 35)
GU11	'Is the media invasion helping Bridgend?' (<i>The Guardian</i> , G2, February 21, 2008: 3)
GU12	'Bridgend should not be demonised' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 22, 2008: 37)
GU13	'The readers' editor on...reporting the suicides in South Wales' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 25, 2008: 31)
GU14	'More consideration, less volume' (<i>The Guardian</i> , MediaGuardian, February 25, 2008: 7)
GU15	'Corrections and clarifications' (<i>The Guardian</i> , February 28, 2008: 34)
GU16	'Intimations of mortality: We have lost the art of plain speaking when it comes to death – and that is not healthy for children' (<i>The Guardian</i> , March 1, 2008: 35)
GU17	'Inquests on five young men found hanged in south Wales' (<i>The Guardian</i> , March 20, 2008: 13)
GU18	'Dis/Connected' (<i>The Guardian</i> , The Guide, March 29, 2008: 71)
OB05	'Wales: Police probe another death in Bridgend' (<i>The Observer</i> , June 8, 2008: 10)
GU19	'Dacre promises new look at rules on hacking by journalists' (<i>The Guardian</i> , June 17, 2008: 12)
GU20	'Bad science: Suicides, Aids, and a masts campaigner' (<i>The Guardian</i> , June 28, 2008: 12)
GU21	'Bad science: Plagues of wasps, squirrels, rats? Let's see the data' (<i>The Guardian</i> , July 5, 2008: 12)
GU22	'Bad science: Testing the plausibility effect' (<i>The Guardian</i> , July 12, 2008: 15)
OB06	'The readers' editor on...Bridgend and suicide reporting' (<i>The Observer</i> , July 27, 2008: 30)
GU23	'Horror stories' (<i>The Guardian</i> , MediaGuardian, July 28, 2008: 9)
GU24	'Radio: Friday 12: Pick of the day' (<i>The Guardian</i> , The Guide, September 6, 2008: 97)
OB07	'Radio choice: Britain's Teenage suicides' (<i>The Observer</i> , TV and Radio, September 7, 2008: 25)
GU25	'Radio: Pick of the day' (<i>The Guardian</i> , G2, September 12, 2008: 28)
GU26	'The beginning of the end of a cruel, impractical edict: The law against suicide condemns families to watch loved ones die in pain. Human dignity demands a free choice' (<i>The Guardian</i> , December 13, 2008: 39)
GU27	'Bad science: Vintage year for iffy studies and selective reporting' (<i>The Guardian</i> , December 27, 2008: 21)
GU28	'Year in Review: 2008' (<i>The Guardian</i> , December 27, 2008: 21)
OB08	'How Bridgend was damned by distortion' (<i>The Observer</i> , March 1, 2009: 6-8)
OB09	'There's nothing glamorous about it' (<i>The Observer</i> , Review, March 8, 2009: 2)
OB10	'The readers' editor on...the responsible reporting of tragedies' (<i>The Observer</i> , March 15, 2009: 32)
GU29	'Watchdog or laptog' (<i>The Guardian</i> , MediaGuardian, March 30, 2009: 1-2)
GU30	'Playing to the valleys: Wales raises curtain on £3m national theatre' (<i>The Guardian</i> , November 6, 2009: 7)
<i>The Independent/Independent on Sunday</i>	
IN01	'The web linking seven young people who chose to take their own lives' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 24, 2008: 24)
IN02	'When teenagers lose touch with reality' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 24, 2008: 43)
IN03	'When the subject is suicide, reporting on it requires the utmost sensitivity' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 26, 2008: 18)
INS04	'Police warn of Bebo 'internet suicide cult' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , January 27, 2008: 35)
INS05	'Just upstairs, and horribly at risk' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , January 27, 2008: 42-43)
IN06	'Mother's fears over hangings' (<i>The Independent</i> , January 28, 2008: 8)
IN07	'Another tragedy in Bridgend as girl kills herself' (<i>The Independent</i> , February 6, 2008: 6)
INS08	'Sensitive reporting can be a matter of life and death' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , February 10, 2008: 44)
IN09	'Ray of hope' (<i>The Independent</i> , February 15, 2008: 34)
IN10	'Two Bridgend cousins kill themselves' (<i>The Independent</i> , February 16, 2008: 4)

IN11	'I feel shaken to the core. Why are youngsters around here doing this?/Task force considers the 'Werther effect' (<i>The Independent</i> , February 20, 2008: 6)
IN12	'Bridgend's mood turns from shock to anger' (<i>The Independent</i> , February 21, 2008: 13)
IN13	'The big question: Should the media stop reporting the suicides in and around Bridgend?' (<i>The Independent</i> , February 22, 2008: 39)
IN14	'BBC pulls suicide drama after Bridgend deaths' (<i>The Independent</i> , February 22, 2008: 9)
IN15	'Bridgend suicide 'due to break-up' (<i>The Independent</i> , February 23, 2008: 8)
INS16	'The big stories and talking points of the past seven days' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , February 24, 2008: 30)
INS17	'That bell of suicide tolls for all of us' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , February 24, 2008: 42-43)
INS18	'The path to mental health is paved with prejudice' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , March 2, 2008: 44)
IN19	'Why are children so unhappy?/Teachers demand inquiry into the epidemic of anxiety in the classroom' (<i>The Independent</i> , March 11, 2008: 1-2)
IN20	'Briton banks a fortune from his \$850m Bebo sale' (<i>The Independent</i> , March 14, 2008: 2)
INS21	'Bags of news – and greener at the checkout' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , March 16, 2008: 56)
IN22	'Bridgend inquests told of young men's tormented lives and desperate deaths' (<i>The Independent</i> , March 20, 2008: 9)
INS23	'A bad week for the Web: The sites that give lessons in suicide' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , March 23, 2008: 6)
IN24	'Pandora: Bridgend's 'uncool' MP waits to hear from Brand' (<i>The Independent</i> , April 1, 2008: 14)
IN25	'Pandora: Is this Brand management?' (<i>The Independent</i> , April 16, 2008: 14)
IN26	'Bridgend man found hanged' (<i>The Independent</i> , April 21, 2008: 8)
IN27	'EMO: Welcome to the Black Parade' (<i>The Independent</i> , May 23, 2008: 20-21)
INS28	'What price the Code, if Amy is caught drunk?' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , May 25, 2008: 56)
INS29	'Mobile phone masts are linked to Bridgend suicides, claims scientist' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , June 22, 2008: 30)
INS30	'Privacy is down the YouTube and real friends are history: Teenagers weaned on the instant gratification of the internet do not understand the dangers that lurk in its virtual world' (<i>The Independent on Sunday</i> , July 6, 2008: 20)
IN31	'Ministers seek curbs on teenage suicide websites' (<i>The Independent</i> , August 1, 2008: 8)
IN32	'Bridgend man, 23, is found dead' (<i>The Independent</i> , August 12, 2008: 4)
IN33	'Legal reform to highlight illegality of suicide websites' (<i>The Independent</i> , September 18, 2008: 12)
IN34	'Lonely life and premature death of Nicholas Hughes' (<i>The Independent</i> , March 24, 2009: 14)
IN35	'A depressingly widespread problem' (<i>The Independent</i> , June 16, 2009: 30)
IN36	'The big question: Is depression increasing and what is the best way to treat it?' (<i>The Independent</i> , October 29, 2009: 36)
Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday	
DM01	'The Internet Suicide Cult?/They lived and died online' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 23, 2008: 1, 4-5)
DM02	'Wild child who surfed her way to suicide' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 23, 2008: 5)
DM03	'We are creating a generation for whom reality now exists only on a computer screen' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 24, 2008: 14)
DM04	'I walked in the front door and found my Leah hanging from the stairs. She was breathing but only just' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 24, 2008: 21)
DM05	'A town on suicide watch as toll rises to 13 in just a year' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , January 25, 2008: 23)
DM06	'14 th teenager found hanged in suicide town' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 6, 2008: 25)
DM07	'Horror as girl, 16, who wanted to be a model is found hanged' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 13, 2008: 29)
DM08	'Cousins are found hanged in town hit by a spate of suicides/What parents can do to help'

	(<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 16, 2008: 11)
DM09	'Found hanged, the boy aged ten who wanted to be a girl' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 16, 2008: 38)
MOS10	'Goodbye, my Golden Boy' (<i>Mail on Sunday</i> , Femail, February 17, 2008: 52-53)
DM11	'The tragedy of Jenna, suicide town's 17 th victim/In a town shattered by a series of teenage suicides, another young girl takes her own life' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 20, 2008: 1, 11)
DM12	'Wales drafts plan to help youngsters' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 20, 2008: 11)
DM13	'Father insists there is a link in Bridgend suicides' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 21, 2008: 9)
DM14	'Campaign aims to cut suicide rate by 10 per cent' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 21, 2008: 9)
DM15	'Tragedy and the strange, lonely borderless world inhabited by too many teenagers' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 21, 2008: 14)
DM16	'Daily Mail comment: A public concern' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 21, 2008: 14)
DM17	'Just what's happened to the town I grew up in?' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 22, 2008: 32-33)
DM18	'Is today's younger generation mollycoddled?' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , February 26, 2008: 58)
DM19	'The internet ghouls who glory in our girl's suicide' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , March 20, 2008: 25)
DM20	'Boy hanged in Bridgend 'wanted to be with his dead friend' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , March 20, 2008: 41)
DM21	'Satellite choice: Dis/Connected' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , March 31, 2008: 58)
DM22	'Woman is Bridgend's 18 th suicide victim' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , April 10, 2008: 12)
DM23	'Suicide sites warning' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , April 11, 2008: 22)
DM24	'Teenager's death may be 19 th Bridgend suicide' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , April 21, 2008: 32)
MOS25	'21 st victim in 'suicide town' (<i>Mail on Sunday</i> , June 8, 2008: 8)
DM26	'Suicide victims' friend in fatal balcony fall' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , June 10, 2008: 21)
MOS27	'Girl, 16, killed by train as she tries to recover mobile' (<i>Mail on Sunday</i> , June 15, 2008: 38)
DM28	'New Bridgend hanging tragedy' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , June 18, 2008: 5)
MOS29	'400 Facebook friends, but who else did the web let into Laurent's life?' (<i>Mail on Sunday</i> , July 6, 2008: 28)
DM30	'Dark side of YouTube' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , July 31, 2008: 37)
DM31	'Will Dannii be X-asperated by new girl Cheryl?' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , August 15, 2008: 11)
DM32	No title (<i>Daily Mail</i> , August 18, 2008: 15)
DM33	'X Factor hopeful 'forced to talk about suicides' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , August 22, 2008: 21)
DM34	'Want fame? Forget hard work. Just hard luck; As yet another X Factor wannabe fakes a sob story...' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , August 28, 2008: 49)
DM35	'Outlawed: The websites that encourage teen suicides' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , September 18, 2008: 31)
DM36	'The friend who haunts me still' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , November 1, 2008: 22-23)
DM37	'So is there a suicide gene?' (<i>Daily Mail</i> , Femail, April 2, 2009: 58)
Daily/Sunday Express	
DE01	'Seven die in suicide 'craze' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 23, 2008: 10-11)
DE02	'Suicide is 'cool' says death cult gang's pal' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 24, 2008: 17)
DE03	'How many more of our children will succumb to the suicide cult?' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 25, 2008: 28-29)
DE04	'Linked by web of despair' (<i>Daily Express</i> , January 26, 2008: 15)
SE05	'End of my dreams/Deadly secret e-mails' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , January 27, 2008: 9)
DE06	'Another girl hangs herself in death town/Suicide No14 in the town haunted by internet cult' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 6, 2008: 1, 5)
DE07	'Social websites like Bebo give a shoulder to cry on' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 7, 2008: 39)
DE08	'Coroner: 14 suicides not linked' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 9, 2008: 10)
SE09	'15 th death in suicide town' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 10, 2008: 2)
DE10	'Now coroner probes nine more hangings in valley of the suicides' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 14, 2008: 6)
DE11	'Two more hangings rock death-cult town' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 16, 2008: 5)
DE12	'Suicide of boy who read of tragedies' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 16, 2008: 5)
SE13	'8 more suicide bids' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 17, 2008: 15)

SE14	'Probe this spate of suicides' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 17, 2008: 26)
DE15	'Jenna is the 17 th young person to kill herself in tragic Bridgend/She was a happy girl...so why kill herself?' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 20, 2008: 1, 5)
DE16	'More suicide mystery' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 20, 2008: 12)
DE17	'Suicides are linked, says grieving father' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 21, 2008: 5)
DE18	'17 suicides in one town but a police chief says the media is to blame' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 21, 2008: 11)
DE19	'Tribute web pages shut to halt copycat suicides' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 22, 2008: 33)
DE20	'We must talk to our teenagers' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 23, 2008: 20)
DE21	'I'm going to kill myself...and it will be your fault' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 23, 2008: 26)
SE22	'They want to be dead for a bit...but if you're dead there's no coming back' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 24, 2008: 10-11)
SE23	'We must act on welfare reform' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 24, 2008: 26)
SE24	'We can't bring back hanging' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 24, 2008: 29)
SE25	'Modern Britain is so sickening' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , February 24, 2008: 84)
DE26	'Samaritans patrol the streets in suicide town' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 25, 2008: 22)
DE27	'Anger over class suicide not project' (<i>Daily Express</i> , February 27, 2008: 27)
SE28	'Can the internet be made safe?' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , March 2, 2008: 6)
SE29	'Suicide torment' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , March 2, 2008: 83)
DE30	'Bridgend hangings blamed on drugs and drink' (<i>Daily Express</i> , March 20, 2008: 19)
DE31	'Woman is Bridgend victim 18' (<i>Daily Express</i> , April 10, 2008: 11)
DE32	'Town's 19 th suicide victim' (<i>Daily Express</i> , April 21, 2008: 21)
DE33	'Drug boy's distraught parents 'in suicide pact' (<i>Daily Express</i> , June 5, 2008: 27)
SE34	'Bridgend 'suicide' toll hits 21 as friend of victim is found hanged' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , June 8, 2008: 6)
DE35	'Suicide toll reaches 22' (<i>Daily Express</i> , June 18, 2008: 17)
SE36	'Suicides 'linked to mobile phone masts/Were they too near masts' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , June 22, 2008: 1, 4)
DE37	'Ex-drug addict mum to be X Factor's latest star' (<i>Daily Express</i> , August 15, 2008: 5)
SE38	'I dressed as a schoolgirl to save my daughter from school bullying' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , August 31, 2008: 64)
SE39	'Cannabis 'killed suicide victims' (<i>Sunday Express</i> , November 9, 2008: 4)
<i>The Sun/News of the World</i>	
SU01	'Bebo mates 'in suicide chain' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 23, 2008: 9)
SU02	'Please don't copy my son's suicide' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 24, 2008: 19)
SU03	'Gloom of dark skies' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 24, 2008: 19)
SU04	'Sick sites' 'glamour' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 24, 2008: 19)
SU05	'12 more teens in suicide risk' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 25, 2008: 29)
SU06	'Happy Luke new suicide spree victim' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 26, 2008: 31)
NW01	'Street of suicide' (<i>News of the World</i> , January 27, 2008: 8)
SU07	'Police to probe 13 suicides' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 28, 2008: 4)
SU08	'Suicides town in farewell to Tasha' (<i>The Sun</i> , January 31, 2008: 11)
SU09	'Bridgend's 14 th suicide' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 6, 2008: 19)
SU10	'No link' in town's suicides' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 9, 2008: 15)
NW02	'Rail death is 'suicide' No15' (<i>News of the World</i> , February 10, 2008: 14)
SU11	'Catwalk rookie, 16 is found hanged' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 13, 2008: 9)
SU12	'Bridgend toll hits 23' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 14, 2008: 35)
SU13	'Bridgend toll 16 as cousins hang' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 16, 2008: 11)
SU14	'Telly 'copycat' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 16, 2008: 11)
NW03	'Tasha's funeral drove me to hang myself too' (<i>News of the World</i> , February 17, 2008: 11)
SU15	'17 hangings, 13 months, 1 town, 1 question..WHY?/Place where shadow of death stalks the young' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 20, 2008: 1, 4-5)
SU16	'Please, end our torment' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 20, 2008: 5)
SU17	'Calls for help rise' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 20, 2008: 5)
SU18	'Sun says: Parents' hell' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 21, 2008: 8)

SU19	'Goodbye our little butterfly' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 21, 2008: 12-13)
SU20	'Terrible legacy for sad families' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 21, 2008: 13)
SU21	'Bridgend rail death' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 22, 2008: 7)
SU22	'Bridgend suicide lad's Web threat' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 23, 2008: 23)
SU23	'Don't do it' squad' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 25, 2008: 20)
SU24	'Bridgend 'Cracker' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 26, 2008: 17)
SU25	'Welsh school's suicide lessons' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 27, 2008: 29)
SU26	'Funeral class for risk kids' (<i>The Sun</i> , February 28, 2008: 6)
SU27	'Bridgend hanging lad, 17, was drunk' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 1, 2008: 39)
NW04	'Tragic ten all linked' (<i>News of the World</i> , March 2, 2008: 26)
SU28	'Jenna 'to be last of suicides' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 4, 2008: 9)
NW05	'Our heroes' (<i>News of the World</i> , March 9, 2008: 38-39)
SU29	'Kid stress fear' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 19, 2008: 2)
SU30	'Coroner's fury at suicide sites' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 20, 2008: 17)
SU31	'Troubled love-life and drug cocktail/Leigh wanted to be with best pal/Groom-to-be 'had no reason to die'/Dad-of-one sent a last text to ex/Shoot threat over debt to two thugs' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 20, 2008: 17)
SU32	'Mum's turmoil at web sickos' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 20, 2008: 17)
SU33	'Don't let Net snare your kids' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 21, 2008: 25)
SU34	'Tattoo tribute' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 24, 2008: 7)
SU35	'Teens on internet 20 hours a week' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 24, 2008: 11)
SU36	'Lads save woman in Bridgend suicide bid' (<i>The Sun</i> , April 8, 2008: 25)
SU37	'Rescued Bridgend girl dies' (<i>The Sun</i> , April 10, 2008: 29)
SU38	'Hang lad is 19 th in Bridgend suicides' (<i>The Sun</i> , April 21, 2008: 7)
SU39	'Hang lad night out' (<i>The Sun</i> , April 26, 2008: 28)
NW06	'Bridgend alert missed' (<i>News of the World</i> , April 27, 2008: 34)
SU40	'£2m Bridgend aid' (<i>The Sun</i> , May 7, 2008: 15)
SU41	'20 th town death' (<i>The Sun</i> , May 8, 2008: 35)
SU42	'Parents' death bid' (<i>The Sun</i> , June 5, 2008: 26)
NW07	'Suicide No21 at Bridgend link to No20' (<i>News of the World</i> , June 8, 2008: 28)
SU43	'Hols fall lad from Bridgend' (<i>The Sun</i> , June 10, 2008: 25)
NW08	'Train girl dies saving mobile' (<i>News of the World</i> , June 15, 2008: 14)
SU44	'Brave girl, 16, killed saving pal from train' (<i>The Sun</i> , June 16, 2008: 27)
SU45	'Suicide St Bridgend' (<i>The Sun</i> , June 18, 2008: 12-13)
SU46	'Suicide squad blitz' (<i>The Sun</i> , June 19, 2008: 14)
NW09	'Rock tribute for tragic 22' (<i>News of the World</i> , July 6, 2008: 18)
SU47	'Hanging 'blunder' (<i>The Sun</i> , July 26, 2008: 26)
SU48	'Cops probe suicide No23 in Bridgend' (<i>The Sun</i> , August 12, 2008: 19)
SU49	'Song for Bridgend' (<i>The Sun</i> , August 15, 2008: 5)
NW10	'Sad Web vigil on Bridgend' (<i>News of the World</i> , August 17, 2008: 12)
SU50	'X factor girl's Bridgend fury' (<i>The Sun</i> , August 22, 2008: 31)
SU51	'Suicide sites ban' (<i>The Sun</i> , September 18, 2008: 4)
SU52	'Sun says: Stop the sites' (<i>The Sun</i> , September 18, 2008: 8)
SU53	'Bridgend lass died mourning 3 friends' (<i>The Sun</i> , September 26, 2008: 27)
SU54	'Bridgend hanging after girl's love split' (<i>The Sun</i> , October 11, 2008: 31)
SU55	'Bridgend hanging over pal' (<i>The Sun</i> , October 25, 2008: 27)
SU56	'Mum Lisa, 25, found hanged in Bridgend' (<i>The Sun</i> , November 12, 2008: 29)
SU57	'Fury over Net game of suicide' (<i>The Sun</i> , November 13, 2008: 37)
SU58	'Hey, he's armless' (<i>The Sun</i> , November 18, 2008: 29)
SU59	'Two-year mortgage holidays; Queen's Speech: Help for homeowners' (<i>The Sun</i> , December 4, 2008: 8-9)
SU60	'Lad of 17 is No25 to die in Bridgend' (<i>The Sun</i> , December 30, 2008: 7)
SU61	'Sent to the Front' (<i>The Sun</i> , December 31, 2008: 28-29)
SU62	'Scientists: Suicide can be 'catching' (<i>The Sun</i> , March 13, 2009: 36)
SU63	'Bridgend victim 26' (<i>The Sun</i> , April 16, 2009: 10)

SU64	'Bridgend suicide girl's dad is found hanged' (<i>The Sun</i> , April 29, 2009: 23)
SU65	'New horror in Bridgend' (<i>The Sun</i> , June 18, 2009: 17)
SU66	'Jilted ex killed self' (<i>The Sun</i> , August 14, 2009: 15)
SU67	'£2m to prevent suicides' (<i>The Sun</i> , November 3, 2009: 33)
Daily/Sunday Mirror	
MI01	'Suicide town' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 23, 2008: 19)
MI02	'Just seconds from being suicide No8' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 24, 2008: 17)
MI03	'I'd never do that to you Mum' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 24, 2008: 36-37)
MI04	'Town's 13 suicides in a year' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 25, 2008: 27)
MI05	'Logged on to despair' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 26, 2008: 21)
MI06	'Suicide anguish of mum' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 26, 2008: 26)
SMI07	'Suicides Net probe' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i> , January 27, 2008: 2)
SMI08	'Tash had been so happy on the day she killed herself' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i> , January 27, 2008: 27)
MI09	'Plea over suicides' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , January 31, 2008: 22)
MI10	'14 th suicide in death town' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 6, 2008: 21)
MI11	'Suicide 14 'not linked' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 9, 2008: 31)
SMI12	'Bridgend victim 15' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i> , February 10, 2008: 6)
MI13	'Fears on nine new hangings' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 14, 2008: 11)
MI14	'Two cousins die in 'Bridgend suicides' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 16, 2008: 21)
MI15	'Mum fears copycat death' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 16, 2008: 21)
MI16	'Suicide No17 in the town of no hope' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 20, 2008: 4-5)
MI17	'It's depressing, there are no jobs..there's a sense place is cursed' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 20, 2008: 5)
MI18	'Look and listen for danger signs' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 20, 2008: 5)
MI19	'Dying is dead easy..' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 20, 2008: 13)
MI20	'There ARE links' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 21, 2008: 14)
MI21	'Can our kids really be dying for fame' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 22, 2008: 31)
MI22	'Nat Net threat' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 23, 2008: 15)
MI23	'Bridgend fury at teen suicide note lessons' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 27, 2008: 23)
MI24	'In detention..for refusing to plan her own funeral' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , February 28, 2008: 37)
MI25	'Bridgend boy hangs after boozing binge' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , March 1, 2008: 21)
MI26	'Bridgend coroner suicide plan plea' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , March 20, 2008: 19)
MI27	'Suicide: Why it's the biggest killer of young men' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , April 17, 2008: 42)
MI28	'Suicide County hit by tragedy No19' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , April 21, 2008: 11)
MI29	'Sis horror' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , April 22, 2008: 17)
MI30	'Letter: You Text' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , April 22, 2008: 41)
MI31	'Lotto help for suicide' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , May 7, 2008: 20)
MI32	'20 th suicide in Bridgend' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , May 8, 2008: 27)
MI33	'Drug death tot's mum and dad in suicide bid' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , June 5, 2008: 19)
MI34	'We'll shut down suicide websites' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , June 6, 2008: 26)
SMI35	'Bridgend man in suicide No21' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i> , June 8, 2008: 10)
MI36	'Bridgend suicide 21 'a hanging' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , June 9, 2008: 28)
MI37	'It made no sense..why would a 10-year-old kill himself?' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , June 19, 2008: 38-39)
MI38	'Death film ban' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , June 20, 2008: 15)
MI39	'Boy, 15, in hanging after row' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , June 28, 2008: 28)
MI40	'MySpaced out' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , July 4, 2008: 27)
MI41	'Row with his girl led to suicide' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , July 26, 2008: 27)
MI42	'23 rd victim of hanging in Bridgend suicide zone' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , August 12, 2008: 11)
MI43	'X Factor girl told to 'talk up' suicides' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , August 22, 2008: 3)
SMI44	'Snort..then Si' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i> , August 24, 2008: 21)
SMI45	'Suicide Net ban' (<i>Sunday Mirror</i> , September 14, 2008: 18)
MI46	'Jenna: no link to Bridgend suicides' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , October 11, 2008: 24)
MI47	'Hanged girl upset at loss' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , October 25, 2008: 24)

MI48	'Mum found hanged in Bridgend' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , November 12, 2008: 18)
MI49	'I blame suicide websites for my beautiful Imogen's death' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , December 6, 2008: 38-39)
MI50	'Yet another teen death in Bridgend' (<i>Daily Mirror</i> , December 30, 2008: 21)

APPENDIX II
Protocol used for sample article analysis

Table II.A: Protocol template	
1. Article Identifier:	
2. Author:	
3. Date of publication:	
4. Page and Section:	
5. Length of article:	a. Under 500 words b. 501 to 1,000 words c. 1,001 to 2,000 words d. 2,001 words plus
6. Degree of relevance to Bridgend suicide case:	a. Primary relevance (Bridgend case in its own right) b. Secondary relevance (Bridgend case within a wider context) c. Incidental relevance/Irrelevance (Bridgend case only as a point of reference)
7. Miscellaneous: Include headline, key phrases, relevant 1 to 3 sentences that help identify the report	
Headline:	
Outline:	
Key phrases/Quotes:	
8. Aspect(s) of suicide constituting author's main focus [headline-sub-heading(s)-lead paragraph]:	a. Causes of suicide b. Suicide method c. Suicide prevention (appropriate policy responses to be adopted/weaknesses of existing policies) d. Memorialisation and impact of suicide on family and community life e. Other
9. Bridgend suicides primarily seen as a potential problem of:	a. Internet suicide (Virtual immortality/Suicide websites/Internet medium) b. Suicide contagion (Virtual immortality/Suicide websites/Copycat effect/Contagion effect/Media responsibility/Cultures of death/Local deprivation) c. Breakdown Britain (Local deprivation/Social Breakdown) d. Mental health (Emotional vulnerability/Mental illness/Institutional failure) e. Other
10. Other present (not primary) frames/sub-frames:	a. Internet suicide (Virtual immortality/Suicide websites/Internet medium) b. Suicide contagion (Virtual immortality/Suicide websites/Copycat effect/Contagion effect/Media responsibility/Cultures of death/Local deprivation) c. Breakdown Britain (Local deprivation/Social Breakdown) d. Mental health (Emotional vulnerability/Mental illness/Institutional failure) e. Other
11. Appropriate	a. Tighter Internet regulation and amendment of legislation on assisting

response(s) to suicide apropos the Bridgend case:	- suicide b. Media guidelines ensuring responsible reporting of suicide c. Effective mental health support combined with public awareness and sensitisation over the issue d. Uncertainty; no particular response deemed appropriate e. Other
12. Construction of Bridgend area:	a. Mostly positive portrayal b. Mostly negative portrayal c. Other d. No reference to the quality of life in Bridgend
13. Construction of Internet medium:	a. Mostly positive portrayal b. Mostly negative portrayal c. Other d. No reference to the role of the Internet in Bridgend or other suicide cases
14. Construction of suicidal act:	a. Accidental b. Selfish c. Impulsive d. Premeditated and linked to existing (often chronic) mental health problems e. Inability to trace victim's intention retrospectively; complexity of suicidal act; multiple and often highly subjective factors to be taken into account f. Other g. No judgements made regarding the suicidal act per se
15. Construction of suicide reporting apropos Bridgend:	a. Irresponsible b. Insensitive or inaccurate c. Responsible and accurate d. Detailed and harsh, but also responsible; inevitable risk of causing a Werther effect, but the only way to raise public awareness over the issue e. Abstract reference to the Werther effect potentially caused by media reports of suicide f. Other g. No reference to the role of traditional media in reporting the Bridgend suicides
16. Status of dominant claims-makers cited in the report:	a. Politicians b. Police officers/coroners c. (Mental) health authorities/experts d. Local authorities e. Voluntary sector (e.g. charities committed to suicide prevention) f. Religious leaders g. Journalists/Authors h. Victims' family and friends i. Other
17. Visual material accompanying the text	
Image content:	a. Image(s) of victim(s) alone b. Image(s) of victim(s) within a friendly/familial context c. Image(s) indicative of suicide method d. Online memorials e. Offline public expressions of grief (e.g. on-site tributes, families mourning at the victim's funeral etc) f. Image(s) of Bridgend (maps indicating where each death occurred or actual photographs) g. Other h. No image(s) or image(s) irrelevant to the Bridgend case
Image size:	

Visual analysis:

18. Notes

APPENDIX III

Spreadsheets

Figures III.1 and III.2 provide an indicative depiction of the spreadsheets created in order to bring together and comparatively analyse the collected data over time and across different newspapers.

DATE	EVENT	ARTICLE CODE	PRIMARY FRAME	VICTIMS	NOTES	LEGEND
17/01/2008	Natasha Randall's death (1)					Event
18/01/2008	Leah Phillips' (+ 1) suicide (?) attempt (8)					** Front page
23/01/2008		DT01	Internet suicide (possible internet suicide pact; online memorial)		is potentially glamorising suicide; general concern re	Primary relevance
24/01/2008		DT02	Internet suicide (possible internet suicide pact; focus moving from		online memorials potentially glamorising suicide t	Secondary relevance
		DT03	Social breakdown ('Internet suicide' theory openly questioned; su		icides as a sign of a deeper social malaise; a respon	Incidental relevance
25/01/2008	Anti-suicide task force meeting (15)					Suicide contagion
	South Wales Police to review all 13 Bridgend suicides (15A)					Internet suicide
	Ministry of Justice announces crackdown on suicide websites (15Aa)					Social breakdown
		DT04	Suicide contagion (one suicide attempt potentially triggering a series of copycat incidents; emotional vulnerability and			Mental health
26/01/2008		DT05	Internet suicide (crackdown on suicide websites offering information on suicide methods; Bridgend pointing out gravity of internet suicide p			
27/01/2008		STE06	Mental health (Emotional vulnerability of youngsters, but 'victim'		status openly questioned; prey to their emotions; inability to perceive the	
		STE07	Internet suicide (potential link between internet and suicide under		scrutiny; signification spiral; dissimilar cases of online deviance linked	
30/01/2008	Natasha Randall's funeral (15B)					
01/02/2008 [after]	Rosanna Lewis' suicide attempt (15C)					
04/02/2008	Angeline Fuller's death (16)					
06/02/2008		DT08	Internet suicide (potentially deleterious influence of social networking sites on young people)			
06/02/2008	Commons Debate on Suicide Prevention (17)					
08/02/2008	Inquest on Angeline Fuller's death (17A)					
09/02/2008	Ian Jenkins' death (accident or suicide?) (17B)					
10/02/2008		STE09	Suicide contagion (?) (Yet another sudden death in 'suicide town'; deviation from locale and suicide method; however, still in wider Bridgen			
13/02/2008	Probe on 9 more suicides in Glamorgan Valleys (17C)					
13-15/02/2008	Nathaniel Pritchard's death (18)					
	Kelly Stephenson's death (19)					
16/02/2008		DT10**	Suicide contagion (latest victims related and also friends with previous victims; continuous search for potential links between individual su			
		DT11	Suicide contagion (Cameron McWilliams' suicide possibly due to Werther effect caused by too much attention drawn to Bridgend case; pote			
17/02/2008		STE12**	Internet suicide (potential online glamorization of suicide in memorial sites and concerns re potentially deleterious influence of social net			
		STE13	Internet suicide (signification spiral; various online risks linked together and presented as equally threatening; focus on suicide websites c			
18/02/2008		DT14	Internet suicide (Response to STE13; batty 'suicide gurus'; unlikely they had anything to do with Bridgend; simplistic, unsubstantiated explar			
19/02/2008	Pritchards' press conference (20)					
	Jenna Parry's death (21)					

Figure III.1: 'Primary frame' spreadsheet

Present frames - Microsoft Excel

File Home Insert Page Layout Formulas Data Review View

Clipboard Font Alignment Number Styles Cells Editing

K80

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
33	IN27	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+		
34	INS28						+	+				+	
35	INS29			+								+	
36	INS30	-	-	+						+			
37	IN31	+	+								+	+	
38	IN32				+								
39	IN33		+	+									
40	IN34					+					+	+	
41	IN35											+	
42	IN36											+	
43	BRIDGEND SUICIDES: PRESENT FRAMES												
44													
45		IS											
46		ONLINE SC			OFFLINE SC				BREAKDOWN BRITAIN		MENTAL HEALTH		
47	CODE	VI	SW	IS	CP	CN	MR	CD	LD	SB	EV	MI	IF
48	DM01	+	+	+	+					+			
49	DM02	+		+						+			
50	DM03	+	+	+	+						+		
51	DM04	+	+	+	+			+		+			
52	DM05	+			+						+	+	
53	DM06	+			+				+		+	+	
54	DM07	+											
55	DM08	+		+	+					+	+	+	
56	DM09						+				+	+	
57	MOS10		+								+	+	+
58	DM11	-	-	+	+	+			+		+	+	+
59	DM12				+						+	+	
60	DM13	-	-		+	+			-		+		
61	DM14										+	+	
62	DM15										+	+	

Sheet1 Sheet2 Sheet3 Sheet4 Sheet6

Ready 85%

Figure III.2: 'Present frames' spreadsheet

APPENDIX IV

The road from local to national news and the formation of the Bridgend narrative

Table 4.A: Bridgend-related suicides in the national press before January 2008

	Date	Title	Suicide motive	Individual incident/ Part of a wider phenomenon?
<i>The Times</i>	April 1, 2006	'Grieving parents follow son to death'	Mental distress following son's death	Part of an unexplained national rise in the number of young male suicides
<i>The Times</i>	June 2, 2007	'Boy, 15, lay down in front of train after gay taunts'	Homosexual bullying	Individual incident
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	April 1, 2006	'Parents of suicide son take their own lives'	Mental distress following son's death	Individual incident
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	October 11, 2006	'Student's suicide after overdraft was withdrawn'	Bank debt, depression and self-harm	Individual incident
<i>The Independent</i>	September 6, 2007	'Hatred and bigotry in the playground'	Homosexual bullying	Part of the wider bullying problem in British schools
<i>Daily Mail</i>	January 28, 2006	'Student found hanged 'was worried over debts'	Bank debt	Individual incident
<i>Daily Mail</i>	April 1, 2006	'Son's suicide led devoted parents to kill themselves'	Mental distress following son's death	Part of an unexplained national rise in the number of young male suicides
<i>Daily Mail</i>	October 11, 2006	'Student's deadly debt: the day after HSBC called his Pounds 1,000 overdraft, he hanged himself in despair'	Bank debt	Individual incident
<i>Sunday Express</i>	January 29, 2006	'Suicide of bullied boy'	Bullying	Individual incident
<i>Daily Express</i>	April 1, 2006	'Tragedy of family in triple suicide'	Mental distress following son's death	Individual incident
<i>Daily Express</i>	June 8, 2006	'Man's suicide with helium for balloons'	Mental distress following break-up and mother's death	Part of the wider problem posed by suicide websites
<i>Daily Express</i>	October 11, 2006	'Student killed himself over a GBP 1,000 overdraft'	Bank debt	Individual incident
<i>News of the World</i>	January 29, 2008	'Bullied to death'	Bullying	Part of the wider bullying problem in British schools
<i>News of the World</i>	February 5, 2006	'Sister's grief over 'bully' pupil'	Bullying	Individual incident
<i>The Sun</i>	April 1, 2006	'Parents' suicide as son found hanged'	Mental distress following son's death	Individual incident
<i>The Sun</i>	June 8, 2006	'£20 'diy helium' suicide'	Mental distress following break-up and mother's death	Part of the wider problem posed by suicide websites
<i>News of the World</i>	November 18, 2007	'16 reasons why we MUST beat the bullies'	Bullying	Part of the wider bullying problem in British schools
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	January 28, 2006	'Debt lad in suicide'	Bank debt	Individual incident
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	January 29, 2006	'Bullied to death: Jon, 15, was the boy everyone picked on at school. He put an end to his hell by lying down in front of a train'	Bullying	Part of a wider bullying problem in British schools
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	May 9, 2006	'My girlfriend killed herself by diving off a cliff...Torn apart by grief I did a copycat: exclusive agony of the suicide survivor'	Mental distress following girlfriend's suicide	Copycat incident, but not part of a wider phenomenon
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	June 8, 2006	'Suicide by internet kit'	Mental distress following break-up and mother's death	Part of the wider problem posed by suicide websites

Table 4.B: Regional press and the transition of focus from a Wales-wide to a Bridgend problem (articles in chronological order)

Wales-wide problem	2006	▪ 'Welsh youth suicide rates 'disturbing' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, February 6, 2006: 11) ▪ 'Let's help young like these to prevent tragedy' (<i>Western Mail</i>, February 7, 2006: 13) ▪ 'Welsh schools not doing enough to stop bullying, expert says' (<i>Western Mail</i>, February 14, 2006: 4) ▪ 'Retro report-February 1997: Appeal for Samaritans volunteers as suicide rate in Wales soars' (<i>Western Mail</i>, February 17, 2006: 18) ▪ 'Man killed himself' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, March 30, 2006: 17) ▪ 'Suicide rates soaring' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, August 31, 2006)
	2007	▪ 'Schools urged to give pupils more help to cope with grief' (<i>Western Mail</i>, May 3, 2007: 32) ▪ 'Go away and sleep on the streets' (<i>Western Mail</i>, November 17, 2007: 4) ▪ 'Ring of hatred' (<i>Wales on Sunday</i>, November 25, 2007: 28)
	2008	▪ 'We're here to provide support' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, January 21, 2008: 22)
Establishing links between individual suicide cases in and around Bridgend	2006	▪ 'Police appeal for missing teenager' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, October 26, 2006: 2) ▪ 'Fears growing for missing Dale' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, November 9, 2006: 25) ▪ 'Mum's appeal' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, November 23, 2006: 16) ▪ 'Man found hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, November 30, 2006: 3) ▪ 'Police appeal' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, November 30, 2006: 16) ▪ 'Missing teenager' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, December 7, 2006: 8) ▪ 'Mother's plea for information on Dale' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, December 28, 2006: 2)
	2007	▪ 'Missing teen found hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, January 11, 2007: 1) ▪ 'Body is released to Dale's family' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, February 8, 2007: 7) ▪ 'Friend dies in hanging tragedy' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, February 21, 2007: 3) ▪ 'Second teen found dead' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, February 22, 2007: 3) ▪ 'Man found hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, March 1, 2007: 4) ▪ 'A celebration of Thomas's life' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, March 15, 2007: 9) ▪ 'Family's tears for young father' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, May 24, 2007: 5) ▪ 'Sinister rumours and the last days of Dale' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, August 7, 2007: 20) ▪ 'Missing Dale hanged himself in warehouse' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, August 9, 2007: 10) ▪ 'Bodies found' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, August 16, 2007: 3) ▪ 'Gang fight in Bridgend' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, August 23, 2007: 7) ▪ 'Father tells of 'amazing' son's life/Sisters are left bewildered' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, September 6, 2007: 4-5) ▪ 'Mum found son hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, September 6, 2007: 20) ▪ 'Tributes to 'shy and lovely boy'' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, September 13, 2007: 19) ▪ 'Man was found hanging' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, September 27, 2007: 2) ▪ 'Man found dead' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, December 28, 2007: 3) ▪ 'Dead man named' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, December 29, 2007: 3)
	2008	▪ 'Friends pay tribute to 'gentle giant' Gareth' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, January 10, 2008: 2) ▪ 'Girl's sudden death' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, January 19, 2008: 5)
Bridgend problem	2006	▪ 'Suicide rate one of worst' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, June 29, 2006: 14)
	2007	▪ 'Mother's plea: mum of Thomas 20, found hanging begs others to seek help' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, March 15, 2007: 1) ▪ 'Hanging adds to sad statistics' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, June 7, 2007: 2) ▪ 'Why are youngsters hanging themselves?' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, August 15, 2007: 6) ▪ 'Bride-to-be finds fiancé hanging' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, August 29, 2007: 1) ▪ 'Fiancé found hanged' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, August 30, 2007: 3) ▪ 'Call for action after deaths' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, September 20, 2007: 7) ▪ 'Wife found husband hanged on stairs' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, September 20, 2007: 7) ▪ 'Mum: 'Don't leave loved ones in agony' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, September 26, 2007: 19) ▪ 'Doubts cast on hangings' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, October 9, 2007: 23) ▪ 'Tragic bedsit death' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, October 11, 2007: 11)
	2008	▪ 'Shocking suicide rates for Bridgend borough' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, January 3, 2008: 2) ▪ 'Let's lend a listening ear' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, January 3, 2008: 28) ▪ 'Man found hanging a week after friend/You need someone to talk to' (<i>Glamorgan Gazette</i>, January 17, 2008: 4) ▪ 'Why are so many of our youngsters killing themselves?' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, January 17, 2008: 1, 6-7) ▪ 'Talking is a step in the right direction' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, January 17, 2008: 32) ▪ 'Girl, 17, is found hanged at home' (<i>South Wales Echo</i>, January 22, 2008: 4)

APPENDIX V

The presence of the four main frames in the post-2008 national Bridgend coverage

A. Internet Suicide (IS)

Figure 5.2:
The presence of the IS frame in the entirety of
the sample newspapers

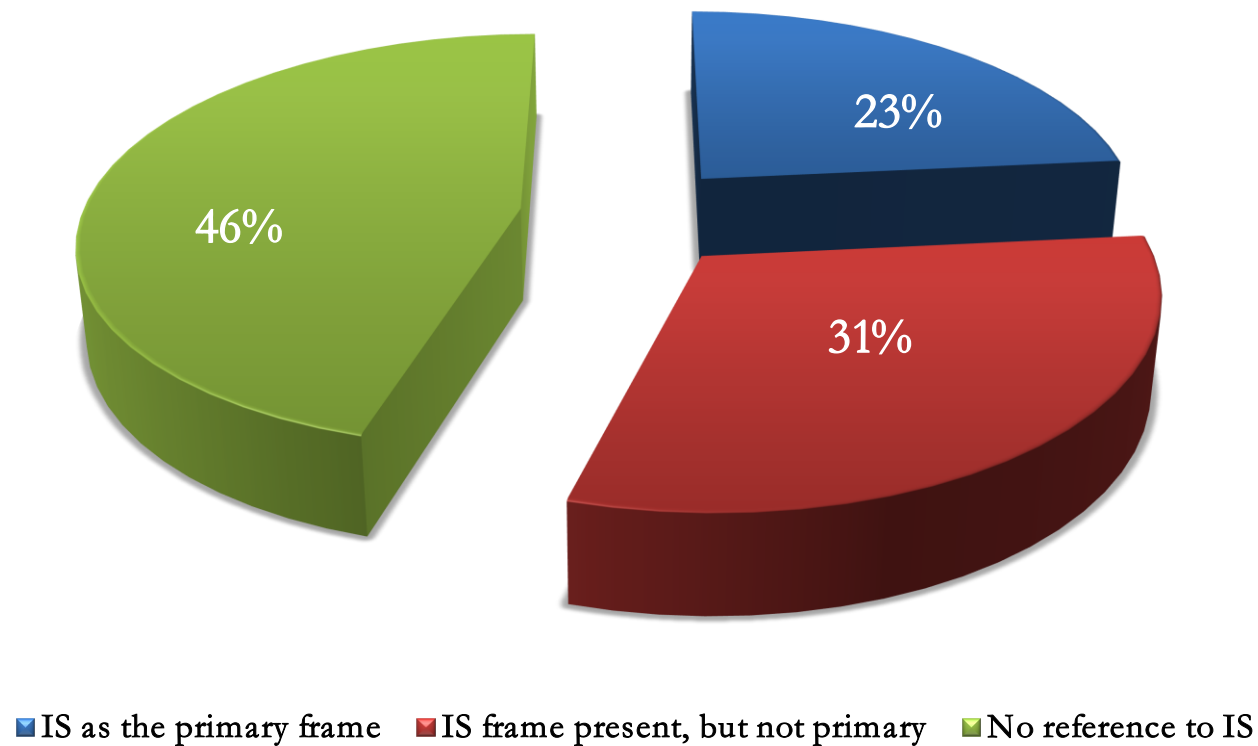


Table 5.A:
The presence of the IS frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest

[illegible]

B. Suicide Contagion (SC)

Figure 6.2:
The presence of the SC frame in the entirety of
the sample articles

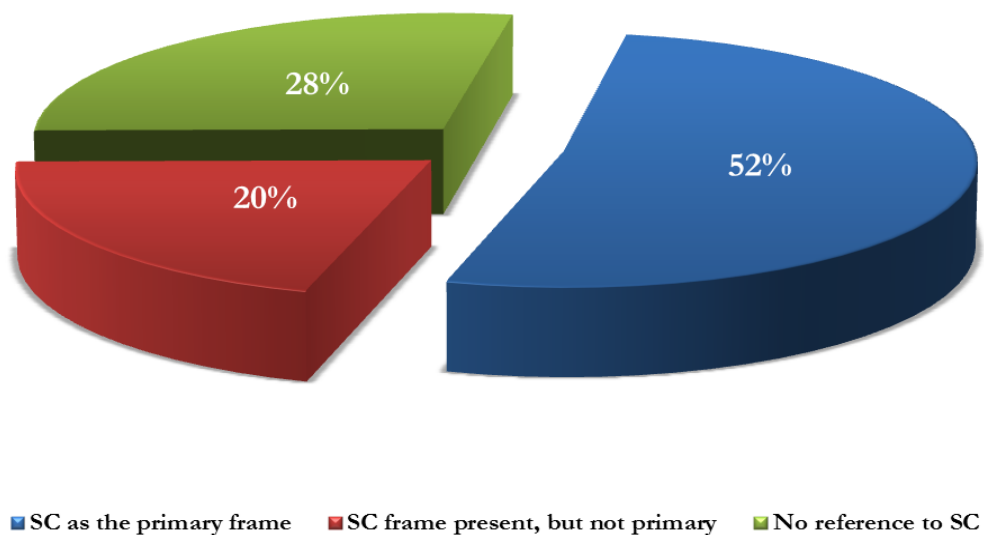


Figure 6.3:
SC as the dominant frame in the entire Bridgend coverage

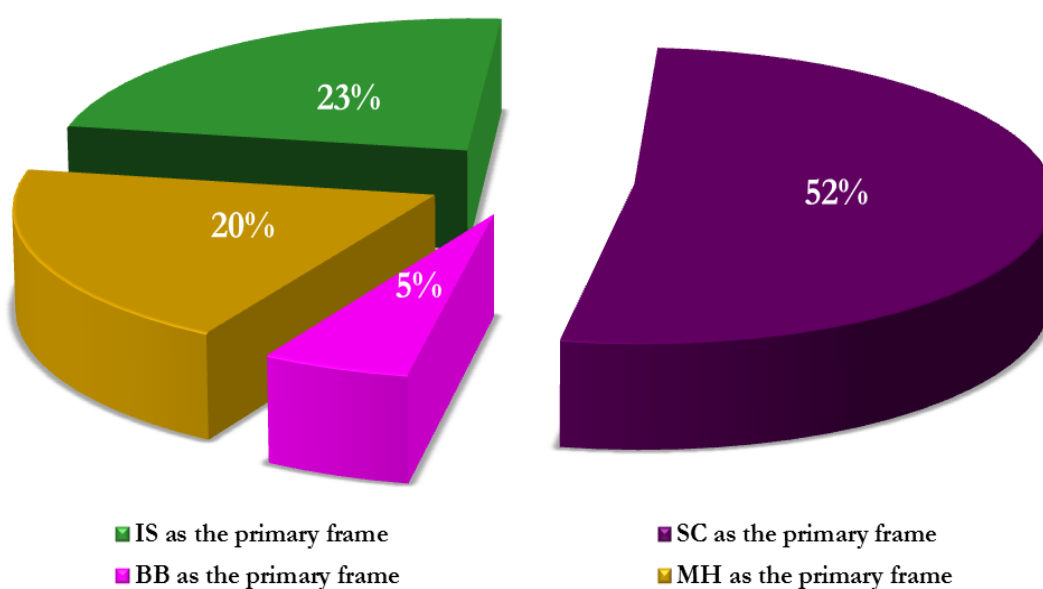
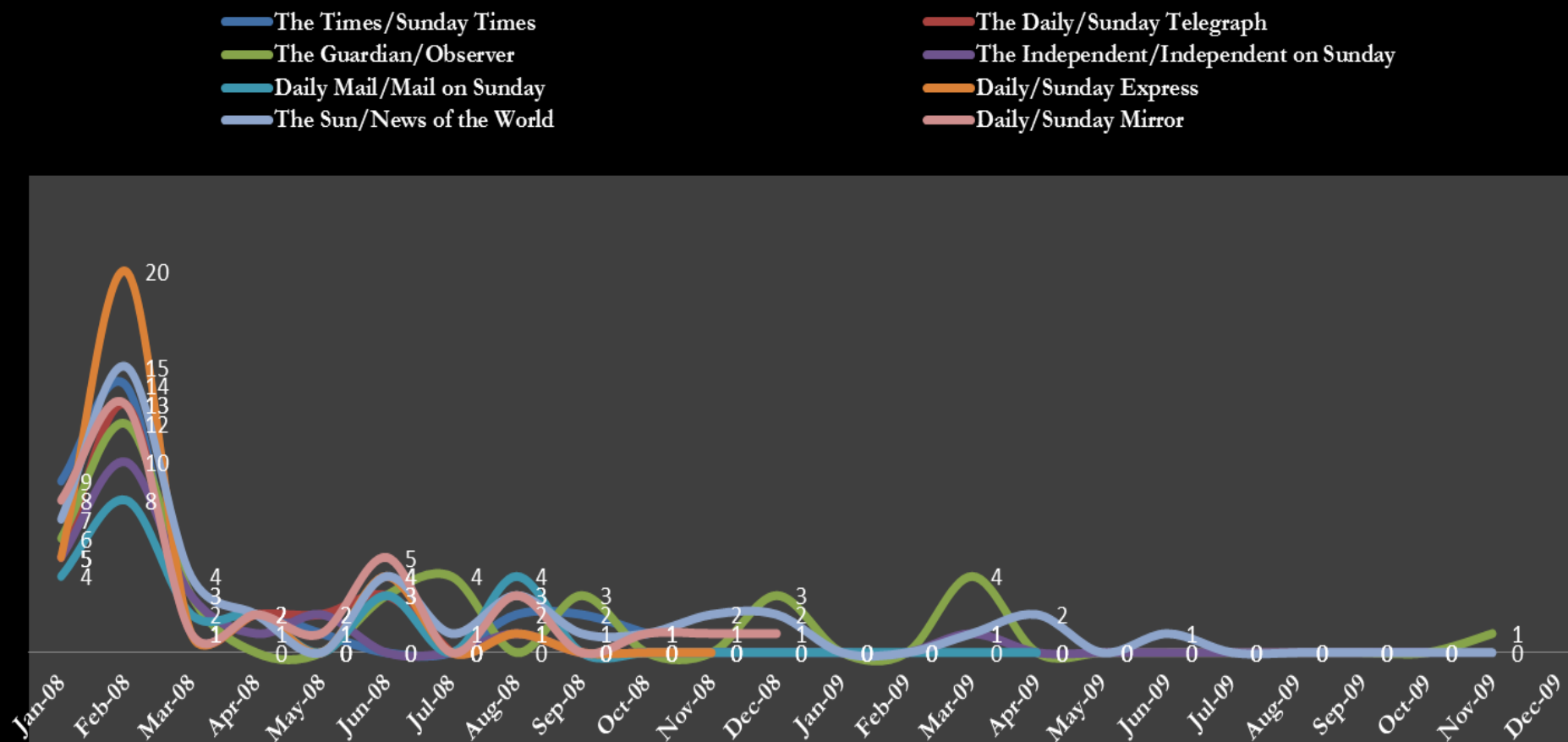


Table 6.A:
The presence of the SC frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest

[illegible]

Figure 6.4: The presence of the SC frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest (see Table 6.A)



C. Breakdown Britain (BB)

Figure 7.2:
The presence of the BB frame in the entirety of the sample articles

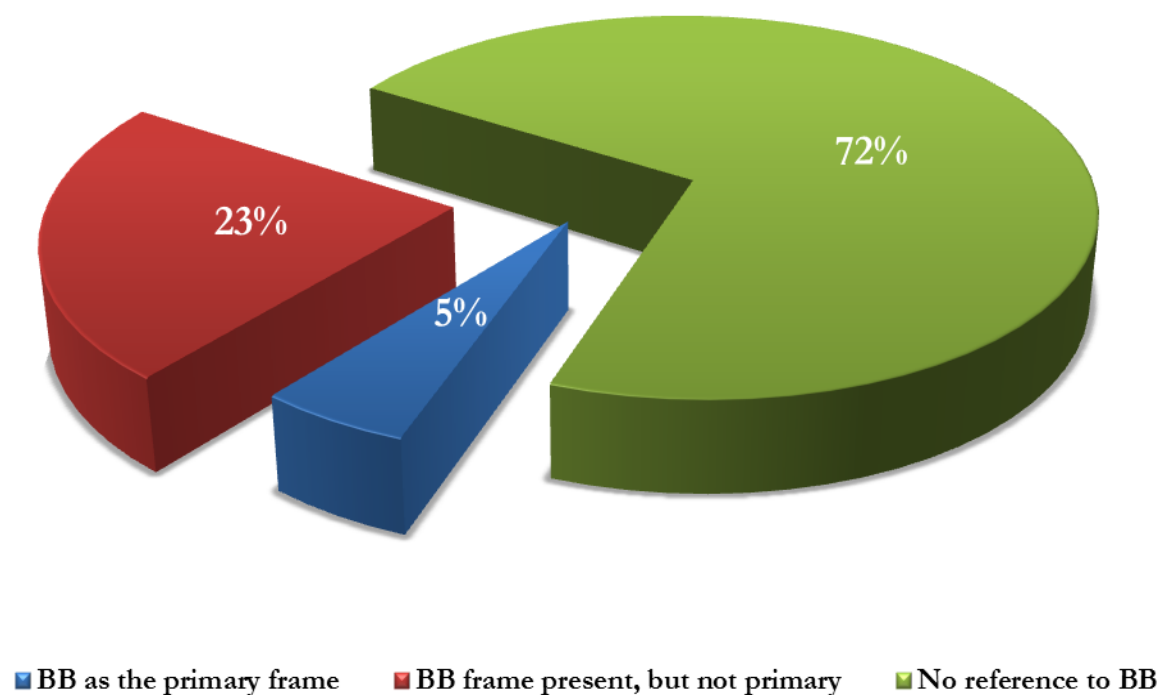


Table 7.A:
The presence of the BB frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest

[illegible]

D. Mental Health (MH)

Figure 8.2:
The presence of the MH frame in the entirety of the sample articles

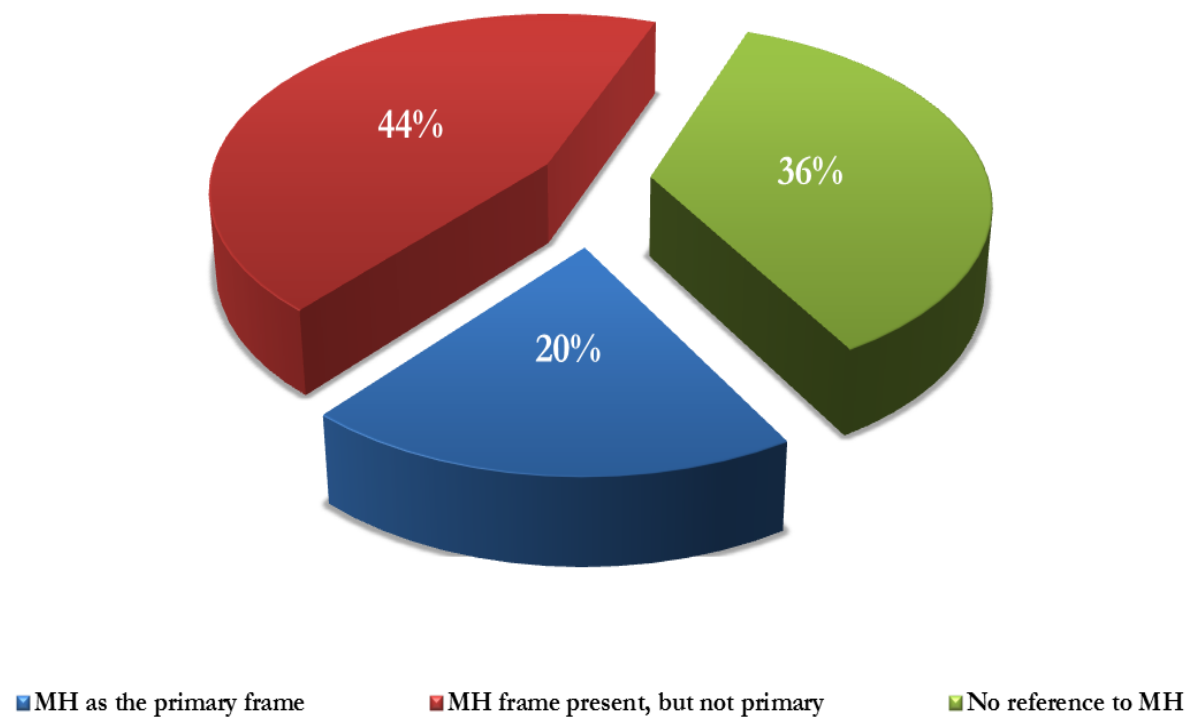
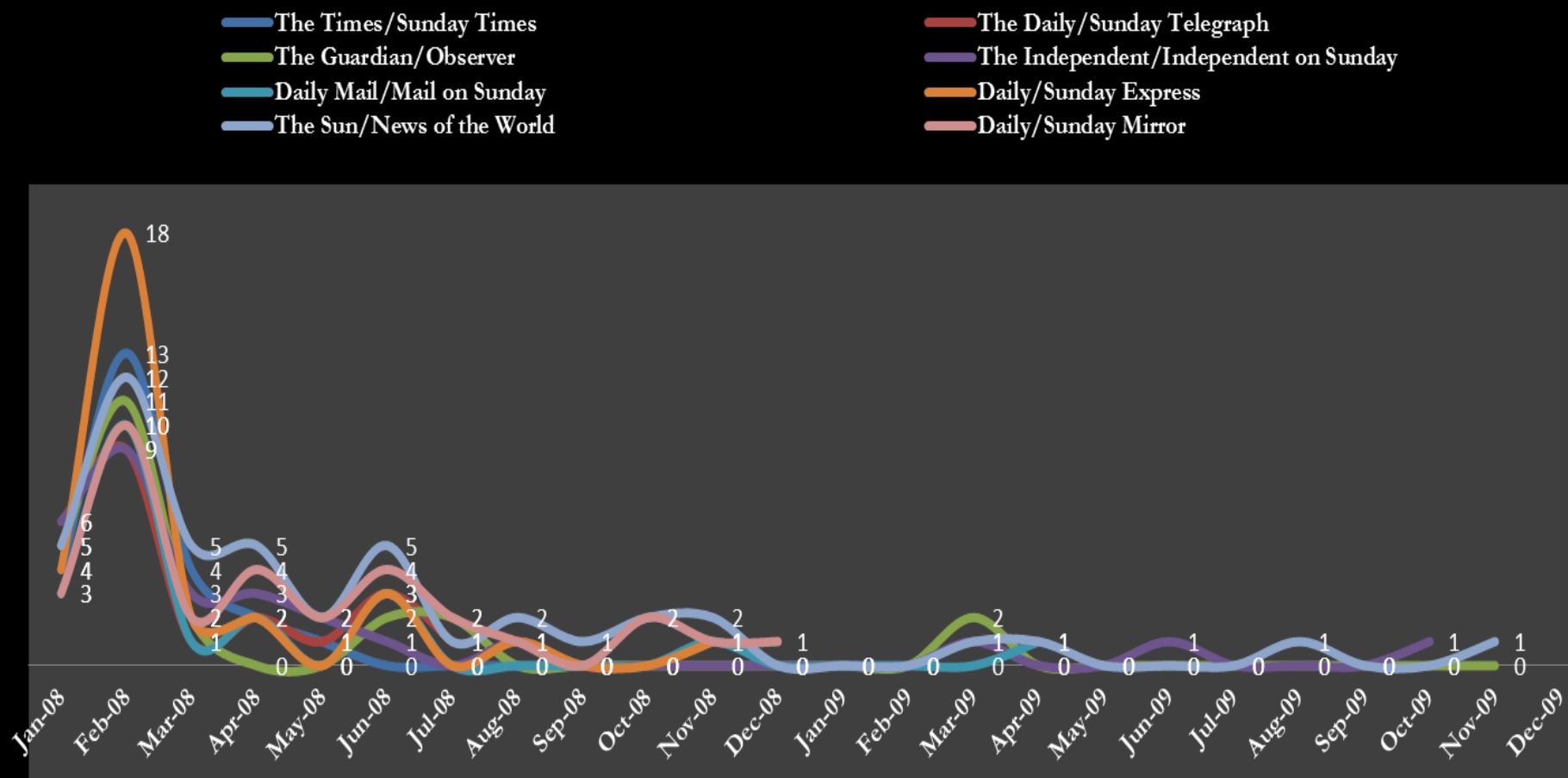


Figure 8.3: The presence of the MH frame in the Bridgend coverage by newspaper and month of interest (see Table 8.A)



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