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Good grief: the newspaper obituary in New Zealand

Abstract:

Unlike the United States and Canada, where there has been a resurgence in the popularity of the obituary, New Zealand is witnessing a decline in this final chronicling of lives. Once a standard literary skill all trainee journalists had to perfect, obituary writing is now uncommon. Instead, New Zealand journalists are expected to adapt their writing skills, often without much training or guidance, to reflect the changing role of journalism and the public perception of death. This article uses qualitative content analysis and interviews to illustrate this transition by investigating the obituary content of the country's largest daily newspaper, *The New Zealand Herald*. Although newspapers remain a public forum for death, this study also identifies the shift from focusing on the past, that is, the deceased, to the present, or those people left after the death of a loved one.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Writing – New Zealand – Obituary – Death knock – Trauma reporting

Introduction

Death announcements and obituaries have long been considered public rituals (Kitch 2000). A death notice in the service section of the newspaper would inform readers about funeral details, whereas an obituary in the news section routinely followed, if the person was considered worthy. The ritualised narrative recounted the deceased's life and achievements and obituaries were often among the best-read articles in any newspaper (Tully 2008). In the 1960s, at least half a page of the weekend publication of *The New Zealand Herald* featured columns of engagement announcements, with the odd wedding photograph as well. Another regular feature, among the news towards the back of the broadsheet, was large tracts of space devoted each week to obituaries, usually of prominent New Zealanders. Times have changed. Now death has been propelled to the front pages, and more emphasis is given to those grieving the loss of a loved one.

Unlike the United States and Canada (Starck 2008), New Zealand is witnessing a decline in obituary content in its newspapers. Now, rather than having to learn to write obituaries in an objective matter-of-fact manner, journalism students are being encouraged to interview relatives of victims and empathise with the grieving so they can capture emotion and tell a story in a different narrative form.

Theoretical framework

An obituary, or 'obit' as it is known in the industry, is a final epitaph, a summing up of someone's life and the reasons why they will be remembered (Riddell, ctd in Tully 2008: 90). Obituaries tend to follow a conventional conservative narrative structure, beginning the story with when and where the person was born, raised and educated and followed by the deceased person's most significant achievements. Along with all the necessary information – including full name (and nickname), age, date of birth, and where and when the person died, an obituary will also usually include offices or titles held, where the person was educated, as well as his or her major achievements in life, and a list of the surviving children and siblings. Details of the service and place of burial are also usually included.

This is still the case in the more conservative newspapers. Dunedin's *Otago Daily Times*, for example, runs a 10-column page of obituaries every Saturday, featuring mostly well-known members of the community. *The Press* in Christchurch has a set half-page for two local obituaries plus photographs in the 'Mainlander' section every Saturday.

Last century, many larger newspapers employed obituary writers, craftsmen in the art of obituary writing; very few still do, and certainly none in New Zealand. Obituary writing has become the work of general writers. There could be a number of reasons for their demise in New Zealand, including the lack of time to write them and lack of originality. It could be as Mark Helprin suggests in his 1983 novel *Winter's Tale:* 'The obituary writers drew their incomplete sketches, touring through his life like travelers to England who do not ever see swans, sheep, bicycles, and blue eyes' (265). In 2010, *The New Zealand Herald* chose to cease its regular Saturday page of

obituaries as the editorial staff 'found it was inconsistent in quality and with too many foreign sourced obits' (Murphy 2013).

Yet in the United States and Canada, obituary content has increased markedly, because many newspapers now sell obituary space (Starck 2008). Starck's research indicates that the revenue potential has been a life-saver for many newspapers during competitive times in the media: ''For many newspapers, charging for obituaries may be the only way to avoid following their readers to the grave'' (Noah 1997, ctd in Starck 2008: 447).

The Readership Institute, under the auspices of Northwestern University, reviewed the obituary policies of 100 American newspapers in 2012, and observed a wide range of practices. Researchers found a few newspapers still wrote news obituaries for every person with any connection to the circulation area, however tenuous they were. A few had transferred the responsibility for obituaries to their classified departments where paid obituaries were sold, and no news obituaries were written at all. However most of the newspapers in the study provided opportunities for both 'news obituaries' and 'paid obituaries'. They varied in length and detail in the news obituary, from the barest information (name, age, date of death, name of funeral home handling the services) to 'expansive chronicles of life'.

Obituaries also have an afterlife now they are going digital. The founder of *iAnnounce*, Alex Stitt, has observed how much revenue family notices brought in to the company when he worked as a manager at the *Daily Telegraph*. *Legacy.com*, which is owned by a private equity firm, has now bought *iAnnounce* and set up partnerships with hundreds of newspapers throughout the world, including *The New Zealand Herald*. The company acknowledges that obituaries are a billion-dollar market, most of which has been captured by newspapers. Now, the internet spaces for the grieving take the obituaries from the newspapers and make them available online for people to view and comment on. In return, the Boston-based Great Hill Partners pays publishers a share of revenue from online advertisements and related services (*Financial Times*, 9 May 2013).

Paying for placement of an obituary could be considered a form of vanity publishing and Starck (2008) discusses many examples of sycophantic obituaries. However, supplied content for obituaries has become many an editor's nightmare (The Readership Institute 2012), especially in smaller circulation areas, where well-known community members expect their loved ones will feature in the editorial section's obituaries (Kirkness 2013). This can create a dilemma for editors and may well be another reason for the decline of local obituaries in New Zealand newspapers.

The decline of the obituary in the editorial section of newspapers may be attributable to a number of factors. Some researchers argue it could be a generational transition, just as the columns of engagements now belong to a past era (Kitch 2000). Others suggest the representation of death has changed (Walter, Littlewood & Pickering 1995; Hanusch 2008). Death is no longer a taboo subject and has moved from the private realm into public discourse in Western societies. Death is now extremely visible (Hanusch 2008) and thus has been moved from a set section in most

newspapers, and been propelled to the front pages – especially in the case of a more unexpected or tragic demise.

Some propose that it could be because editors have recognised the selling power of death. Walters et al. proposed that competition between media has exacerbated the pressure. 'The more intense the competition, the more shocking must be the portrayal of violent deaths; and the more used we get to violence in the news, the more explicitly it must be portrayed if we are to take notice' (1995: 583).

New Zealand newspaper stories appear to be reflecting a trend in the United Kingdom, where obituaries and related reports now invariably focus on the grief of the living, those people left behind, in particular where the death is sudden and involves an ordinary person (Duncan 2012). In one of the most recent sensational murders in New Zealand for example, more than two years on after her former husband was tried for the murder of her brother, Anna Guy is still making news. Her new life in Auckland and her new relationship are current angles for ongoing news stories about this 'survivor' – see, for example, stories about her suffering an eating disorder (*3rd Degree*, 2013), her love life (*New Zealand Woman's Weekly*, 2013) and pregnancy (*Otago Daily Times online*, 2013).

Even the threat of death can be enough to make the front page now. The lead story in the *Herald on Sunday* on 17 February, 2013, for example, featured the outcome of a toddler who survived a fall at his childcare centre. The main headlines read: *Parents left in dark*, with two smaller headlines – one above and one below the main headline which read – *Boy fractures skull* and *Could this happen to you?* Duncan contends that to connect with readers there should be a strong 'like us' factor, where readers can identify with the interviewees' experience and reinforce the emotional authenticity expressed within the story (2012: 591.) Walter et al. suggest that readers may identify with the 'characters' in a news story 'whose emotional intensity and social vulnerability' are being displayed not out of any macabre vicarious pain or voyeuristic pleasure, but as a reminder of their own mortality' (1995: 586).

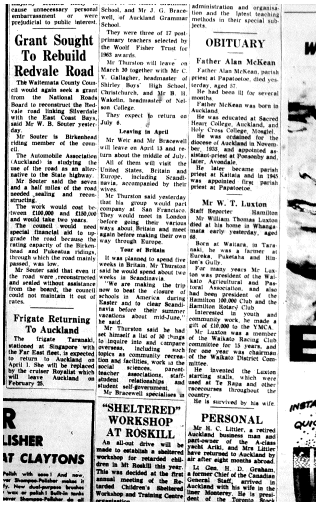
Method

This article explores how death is represented in newspapers in New Zealand and how that representation is going through a pattern of change (Starck 2008; Duncan 2012), by examining its coverage in New Zealand newspapers. It focuses in particular on *The New Zealand Herald*, the country's largest daily newspaper. 'Granny Herald' as it has been fondly known for decades, has featured obituaries since it was launched in 1863. However, being a paper that has a wide circulation base, from the far north to half way down the North Island, it has not featured obituaries as comprehensively as the country's three other major city newspapers which are more parochial, namely, the *Dominion Post* in Wellington, *The Press* in Christchurch and *The Otago Daily Times* in Dunedin.

A qualitative content analysis of three issues of *The New Zealand Herald* over the past 50 years illustrates the change in how death has been covered, focusing on obituaries. It looks at 1963, 2003 and 2013. Over those decades, however, traumatic

events have increasingly become news staples (Cote & Simpson, 2006). Unexpected death during peace time is now less accepted (Walter et al, 2005) and less inevitable, especially among the young, so is therefore considered newsworthy.

Three weekend publications of *The New Zealand Herald* from mid-February (1963, 2003 and 2013) illustrate the transition. For example, in 1963, in the middle of page three of *The New Zealand Herald,* were two traditional and very formal obituaries (see Fig. 1). These two obituaries read more like today's extended death notices, which are currently found in the back section of the newspaper. There was no colour in the language, nor emotion, as often features in more contemporary obituaries. Instead they follow the fact-based formula of the time: name, place of residence, occupation, age, where they died if known, where the person was born and educated, claim to fame and, in the case of the second, what family they left behind.



Grant Sought To Rebuild Redvale Road

Frigate Returning To Auckland

"SHELTERED" WORKSHOP AT ROSKILL

OBITUARY

Father Alan McKean

Mr W. T. Luxton

PERSONAL

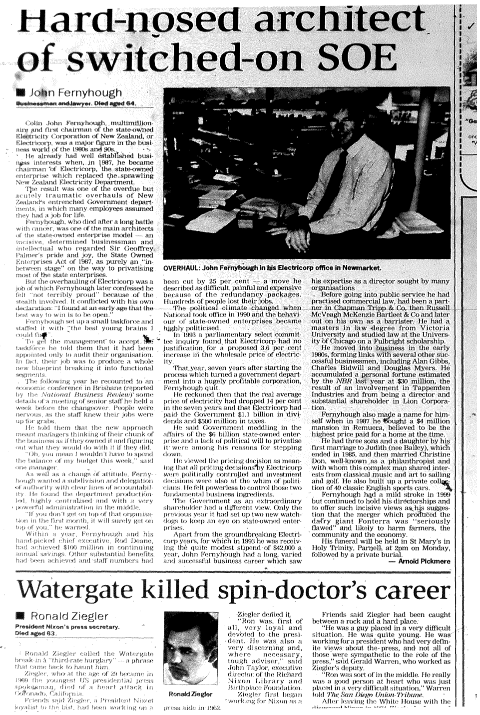
Fig. 1 *The New Zealand* Herald, 19 February 1963: 3

In contrast, under the heading 'Obituary' on 15 March 2013, were the following death announcements from *The New Zealand Herald* website:

> MARSHALL, Dennis George. On Wednesday March 13 2013 at home with his family after a short illness borne with dignity and his ready smile. Aged 57 years. Adored and loving husband of Jennifer, and most loved dad of Greg and Larissa Marshall, and Keely and Hugh Taylor. Very proud granddad of Jessica and Alicia Marshall. Loved son of Noel (deceased) and Joy Marshall, and special brother of Carol, Derrick, Linda and Graham Farley, and Sally. Number 2 son (in-law) of Bill and Lucy Sidebottom, and loved brother-in-law of Susan and Adrian McRoberts, Martin and Christine Roberts, Julie Honeyfield and Grant Honeyfield. New friend of Tim. Unique uncle to his 3 nieces and 7 nephews. Dennis will be at home until Monday March 18. A celebration of Dennis's life will take place at Ataahua, 644 Pyes Pa Road, Tauranga on Tuesday March 19 at 1:30pm. No flowers by request please, in lieu of which donations to Waipuna Hospice would be appreciated.
>
> CARMONT, Pamela Ellen (Pam). Passed away at home, aged 70 years. Dearly loved daughter of the late Elsie and Jim Scott. Loved by all her cousins. A service for Pam

> will be held at Grange Manor, 400 Dominion Road, Mt Eden on Friday 15 March at 10am

The change has almost been as dramatic in a decade: the examples featured on pages 26 and 27 of the A section in the Saturday edition of *The New Zealand Herald* on February 16, 2003, are typical of the time: Under the banner ‘Last Word’, the largest obituary is featured on page 27 with a photograph of Auckland-based businessman and lawyer John Fernyhough.



Hard-nosed architect of switched-on SOE

■ John Fernyhough

Businessman and lawyer. Died aged 64.

Colin John Fernyhough, multimillionaire and first chairman of the state-owned Electricity Corporation of New Zealand, or Electricorp, was a major figure in the business world of the 1980s and 90s.

He already had well established business interests when, in 1987, he became chairman of Electricorp, the state-owned enterprise which replaced the sprawling New Zealand Electricity Department.

The result was one of the overdue but acutely traumatic overhauls of New Zealand's entrenched Government departments, in which many employees assumed they had a job for life.

Fernyhough, who died after a long battle with cancer, was one of the main architects of the state-owned enterprise model — an incisive, determined businessman and intellectual who regarded Sir Geoffrey Palmer's pride and joy, the State Owned Enterprises Act of 1987, as purely an "in-between stage" on the way to privatising most of the state enterprises.

But the overhauling of Electricorp was a job of which Fernyhough later confessed he felt "not terribly proud" because of the stealth involved. It conflicted with his own declaration: "I found at an early age that the best way to win is to be open."

Fernyhough set up a small taskforce and staffed it with "the best young brains I could find".

To get the management to accept the taskforce he told them that it had been appointed only to audit their organisation. In fact, their job was to produce a whole new blueprint breaking it into functional segments.

The following year he recounted to an economic conference in Brisbane (reported by the *National Business Review*) some details of a meeting of senior staff he held a week before the changeover. People were nervous, as the staff knew their jobs were up for grabs.

He told them that the new approach meant managers thinking of their chunk of the business as if they owned it and figuring out what they would do with it if they did.

"Oh, you mean I wouldn't have to spend the balance of my budget this week," said one manager.

As well as a change of attitude, Fernyhough wanted a subdivision and delegation of authority with clear lines of accountability. He found the department production-led, highly centralised and with a very powerful administration in the middle.

"If you don't get on top of that organisation in the first month, it will surely get on top of you," he warned.

Within a year, Fernyhough and his hand-picked chief executive, Rod Deane, had achieved $100 million in continuing annual savings. Other substantial benefits had been achieved and staff numbers had been cut by 25 per cent — a move he described as difficult, painful and expensive because of the redundancy packages. Hundreds of people lost their jobs.

The political climate changed when National took office in 1990 and the behaviour of state-owned enterprises became highly politicised.

In 1993 a parliamentary select committee inquiry found that Electricorp had no justification for a proposed 3.6 per cent increase in the wholesale price of electricity.

That year, seven years after starting the process which turned a government department into a hugely profitable corporation, Fernyhough quit.

He reckoned then that the real average price of electricity had dropped 14 per cent in the seven years and that Electricorp had paid the Government $1.1 billion in dividends and $500 million in taxes.

He said Government meddling in the affairs of the $6 billion state-owned enterprise and a lack of political will to privatise it were among his reasons for stepping down.

He viewed the pricing decision as meaning that all pricing decisions by Electricorp were politically controlled and investment decisions were also at the whim of politicians. He felt powerless to control those two fundamental business ingredients.

The Government as an extraordinary shareholder had a different view. Only the previous year it had set up two new watchdogs to keep an eye on state-owned enterprises.

Apart from the groundbreaking Electricorp years, for which in 1993 he was receiving the quite modest stipend of $42,000 a year, John Fernyhough had a long, varied and successful business career which saw his expertise as a director sought by many organisations

Before going into public service he had practised commercial law, had been a partner in Chapman Tripp & Co, then Russell McVeagh McKenzie Bartleet & Co and later out on his own as a barrister. He had a masters in law degree from Victoria University and studied law at the University of Chicago on a Fulbright scholarship.

He moved into business in the early 1980s, forming links with several other successful businessmen, including Alan Gibbs, Charles Bidwill and Douglas Myers. He accumulated a personal fortune estimated by the *NBR* last year at $30 million, the result of an involvement in Tappenden Industries and from being a director and substantial shareholder in Lion Corporation.

Fernyhough also made a name for himself when in 1987 he bought a $4 million mansion in Remuera, believed to be the highest price paid for a home at the time.

He had three sons and a daughter by his first marriage to Judith (nee Bailey), which ended in 1985, and then married Christine Don, well-known as a philanthropist and with whom this complex man shared interests from classical music and art to sailing and golf. He also built up a private collection of 40 classic English sports cars.

Fernyhough had a mild stroke in 1999 but continued to hold his directorships and to offer such incisive views as his suggestion that the merger which produced the dairy giant Fonterra was "seriously flawed" and likely to harm farmers, the community and the economy.

His funeral will be held in St Mary's in Holy Trinity, Parnell, at 2pm on Monday, followed by a private burial.

— Arnold Pickmere

OVERHAUL: John Fernyhough in his Electricorp office in Newmarket.

Watergate killed spin-doctor's career

■ Ronald Ziegler

President Nixon's press secretary. Died aged 63.

Ronald Ziegler called the Watergate break-in a "third-rate burglary" — a phrase that came back to haunt him.

Ziegler, who at the age of 29 became in 1969 the youngest US presidential press spokesman, died of a heart attack in Coronado, California.

Friends said Ziegler, a President Nixon loyalist to the last, had been working on a

Ronald Ziegler

press aide in 1962.

Ziegler denied it.

"Ron was, first of all, very loyal and devoted to the president. He was also a very discerning and, where necessary, tough adviser," said John Taylor, executive director of the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace Foundation.

Ziegler first began working for Nixon as a

Friends said Ziegler had been caught between a rock and a hard place.

"He was a guy placed in a very difficult situation. He was quite young. He was working for a president who had very definite views about the press, and not all of those were sympathetic to the role of the press," said Gerald Warren, who worked as Ziegler's deputy.

"Ron was sort of in the middle. He really was a good person at heart who was just placed in a very difficult situation," Warren told *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

After leaving the White House with the

Fig. 2 *The New Zealand* Herald, 16 February 2003: 27

Last Word

■ **NOTED**

Secret talks with Goering

Lord Aberconway, a shipbuilding magnate who secretly met Adolf Hitler's aide Hermann Goering weeks before the German invasion of Poland, has died at 89. Aberconway, born Charles Melville McLaren, kept the details of his participation in a 1939 meeting with Goering secret for 60 years, revealing it in 1999. When he was 26 and head of the shipbuilding firm John Brown & Co, Aberconway was invited to join other British industrialists planning to meet Goering on an island off the German coast. The delegation allegedly suggested that Britain would give Germany concessions on Poland if the Nazis agreed not to invade. Critics said this encouraged Hitler to send his troops into Poland by leading him to believe Britain was unlikely to oppose him. Aberconway denied this, saying Goering had been told the official British policy — that an invasion of Poland would lead to war. Aberconway inherited his title and the chairmanship of John Brown and the mining company English China Clays when his father died in 1953. Under his leadership, John Brown built the Queen Elizabeth II, its last ocean liner. He had a passion for gardening and gardeners came to expect him to pronounce annually that that year's Chelsea Flower Show was the best yet.

Mastermind of cordless mike

Geoffrey Blundell, who has died aged 79, developed the cordless radio microphone, now widely used in television news and film-making. He also worked with Maxwell Cade to develop a machine he called the Mind Mirror. The pair used this to measure the brain patterns of Eastern swamis and gurus, finding patterns they had not seen before. Cordless radio microphones allow performers to move about unhampered by cables or booms. Blundell's first models in the mid-1960s used radio valves. Over four decades he improved them to provide high sound quality and reliability. In James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), his mikes had to withstand Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio struggling through water in the bowels of the ship. Blundell set up his company, Audio, in 1963. In 1986, he started using tiny surface-mount transistors. An early breakthrough came when Audio microphones were used in the making of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968.

Father of modern hotel

Kemmons Wilson, who founded the Holiday Inn chain of hotels and revolutionised the industry by bringing affordable and comfortable lodging to millions of travellers, has died at 90. Wilson is widely viewed as the father of the modern-day hotel. He started with a single hotel outside Memphis and expanded his company into a worldwide empire. Travellers around the world could expect comfort, cleanliness, quality service and good food at moderate prices. "Kemmons Wilson has transformed the motel from the old wayside fleabag into the most popular home away from home," *Time* magazine said in a 1972 cover story. Today there are more than 1000 Holiday Inns across the US and more in other countries.

TEAMWORK: Marie-Therese Danielsson and her husband Bengt wrote many books about the South Pacific.

Campaigner driven by passion for Polynesia

■ Marie-Therese Danielsson

Anti-nuclear activist. Died aged 80.

Activist and writer Marie-Therese Danielsson fought with a passion against French nuclear testing in the South Pacific.

Danielsson, a French national who won a Right Livelihood award — known as an "alternative Nobel" — for her work, died on Thursday of a stroke in Papeete, activists in Tahiti said.

She joined her husband, Bengt Danielsson, in Tahiti during the 1940s. Mr Danielsson, a Swedish ethnologist, was aboard Thor Heyerdahl's balsa-log raft Kon-Tiki during the famous 1947 voyage from Peru to Polynesia.

The Danielssons became involved in the anti-nuclear movement in the 1970s, persuaded that nuclear radiation caused the death of their daughter, Maruia.

Starting in 1966, France carried out nearly 200 nuclear tests and safety trials in the South Pacific. The tests stopped in 1996.

Many in Polynesia believe they caused cancer and other ailments and are still fighting for government recognition. The French government says the tests were clean.

The Danielssons wrote many books on Polynesia, including a book about painter Paul Gauguin, who spent many years in the South Pacific, and *Mururoa, mon amour*, about the nuclear tests.

Mrs Danielsson was a member of Mururoa e Tatou, an association of people who worked on the nuclear sites, and also supported other Polynesian causes.

The Danielssons won a Right Livelihood award in 1991 "for advocating an end to French nuclear colonialism".

Mrs Danielsson is to be buried in Sweden alongside her husband, who died in 1997.

— AP

Fig. 3 *The New Zealand* Herald, 16 February 2003: 26

Another, also accompanied by a photograph, is a tribute to Ronald Ziegler, who was President Nixon's press secretary during Watergate. On the opposite page (26), three short obituaries run down the side of a larger one. They include brief backgrounds on a shipping magnate who had links to Goering during WWII, an inventor and a property magnate. There is another photograph, this time of Marie-Therese Danielsson, a Swedish-born anti-nuclear activist, and her husband. The obituary is supposedly about her but appears to be more about both of them.

Obituaries in newspapers, which originally focused on local identities, began to change early last century and started to include more scientists, inventors, industrialists and religious figures – and mostly men (Starck 2004). The content changed again later in the century when they began to include obituaries about celebrities, in particular, famous entertainers and athletes. This mirrored the growing fascination with celebrity culture (Kitch 2000). Obituaries became a way to enable the public mourning of famous people.

A second reason to include more international notables and celebrities in the obituaries appears to be the increase in accessibility with globalisation: technology enabled obituaries to be sent worldwide via 'the wires', for example, Reuters, rather than being written by local staff. Globalisation also began to affect the business model of newspapers. Many publications which had been privately owned were bought up last century by wealthy owners, 'media moguls' who could disseminate information easily and efficiently, and syndicate publishable material that could be used in newsrooms around the world. This ties in with the third reason, the reality of newspaper newsrooms losing revenue, as they had to compete with other media. Firstly the advent of radio, followed by television, and then the Internet this century saw online news begin to seriously erode newspaper sales.

Importance of news values

News values determine how much prominence a news story is given by a media outlet (Harcup & O'Neill 2001). The more news values in a story, the more newsworthy it is. These factors include the timing of an event, how easy it is to understand, the significance, how relevant it is to the audience, predictability, unexpectedness, topicality and negativity as six of the 12 originally identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965). Because death often involves a range of news values, the topic often become front-page material. Or, as the editor of *The New Zealand Herald* told journalism students at Auckland University of Technology in 2012: 'Whatever will kill you will make the front page'. Unexpected deaths, for example, as a result of murder or accident, which are presented as 'highly disruptive events in society' fulfil a number of news values (Hanusch, 2008).

Based on these news values *The New Zealand Herald* 'covers news stories and extended obituaries within the news pages as we become [more] aware of deaths. For more prominent newsmakers, for example Sir Wilson Whineray [a rugby sporting legend], feature-length tributes are published' (Murphy 2013).

Although head of news Tim Murphy felt the formal obituaries' page had its merits, he also stated that it was 'difficult to sustain week-in, week-out' (2013). Now the newspaper has adopted another approach to news of deaths, based on news values. This approach follows a trend in newspapers to feature life stories, which have come to represent different eras and generations. Kitch contends that public figures are used to explain national character, 'telling an instructive tale in which the lives of the famous express the values of "everyone"' (2000: 172).

The *Dominion Post* takes a slightly different approach to obituaries. Rather than concentrate on local luminaries, the editor believes everyone 'has a story to tell' (Donogue 2013). The newspaper features what it calls 'life stories' on its obituary pages along with regular obituaries. Staff select names at random from the death notices and then profile the deceased, often using a range of sources which are listed at the end of each article. Tim Donoghue, a veteran news writer with the paper, has written life stories on all sorts of people, from a migrant shoemaker in Wellington to a 64-year-old Maori grandmother from a small town north of Wellington. These obituaries are researched and then written in a much livelier tone than the often traditional, fact-heavy and quote-free obituaries of the past. Some can take days of work to research, a luxury now in an industry under increasing financial pressure. But they are well received by readers (Donogue 2013). Interestingly, once these life stories go online they encourage interaction and comments, as for example, following the publication of the obituary written about Patricia Pohe-kume Edmonds which was posted on the Stuff.co.nz website on 25 June 2011:

> Chur Nanny Patsy, an obituary even [sic].
> resteasy nanny kume loveyou forever and always, you will always
> be in my heart, not far just a memorie away [sic].

Social media has added a new dimension to obituaries: people can respond and pay their own tributes online and, unless the webpage is removed, their tribute lives on. Whereas newspapers are ephemeral, and although people often clipped out and kept printed obituaries, the nature of newsprint means this form is otherwise short-lived.

A new genre

Part of the change to death coverage in newspapers in the twenty-first century is attributable to how death is now perceived: people tend to live longer and death is not so common among young people. Aries, cited in Kitch (2000), explains that as people have become less willing to accept the naturalness and inevitability of death, the rituals of burial and, particularly, the celebration of the deceased, have taken on greater importance (173). Kitch asserts that what has replaced the obituary is another genre, the 'death knock' story. This new genre is also a personal narrative which includes expressions of grief following an introduction which mentions the deceased, along with a phrase which either reflects their respectable character or the futility of their death, for example, father-of-three (Duncan 2012: 598). Like the more traditional obituary, the death knock story has become almost formulaic.

Research is sparse on the transformation of a death knock interview into a news story, but the genre has developed its own stylistics and structural elements (Duncan 2012). For example, emotive or eulogistic quotes from close family and friends are a pre-requisite for the story. The language of the quotes, contends Duncan, reflects the pain and suffering of the bereaved. Tabloid newspapers are generally understood to use more emotive language (Hanusch 2008). Emotions are critical, especially the emotions of the 'chief actors', as reporters 'actually home in on emotions like flies to a flowing light' (584).

In many respects, this goes against the grain of so-called objective news reporting in the past. Rather than simply reporting what happened, the death knock reporter is expected to go beyond the facts and capture and report feelings. But as Smith and Higgins (2012) found, there is often a fine balance between engaging the readers with the story of the bereaved's experiences and informing them of the facts.

There is also a concern that the genre is becoming too formulaic. As one cynical young journalist put it after writing endless death knock stories for the *Herald on Sunday*: 'After a while they are all the same. It's really all about the blood and guts and adding a line about how he enjoyed fishing!' (Personal communication 2010). Duncan (2012) contends that this 'narrative ubiquity reflects journalism changing function within communities' (590). For example, a car accident involving one fatality usually qualifies as a news story as it fulfills the requirements of the narrative form, that is, it involves an element of drama or conflict. The 'ordinary' person therefore becomes 'extraordinary' as a result of the tragedy and therefore becomes newsworthy.

The death knock story also has many advantages over the obituary: it does not stop at just one story, instead the original tragedy or 'event' (Labov & Waltezky, cited in Duncan 2012) can culminate in a series of stories, including, for example, the subsequent court case or post-judicial story, assuming there is a court case involved; then the anniversary story, a year after the event. But they all feature a similar representation of death, in this case, the deceased as 'good people who suffered sudden, blameless, futile deaths' (Duncan 2012: 600).

Conclusion

Reporting death is part of the media's public service role. However, this role is undergoing a transition. For example, rather than traditional pages of obituaries as were common last century, *The New Zealand Herald* now focuses on celebrating lives lived with extended coverage of legendary and well-known personalities and it gives much more prominence to unexpected deaths and those left behind to grieve. Alternatively, the *Dominion Post* has opted for recognising the lives of people less well known in its obituaries, but concentrating also on those with a story to tell. Meanwhile *The Press* and the *Otago Daily Times* have continued their regular obituary pages, although they tend to include more contributor content and international obituaries.

This transition explains why the death knock story is now as common as obituaries once were. These are considered more newsworthy because of their dramatic content and they are usually personalised for impact. As Duncan explains, the death knock news story provides the audience with an emotional engagement, not just an informative one. 'Good journalism, like good fiction, connects with its audience' (2012: 592).

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