# Reporting the Death Knock: Ethics, Social Media and the Leveson Inquiry

**Larissa Belch**

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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to understand the current practice in death knocks among print journalists and the ethical implications of reporting death and whether limitations are placed on the practice by reducing newspaper budgets. It will explore the pressures print journalists face when reporting death at a time when the public perception of journalists is at an all-time low. It will discuss the use of social networking sites when reporting death and will examine the prevalence of the digital death knock and the reasons journalists have turned to the internet. In order to fully understand the current practice it is necessary to assess the ethical implications and therefore it is important to discuss the impact of the Leveson Inquiry on journalism practice.

Six journalists were identified to represent a range of newspaper journalism: tabloid, broadsheet, weekly and regional reporting. A news agency journalist and a freelance reporter were also interviewed. They were questioned about how they report death, on their feelings about carrying out both traditional and digital death knocks, the impact the practice has had on them, their justification for approaching grieving relatives when covering death stories, their reasons for carrying out a digital death knock over the traditional practice and the ethical implications of doing so. They were also asked what impact the Leveson Inquiry and newsroom culture has had on death reporting.

The research found that the death knock remains an essential part of reporting death, is mostly justified and ensures accuracy. The digital death knock is prevalent with all the interviewees acknowledging that they are relying increasingly on social media. It seems that newsroom culture is largely responsible for the use of

technology in reporting death - respondents stated practices have been affected by budget and staff cuts at a time when there is increasing pressure to multi-task. The digital death knock is not used as an avoidance tactic and the journalists had no ethical concerns about lifting information from ‘public’ sites. The Leveson Inquiry had little impact on their practices but two respondents stated they now had to ‘be seen to be doing their job properly’.

# Contents

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## Introduction

The Research Problem

The aim of this thesis is to examine the current methods of carrying out death knocks, the ethical implications of the practice and the limitations placed on the death knock process by reducing newspaper budgets. In order to understand the current climate this thesis will explore journalists' use of social media and the current economic culture in newsrooms. It will also engage with recent UK discussion on ethics and in particular the individual's right to privacy. In order to fully understand the modern day death knock the research will examine both the traditional death knock where the journalist approaches family members directly by calling at the family home and the newly-emerging digital death knock which involves the reporter securing the same information from social media posts. It will also explore the ethical implications of both practices and whether either is considered to be an invasion of privacy before briefly examining alternatives to the death knock.

### The Research Rationale

In order for reporters to remain credible and trustworthy their actions should be beyond reproach. Frost (2011) states that if journalists are to win readers' trust then they must show that stories are accurate and truthful and ensure the information is gathered fairly and ethically. When covering the story of a tragic death it is normal practice for a reporter to try and obtain tributes from relatives and photographs of the deceased. Until recently the only way of getting these would be for the journalist to visit the family's home in person. Members of the public may consider this an invasion of privacy but the journalism industry's code of practice allows such an approach. 'In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively'

(IPSO 2015). Similarly the National Union of Journalists justifies the practice as long as it is in the public interest. A journalist does nothing to intrude into anybody's private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest. (NUJ 2015). Keeble (2009) suggests that in some instances a journalist sent on a death knock can find that relatives welcome his or her presence and use it to celebrate the deceased's life.

Over the last few years an alternative method has emerged. The internet has had a massive impact on the journalism industry and reporters have been aided by the soaring popularity of social networking sites. It is now fairly commonplace to see newspapers carrying articles which include tributes lifted from a deceased's Facebook page, a specially created tribute site or from one belonging to a relative. On December 22, 2014 six people tragically lost their lives when they were hit by a runaway bin lorry in Glasgow's George Square. The media immediately reported the news and the following day's reports included social media tributes to the victims including Erin McQuade – an 18- year-old who died alongside her grandparents.

> One friend wrote on Twitter: "RIP Erin and her grandparents, three of the most genuine and lovely people."
>
> Another added: "Canny believe Erin and her grandparents were killed yesterday. Such a good family and lovely girl."
>
> Relative John Sweeney, who lives in Canada, posted on Facebook that he was "feeling heartbroken" in the early hours of this morning.
>
> He wrote: "No words can describe the pain. R.I.P. Jack, Lorraine and Erin. Thoughts and prayers go out to the other families that lost loved ones as well." (Daily Record, December 23, 2014)

There were also a number of media reports containing social media tributes to another of the victims – schoolteacher Stephenie Tait, 29. Former pupils paid tribute on Twitter.

> Liam Andres said: "Just found out that one of the dead was one of my teachers from primary school. Such horrible news, will be missed RIP Miss Tait #GeorgeSquare"
>
> Marcia Mackay tweeted: "RIP Miss Tait was such a great teacher when I had her in primary. Condolences to her family and friends."
>
> Selina White posted: "Absolutely gutted to hear one of my primary teachers was involved in that accident in George Square y/day. RIP Stephenie Tait."
> (The Herald, December 23, 2014)

But the action of lifting quotes from social media could lay the journalist open to criticism insofar as the practice may be seen as an invasion of the victim's and or grieving relatives' privacy. The traditional death knock gives the relatives the opportunity to say no to information and photos appearing in the paper but they have no control over their use if they are available on social networking sites and it could be argued that lifting quotes in this manner is an invasion of privacy. Frost (2011) suggests that the question of privacy is not so much about the invasion but about the control of information. While not directly referring to tragedy reporting he stated the question of control may be the reason why some people will often allow details of their lives to be published for money. It could therefore by argued that the use of a victim's social networking page in the way being examined in this thesis certainly removes any control the bereaved may have over the situation. It is also important to understand why journalists behave in a certain manner and examine the reasons for taking such action. In recent years media practices in the UK have been heavily scrutinised by the public and there has been a great deal of debate around the ethical

standard of the industry. It is fair to say that in the aftermath of the phone-hacking scandal and the subsequent Leveson Inquiry there is a greater emphasis being placed on ethical journalism in an attempt to repair the industry's tarnished reputation with the public.

This thesis will explore existing research in the areas of ethics, the impact of new technology and economic pressures on the industry as well as examining how these factors impact on reporting tragedy. It will also study research on both the effects of carrying out a death knock on the bereaved and also the journalist in order to gain a better understanding of current journalism practices in reporting tragedy. It will question whether there is an appetite within the industry for real change when reporting tragedies in light of the Leveson Inquiry. Primary research will be carried out and the views and experiences of Scottish print journalists will be sought in order the get a better understanding of exactly how social media sites are used in death reporting and the reasons for their use.

# Chapter 1 - Literature Review

## Introduction

This chapter aims to outline and critically evaluate the published literature relevant to the themes of this thesis. The books and journal articles cited refer to a number of issues related to the topic, for example the newsgathering process, death reporting, the traditional death knock practice, its impact on both the interviewee and the journalist, possible alternatives to this form of news-gathering, journalists' use of the internet and the impact of newsroom culture on the process of reporting death. Several of these areas have been widely researched by academics in both the UK and abroad but a search for literature relating to the specific questions relating to the social media sites raised by this thesis was scarce. Indeed only two papers were found to address ethical concerns about the use of social networking sites when reporting tragedy. It was therefore necessary to search for literature which addressed wider issues relating to the death knock and ethical concerns like privacy.

## Newsgathering

The role of the journalist is to inform the public with information that is both accurate and reliable (Frost 2000, Sanders 2003, Dimitrova and Stromback 2009), and in order to fulfil the role effectively reporters must go out into their communities to seek out the relevant information. This activity is defined as newsgathering and while there is a substantial amount of literature available which describes and analyses the roles, purpose and responsibilities of the journalist largely discussed within ethical debate the newsgathering process features far less in academic studies. However much of the recent literature focuses on online newsgathering. Newsgathering is the process of identifying sources and gathering information from

them in order to produce the news (Rupar 2006) and traditional news sources include knowledgeable individuals, specialists in their field, local community figures and members of the public (Harcup 2004). In the last decade alternative sources have emerged as influential in shaping the news. A large number of stories are circulated by public relations professionals but existing literature states that 'the strongest news stories come from journalists talking to people (Harcup 2009: p76) and journalists are encouraged to talk to individuals rather than relying solely on content sourced from the internet (Campbell 1997). This view is supported by evidence from the O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) study of European journalists which found that the face to face conversation is the favoured process of newsgathering.

However the same study found that the internet had become an "indispensable part of the 'journalists' everyday toolbox" (p360). Pavlik (2000: p229) agrees that while "shoe leather" reporting which sees a journalist attend a scene is the best form of reporting he accepts that technology has had an undeniable impact on the way journalists carry out their roles and responsibilities. Technology is not a new phenomenon to impact on journalism and since the introduction of the telephone to newsrooms in the early 1900s it has shaped the way journalists communicate with their sources and their audience. The telephone has its limitations as Pavlik (2000) states it "not always possible via the telephone to be sure of the non-verbal communication that accompanies a verbal answer" and while he argues that this problem may become worse with the development of the internet this new technology can also improve the quality of news-gathering. It is certainly a form of newsgathering which is being fully embraced by journalism professionals. (Pavlik 2000) cites Ross and Middleberg's Media in Cyberspace report findings to evidence this with 93 per cent of journalists admitting to using online tools for researching

and reporting. The same study also revealed that most of the journalists questioned stated they had used the web for gathering information and material that would traditionally have been carried physically to the newsroom. While the majority of available literature studied discusses the impact of technology on the newsgathering process in general it does not detail any specific technological impact on the news gathering process for reporting death.

**Reporting Death**

Sanders (2003) states that most members of the public agree that reporting information about human suffering is acceptable and it is the manner in which the information is presented which can lead to criticism. Moeller (1999: p34) states 'Media moguls have long known that suffering, rather than good news, sells. People being killed is definitely a good, objective criteria for whether a story is important. And innocent people being killed is better'. Castle (1999: p143) agrees that news organisations do attach a high level of news value to tragedy and death. 'There is a popular saying in the media that if it bleeds, it leads'. He argues that the media cannot be expected to ignore such events and it is right that they should dominate the news because that is what happens in personal relationships and what journalists are reporting is simply a reflection of life. Duncan and Newton 2012 argue that death reporting is essentially public service journalism and subsequent articles are 'journalism of feeling as well as fact'.

Greenslade (1999) also refers to death reporting in a public service context but points to the pitfalls the media faces from the public whilst fulfilling this role. He believes that following a disaster the public has a need and a desire to consume all the information relating to the tragedy. However after learning this information he suggests members of the public often become upset that they know 'their own

prurience disgusts them and they lash out at those who told them. This is the classic response, blaming the messenger for the message'.

The manner in which death is covered by the media has changed in recent years. Objectivity and balance have been two of the foundations of news reporting in the western world for well over a century (Hicks, 2008, Randall, 1996, Frost, 2010). But towards the end of the last millennium a new style of news reporting which examines the emotional aspects of the story emerged (Mayes, 2000, Mayes, 2004, Rees, 2007). There has been some analysis done on the reasons for the shift away from reporting the hard news and straightforward fact gathering process towards probing the emotional reaction to news events. For many theorists this change occurred when a nation woke up on August 31, 1997 to news reports that Diana, the Princess of Wales had died in a car crash in Paris. In the hours and days that followed the country witnessed an unprecedented expression of public grief and sorrow (Thomas, 2008). The traditional concept of the British national character, where one refrains from showing emotion (Kear & Steinberg, 1999, Kitch & Hume, 2008) had been replaced by the public's desire for what Mayes (2000: p30) describes as "therapy news".

While the death of Princess Diana left a lasting impact on death reporting Mayes believes the shift actually occurred a year earlier following the Dunblane tragedy. Her research suggests the more personal news stories began to appear in print with the school shooting, in which 16 children and their teacher died. The primary school shooting and subsequent tragedies including the Paddington rail crash are cited by Mayes to support her view that "emotional indulgence and sentimentalism are replacing informative, facts-based news reporting" (Mayes 2000: p30). Some argue that this emotional style of reporting has been around for decades but has tended to

focus on famous cases rather than the more run-of-the-mill reporting about unknown people caught up in tragedy (Kitch, 2007).

It is clear there is a firm belief amongst theorists and practitioners that death reporting is essentially public service journalism. Existing research suggests there may be more of a shift away from fact-based hard news to a more emotional style of reporting in response to a public need for more "feeling than fact" (Kitch 2009: p29). Therefore, it could be argued that to ensure the public's desire for emotional-laden reports is fulfilled then journalists should approach the grieving relatives directly.

**Defining the Death Knock**

The death knock is the name given to the journalistic practice of obtaining tributes from relatives and photographs of the deceased following a death which is newsworthy because of the way in which the person died or the unexpectedness of the death. It is so called because it usually involves the reporter cold-calling at a relative's house to seek an interview. (Keeble 2001). Members of the public may consider this an invasion of privacy (Harcup 2007) but the journalism industry's code of practice allows such an approach. The right to seek information in this manner has been fiercely protected by the industry and is acceptable because "the public demands it and it sells the news" (Castle 2002: p52) . Tulloch (2005) states that the Press Complaints Commission has consistently resisted all attempts to regulate against press intrusion into grief or shock and its voluntary code of conduct states that journalists make inquiries and publish material with 'sympathy and discretion'(Sanders 2003: p101). John Griffith (2004) states it is wrong to assume that by contacting the bereaved family the journalist has intruded on their grief. Griffith, a newspaper executive who lost his own son in a tragic accident described

reports of the death as a "great comfort," while Greenslade (1999) suggests "that for every snub at a grief-stricken household, there are five other willing to open their doors and offer tea, opening their hearts to a stranger with a notebook" and seasoned journalist Magnus Linklater, writing about his own experiences of approaching bereaved families states: "I was amazed by the way in which people who had been through harrowing exposures to death or violence were prepared to welcome a perfect stranger into their home to talk about it…not a door was slammed…I was offered tea and cake…some of those I talked to even had fond memories of the traumatic period when their front gates were besieged by waiting press" (Linklater 1996: p2).

Indeed, the industry argues that the death knock is a necessary feature of modern reporting if the essential requirement of good journalism - accuracy - is to be achieved (Keeble, 2005). Greenslade (1999) acknowledges that the argument against carrying out the death knock has 'superficial validity' but he defends the practice stating that to ignore the victims or those left behind following a tragedy is 'a denial of our humanity'. Duncan and Newton (2012) argue the practice continues because the 'family are fundamental to the story' and in some instances a journalist sent on a death knock can find that the relatives welcome his or her presence and use it to celebrate the deceased's life (Keeble 2001). But some critics remain adamant that there is no justification for the process with McKay (2007: pp51-53) suggesting that 'justifications for death knocks are spurious, as any journalist knows deep down'.

For the journalist the process of carrying out a death knock will likely be one of the most stressful and challenging aspects of his or her job ( Harcup 2004). But media commentator Greenslade cited by Sanders believes that it is a necessary part of the reporter's job. 'It is fair to say that during disasters the media does see itself as

performing a public service'(Sanders 2003: p97). On such occasions journalists find themselves operating in confusing and distressing situations and in order to cover the incident as quickly and as accurately as possible the reporter needs to deal with bereaved relatives. Sanders (2003) states that while journalists might face criticism for being 'ghoulish or vulpine' approaching the grief-stricken is an essential element of the job particularly if accuracy is to be achieved. Meanwhile psychologist Irene Renzenbrink suggests more training to prepare journalists for the death knock – a term which she rejects as being too negative for what she believes can be an interaction which can be beneficial (Sykes et al 2003).

It is a situation which must be handled with compassion and sensitivity and as Keeble (2001) states it is also a requirement of the job in the UK after a legal precedent was set by a 1999 unfair dismissal case ruling. Stoke Sentinel reporter Ian Bailey refused an order from his editor to seek an interview with a football manager following his son's suicide. He was sacked and later lost his unfair dismissal claim (ibid).

**The Death Knock and its Impact on Journalists**

"The public perception is that journalists seem to be less than human; that they don't bleed or grieve or experience things other people do" (Castle 1999: p144). While it is possible that this statement accurately describes the public's view of journalists recent research into how news reporters cope with tragedy reporting reveals a very different reality. The effects on journalists who carry out a death knock have been fairly well documented but this literature relates mostly to large-scale traumatic events like the Dunblane tragedy. Little has been done to research the impact on journalists who cover smaller, everyday tragic occurrences (Duncan and Newton 2010). They argue that the macho culture of the newsroom forces the journalist to

give an outward impression of being ‘detached, desensitized and in control’ (p440). Their survey of journalists revealed the majority of them think of the death knock negatively, finding the process stressful as they did not relish the task of disturbing people who had recently experienced the loss of a loved one and were unsure how the grief-stricken would respond to an approach by a journalist. Feelings of self-disgust have been reported by journalists (British Executive International Press Institute, 1996) with one responder to the Duncan and Newton survey (2010), who subsequently left the profession as a result of the stress of carrying out intrusive reporting, describing himself as a ‘leech’. Waters (2008) claims some journalists who leave the profession or develop a dependency on drugs or alcohol do so as a result of the emotional damage caused by their reporting experiences. While Castle (1999) states that many skilled journalists leave the profession because of their experiences but suggests the industry could retain these reporters if there was a cultural change towards offering them treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Research into the pressures faced by journalists in the aftermath of Dunblane revealed they were ‘compounded by conflicting interests of career progression, commercial imperatives and personal ethics. The need to access material and produce copy to tight deadlines may necessitate over-riding personal reservations, for example, approaching bereaved families’ (Berrington and Jemphrey, 2003: p6) Research has also shown that the anxiety felt by reporters tasked with carrying out death knocks did not diminish with experience. Duncan and Newton (2010) states that while reporters may become more proficient at carrying out the process the intense feelings of dread at the prospect of dealing with the bereaved and the unpredictability of the act remain, and are felt with equal intensity on every occurrence. However distasteful they might consider the death knock to be none of

the journalists questioned said they would refuse to do the interview (Duncan and Newton 2010). Although, studies have shown that journalists will utilise their own tricks of the trade to avoid successful death knocks with Berrington and Jemphrey (2003) quoting one journalist who covered the Dunblane tragedy as saying he saw tabloid reporters 'pretending to doorstep the bereaved'(p12). They made sure their approach was witnessed by police officers who had been assigned to protect grieving families from intrusion so they would be told to leave. It was felt that a formal caution from the police offered a degree of protection from disgruntled news editors for failing to get the sit-down interview with the family. Meanwhile Castle (1999) states most journalists have avoided carrying out the death knock by telling editors that the bereaved individual's relatives refused to talk or were not home. The journalist's desire to avoid the unpleasantness of the death knock was also witnessed in the media coverage of Australia's Black Saturday bushfire disaster in 2009. Muller (2010: p8) states that reporters chose not to be entirely honest with what was happening on the ground when they reported back to their editors, with many of the journalists who were interviewed operating "on the principle of what the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve over. So, where their consciences dictated, they were selective about what they told the desk".

Some journalists, who carried out death knocks in Dunblane, did acknowledge they had been left scarred by their experience but even those reporters believed they should be able to cope without emotional support. As Berrington and Jemphrey, 2003 states a journalist who displays an 'adverse reaction' to reporting tragedy risks being seen as weak by both colleagues and bosses. This was echoed by Muller's (2010) findings which also highlighted the impact on the journalists who covered the Australian fire disaster. This research revealed that some journalists reported a

'sense of embittered disconnection between them and the rest of their world'(Ibid: p9) and while some employers did offer counselling to staff it was clear that few journalists opted to take up the offer. The Muller study concluded that the 'industry support mechanisms are underdeveloped and a culture persists, despite decades of evidence to the contrary, that 'real reporters don't cry'(Ibid: p10). This view is supported by Castle (1999) who suggests that some of the trauma suffered by journalists is actually caused by their feelings towards their own news organisations. He states that it is often not the process of covering the event itself that causes post-traumatic stress disorder but frustration they feel at management who can be unsupportive, unreasonable and demanding. Other research suggests that it is often inexperienced and newly qualified journalists who are sent to carry out death knocks with little or no training (Duncan and Newton 2010, Castle 1999).

The existing research literature therefore suggests that while journalists clearly have reservations about carrying out the death knock - with some actively seeking ways to avoid such confrontation with the grief-stricken – most consider it to be part of the job. And while many admit to being scarred by the experience most journalists will state the need to cope without emotional support (Berrington and Jemphrey 2003). It could be argued that there needs to be a cultural shift within the newsroom in order to help protect journalists from the post traumatic effects of death reporting. An examination of the research allows a deeper understanding of how journalists feel about carrying out a death knock which is important if this study is to discover whether 'digital death knocking' (Duncan 2010) has become more prevalent and if so identify the reasons why reporters are relying on social media sites as a source of material rather than approaching grieving family members in person.

## The Death Knock and the Bereaved

Many of the bereaved who suddenly find they are of interest to the media newsworthy bereaved do welcome the opportunity to speak to reporters about the deceased. (Frost 1998 and Sanders 2003). This view is reinforced by Newton (2011) who researched the impact of the death knock from the bereaved person's perspective. Interviews with relatives of murder victims and road accident victims revealed that the majority did not report having a problem with the principle of the death knock, although about half of those surveyed stated they had experienced some degree of upset from approaches by the media at the time of the death and subsequent contact (Newton 2011). Two relatives of murder victims told the Newton study they had strongly objected to the media approach and had escorted the journalists from their property. However both parties reported a continuing relationship with the journalist and took a more positive view of it. While some voiced dismay at the way it was carried out by the journalists only and not the death knock itself. Newton's 2011 findings echo earlier research carried out in Australia which found that any anger victims or bereaved relatives felt towards journalists was a result of them asking inappropriate questions, asking questions in an insensitive manner and not considering their feelings (Sykes et al 2003).

A number of the relatives surveyed by Newton (2011) spoke about their disappointment at the lack of media attention their bereavement received with some revealing they felt 'neglected and insulted' (Newton 2011: p9). This study also emphasised the role of the police as media liaison with families and identified the difficulties which can arise and may result in relatives' feelings of neglect. Often there is a difference between what the police consider newsworthy and what the media believe to be so and police guidance policy refers to the 'need to protect the

family from unwarranted media intrusion' (National Policing Improvement Agency 2008: p26) but makes no allowances for the possibility that a number of families may wish to talk to the media. The benefits of a family member speaking out via public appeals has been well documented and in a report to the Home Office on the effective use of media in serious crime investigations Feist (1999) wrote of the importance getting a full picture of the victim to garner public sympathy.

Accuracy is of the utmost importance to grieving families and is the biggest complaint they have about not being approached personally by the media (Newton 2011). Accuracy is a fundamental of news reporting according to Randall (1996) and is the cornerstone of ethical reporting (Keeble 2001 and Harcup 2007) so it could be argued that for a journalist to report ethically on a tragedy they must speak directly with the grief-stricken family members who, according to recent research, mostly want to be approached by the press as long as that approach is done sensitively with a fair degree of compassion (Newtown 2011, Griffith 2004). Ultimately when reporters fabricate excuses for news editors in an attempt to avoid the death knock (Keeble 2009; Castle 1999) Newton (2011) questions whether they are denying the grief-stricken relatives the right to contribute to a story which is in reality their story.

Duncan and Newton interviewed grieving relatives for a research paper examining the way journalism students are taught to carry out the death knock. The 2012 study found that the bereaved believed the story of their loss was their story, it belonged to them and was not the reporter's story. The relatives who responded to the study stated that to exclude them for contributing to any articles about their lost loved one in a bid to ease their pain displayed a level of arrogance.

Sykes et al. (2003) believe that the behaviour of journalists reporting traumatic events has the potential to have both a positive and a detrimental effect on the bereaved relatives. Their research found that improper behaviour can cause the

relatives to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder whereas responsible journalistic practice allows for better collaboration between the media and the bereaved which in turn leads to empowerment – the first stage of recovery. They argue that collaboration allows grief-stricken individuals to regain some level of control over their situation. Indeed the Sykes et al (2003) findings illustrate the need for death knock interviews to be handled sensitively and ethically to maximise benefits and minimise damage to the bereaved. This view is backed by US research which states that interviewing people who are experiencing trauma can be both damaging and therapeutic and 'the journalist has a significant role in determining which of these it will be' (Sykes and Green 2003: p3). Nelson (2001) found that whether the experience is damaging or therapeutic depends on whether the interviewee is ready to talk and is confident he or she has control over the situation. Control appears to be an important element in determining the level of damage caused by the media's reaction to a traumatic event as Sykes and Green (2003) found that individuals interviewed for their study cited control of what details make it into print and those that are withheld from publication as a major issue, stating that a loss of control leads to feelings of helplessness which in turn leads to feelings of betrayal. McLennan (1999) details a further responsibility of the press when reporting tragedy stating that while those in the industry often operate under the premise of 'here today gone tomorrow'(p59) it is very different for the victims of tragedy and their families. 'Those directly affected by a traumatic event often closely and repeatedly examine media reports to help them construct meaning - both a broad chronology of what happened and if possible why it happened'(p59). If victims and bereaved relatives do use the media in this way then accuracy is vital to limit damage to the individuals. It could be argued that lifting comments from social media sites and bypassing grieving relatives not only removes their element of

control but could also hamper their recovery from the trauma they have experienced and is therefore unethical behaviour.

**The Death Knock – Possible Alternatives**

This section explores alternative approaches to the death knock that have been proposed in order to reduce the distress caused to the bereaved by being approached by numerous journalists. Greenslade (1999) suggests that the competitive and individualistic nature of the media would prevent a number of possible alternatives to the death knock. He examined the behaviour of the press following the Paddington train crash arguing that the media 'isn't a single entity and cannot be expected to act in unison'**.** If his view is accurate then alternative methods like pooling interviews where only one reporter approaches the family and shares the information with the rest of the media or the use of an intermediary would not work. However this view was stated in 1999 and in the same year Castle's Journalism and Trauma paper, which this thesis will discuss later, contradicted Greenslade's findings. In the intervening years academics in the field have examined the benefits of both pooling interviews and the use of intermediaries. In the last few years technological developments have allowed another possible alternative to emerge and recent research shows the 'digital death knock' method is being employed regularly by journalists (Duncan 2009). However it could be argued the newsroom culture in Britain has changed in light of the Leveson Inquiry and news organisations are not so quick to put profit before ethics and could now be more amenable to pooling interviews or using intermediaries or even a combination of both. In order to discuss whether this is a realistic possibility it is necessary to fully understand the benefits and drawbacks of the death knock alternatives and the ethical implications surrounding their use.

### Organised Pools of Journalists

Sanders (2003) suggests that the inevitable intrusion in tragedy reporting can be minimized by operating a system of organised pools. She argues that they are a good way of minimizing the amount of intrusion a pack of reporters can create and she cites the vast number of journalists who descended on Dunblane in the immediate aftermath of the 1996 school shooting – more than 300 reporters not counting the foreign correspondents who covered the story. This method would also limit another unsavoury practice adopted when reporting on tragedies – the influx of out-of-town journalists. Castle (1999) described such occasions as occurring when an "outside group muscles in and often spoils it for the local media. They appear not to care how they trample around and who they upset, because they don't have to stay long" (p147)

### Social Media Tributes

The use of quotes and photographs which have been posted on Facebook are increasingly finding their way into news articles on tragedies. Turning to the particular practice of trawling such websites to source information about victims the Duncan and Newton (2012) study examined the perceived benefits to journalists. It acknowledged there was an 'emotional cost' to the reporter who carries out a death knock and questioned then whether, given the availability and access to the information on social media sites, journalists can gather the same information required for a death knock story without the unpleasantness and/or stress created by a personal approach. However, subsequent interviews with journalists discovered that despite the online availability of the information most of those questioned recognised the need to interview the family (Duncan and Newton 2012).

While some publications have encouraged their reporters to employ this method and fallen foul of the PCC as a result their contraventions of the code appear to be exceptions rather than widespread. The Duncan and Newton (2012) research survey showed that generally reporters did not just lift pictures and comments from these sites but rather used the sites as a source to identify those who knew the deceased and researched the comments in order to improve their chances of gaining access to the family. When lifting quotes from friends did occur the survey findings revealed that journalists deliberately tended to pick comments which were unlikely to cause offence or hurt to relatives and their research showed that very few bereaved families have any problem with the practice of using social media sites in principal (Duncan and Newton 2012). Some voiced concerns about the level of accuracy of the information taken from social networking sites while two bereaved responders feared the use of the sites would lead to less direct contact with the families. It also emerged that while relatives who used social media sites to pay tribute to their loved ones were happy for the information to reach a wider audience, they stressed they would have liked to have been forewarned it was about to appear in the press and reach a wider audience than was originally intended (Duncan and Newton 2012).

One of the key aspects to the ethical argument for and against using social media sites in tragedy reporting is whether the information is public or private. Journalists by and large believe that because the information is put in the public domain and the individual has not activated privacy settings then it is acceptable to use that information. They do not believe there is any invasion of privacy case to answer because the individual has chosen to publish that information. (Cooper and Whittle 2009). Indeed one responder in the Duncan and Newton 2012 study likened the practice to a ‘virtual version of taking comments from cards and flowers at the scene’ (Keeble and Mair 2012: p212). Meanwhile Fletcher (2007) suggests that

anything found on sites like Facebook is within the public domain because it was voluntarily posted and that the information often contained in such sites makes journalists' 'drool', and states 'these internet sites fulfil a fantasy many of us have had from our first days as cub reporters. Suddenly no-one shuts the door in our face; no grey-faced grief-stricken relative tells us we are ghouls and makes us think worse of ourselves….the door is wide open' (Fletcher 2007: p46).

## Intermediary Service

Castle (1999) believes an intermediary system could be an effective replacement for the traditional death knock, and at the time of his research this method was being successfully used by the media outlets in Sydney, Australia and also in the state of Queensland. The intermediary service involves a spokesperson or family representative facing the media and responding to questions rather than the grieving relative. It could be argued that this method does indeed protect the grieving individual from competitive journalists and also reporters from the emotional burden of the death knock but could it really provide a long term alternative to the long-standing death knock tradition? Castle believes it is a viable alternative and evidences the system in use in Sydney at the time of his 1999 Journalism and Trauma paper, stating the system worked despite the hugely competitive nature of the Sydney media at the time. The former news reporter and police media officer travelled to Britain, America and Canada and suggested the intermediary approach during discussions with practising journalists, news industry managers and journalism academics. He reported a positive response with industry representatives stating they believed it was workable within their newsroom culture (Castle 1999). This contradicts the view held by Greenslade (1999) that the competitive nature of the industry would rule out possible alternatives to the death knock.

**Social Media Sites – The Use of Posts in Death Reporting and the Ethical Implications.**

While the earlier section on newsgathering included literature in relation to technology and newsgathering it is important to discuss the wider implications of the internet on the journalism profession. Critics believe the internet is a serious threat to journalism professionalism and in particular accuracy. They argue that the difficulty of ensuring information sourced from websites is reliable could lead to rushed and unchecked reports being published. If the ever increasing need for speed and access to information is also factored into the equation then the concern over accuracy is even more serious (Hermans & Vergeer 2009). However the 2009 study also found that journalists themselves measure the value of the internet by the speed with which sources become available. If these findings were applied to the specific death knock practice it is clear there could be an argument for the internet being a valuable resource in identifying relevant sources via social networking sites, but there should still be some concern over the reliability of the information sourced from them.

Interestingly the Hermans & Vergeer (2009: p143) study found 'the internet has increased time pressure in the news production process and the competition for scoops' and as a result the traditional news values such as fact-checking could come under pressure. They argue that this in turn could have negative consequences for accuracy within journalism. As this literature review has already stated one of the main reasons for carrying out a death knock is to ensure accuracy of the material (Keeble 2005) it is therefore necessary to address the reliability of social networking sites.

Garrison (2003) suggests that current technologies of new media allow more efficient newsgathering practices and also encourage journalists to adopt new

approaches to old tasks while Meikle and Young (2012) state: “We can use communication technologies to challenge spatial boundaries, breach barriers, break down walls keeping the personal and public separate.” It could certainly be argued that this statement is relevant to the use of social media sites when reporting tragedy. In terms of spatial boundaries the use of Facebook removes the distance obstacle for a journalist and in relation to using communication technologies to breach barriers many journalists will recant tales of doors being slammed in their faces. The use of social media sites as a source for stories removes the front door barrier. Finally on examining the idea that communication technologies break down walls keeping the personal and public separate it could be argued this is evidently the case when you consider grieving relatives post tributes – often containing private thoughts and feelings – on a site which is largely public. However it could be argued that technology can also create barriers. Harcup (2004) insists that interviewing is a vital responsibility of the journalist and that meeting face-to-face is always the best method. He suggests the journalist’s ability to pick up the interviewee’s body language and mannerisms is a key benefit of the face-to-face interview. If a journalist relies on social media sites rather than personal contact they may miss the opportunity to conduct an effective interview.

With the exception of Duncan and Newton (2012), no research has been done to examine the ethical implications of lifting tributes from social media sites when reporting tragedy therefore it is necessary to explore journalists’ use of Facebook as a source in general reporting. While not specifically looking at the use of lifting tributes from Facebook many figures within the industry have begun to question the rights and wrongs of using social sites as a source for material. In order to set this research into context an understanding of how and why journalists use social media sites is necessary and the ethical implications of such use must be examined. Crone

(2008) as cited by Cooper and Whittle (2009: p34) states: “The internet makes it easier to do investigations now – the information is out there on Facebook and MySpace and half the time they don’t hit the privacy button...you have a real problem suggesting that what you have put up there is private.”

Meanwhile Marsh (2008) cited by Cooper and Whittle (2009: p37) states: “I don’t think we’ve begun to work out the limits of social networking sites. There’s no doubt most teenagers don’t think when the post to Facebook. They don’t think it is public. They see it as a public private space. It’s like a conversation in the pub – it’s in a public space but not everyone and their uncle can eavesdrop. I don’t know where the limits lie – when you have a student killed on a gap year is it legit to use photos of the gap year? Probably. Is it legit to use postings intended for a couple of people to read? I don’t know.” Friedman (2013) believes the onus of responsibility lies with the social media user to understand what is and is not public when they post information. She argues that the key responsibility for the journalist is to check that those users are bona fide people and this view further reinforces the need for accuracy in reporting in order to maintain credibility. Journalists can do this by messaging the user and informing them they plan to quote them and while Friedman suggests most will be surprised journalists can even see the information they have posted she argues that even if they do not give the reporter permission to use the information ‘if the facts check out, it is fair game’.

Cooper’s (2012) questioning of whether teenagers think before they post was also addressed by Steyer (2012) who states: "Teens often self-reveal before they self-reflect and may post sensitive personal information about themselves - and about others - without realising the consequences." The issue was also examined by the Duncan and Newton (2012) study which found that while the victims of tragedy

may have decided to keep their site public they probably did not think for one minute that it would be accessed or viewed by anyone other than relatives, colleagues and friends. It put forward the argument that this practice is different from taking information from tributes left at the scene because those comments are left with the full knowledge that they may be read by others.

While Cooper (2012) cites Marsh's belief that the press and the public view social media sites very differently and while many reporters consider the information contained within them to be public the users who post have the opposite opinion. This position is reinforced by the results of an Ipsos Mori poll carried out on behalf of the Press Complaints Commission. It found that 78 per cent of adults aged 16-64 who are on social networking sites said they would alter the personal information they would post on their pages if they thought there was a chance it would later appear in the media (Duncan and Newton2012). In recent years there have been a number of high profile cases of the media printing information from social media sites belonging to key characters in the story. Two examples which illustrate the dangers of posting online without considering privacy settings are the cases of Amanda Knox, who was accused of murder and nurse Rebecca Leighton who was investigated over the contamination of saline bags in her hospital. US citizen Knox who was convicted of killing British student Meredith Kercher and later cleared on appeal found her private life featured on the front pages of numerous newspapers after journalists used information sourced from Knox's own Facebook page (Cooper and Whittle 2009).

Leighton's personal life was also exposed to the British public by journalists who sourced information she herself had put in the public domain. Both Knox and Leighton were in their early 20s who like millions of others in the same age group

posted information online and Cooper 2012 argues that neither thought for a second that their photos or comments would later be reproduced by the mainstream media and that their experience should serve as a warning to others that 'you post at your own risk'.

The Press Complaints Commission has advised the press that the information contained on social networking sites is viewed as intimate by its users and the body is receiving a growing number of complaints from users who feel their intimacy has been invaded by the press (Dodson 2012). However the self-regulatory body has largely agreed with the journalists' view that if members of the public do not want the information to be used then they should not publish it on a social networking site. It has also ruled in favour of the journalist even when the member of the public has tried to protect the information by setting privacy levels (Cooper 2012). This is evidenced in the Goble v People 2009 ruling where the PCC agreed with the journalist that it was in the public interest to print comments made on a social media site by a serving police officer following the high profile death of Ian Tomlinson at the G20 protests in April 2009.

However the press's right to behave in this manner is not absolute as the PCC has also ruled in favour of the individual 'victim' in the past when the use of the information has been deemed unethical. The Sunday Express found itself before the Press Complaints Commission after writing an article which claimed the survivors of the Dunblane Massacre had shamed the victims' with the 'foul-mouthed boasts about sex, brawls and drink-fuelled antics' which they had posted on their social networking sites. The tabloid newspaper said it was right to publish because the teenagers' identities had been made public in the aftermath of the tragedy. The PCC

ruled that the youths had been out of the public's gaze for thirteen years and had not come to the attention of the public by their own actions in 1996 (PCC 2009).

Despite the ambiguity over guidance on the rights and wrongs of using social media as a source of information both in general and for reporting tragedy, it is evident that it is being used increasingly by journalists across the globe. Fievez (2011) states that within seconds of a story breaking news editors and picture desks have ordered their staff to access social networking sites like Facebook, Bebo, Twitter and Linked in. He adds that 'All of the other social networks and personal web-sites are Googled and scoured for pictures and information…. any images on the social sites and personal blogs or web-sites of anyone involved are all also grabbed before anyone has a chance to close the site down, and are then published, syndicated, used on television, re-published or broadcast repeatedly.' This view is also held by Cooper 2012 who agrees social media sites are the first place journalists look for information on an individual. (gentlemanranters 2013).

Fievez's view is reinforced by the Digital Journalism Study which surveyed six hundred journalists around the world to discover fifty-five per cent used social media sites like Twitter and Facebook to find stories (Bennett 2012). And it is easy to see the appeal when you consider that more than a billion pieces of content are uploaded to Facebook alone every day. Indeed Facebook actively promotes journalists' use of its site stating it is a 'rolodex of more than 500 million potential sources' (Facebook 2011).

Duncan and Newton (2012), examined the ethical implications of using social media sites when reporting a tragedy, posed the question that if statistics suggested the majority of the users did not think for a minute the comments they posted would

reach a wider audience would reporters consider the use of such information a form of hacking (Duncan and Newton 2012) Again industry responders, while acknowledging the situation was not clear cut, still argued that the practice was not intrusive because everyone can hit the privacy button which curtails public access (Cooper & Whittle, 2009). But Duncan and Newton (2012) also raised the argument that in such circumstance there is an ethical responsibility on the journalist to consider the implication of using information in a different way from the one which was intended and in a way in which that information then reaches a much larger audience. Some of those journalists interviewed for the Duncan and Newton study did appear to at least consider the implications but their duty to do their job overshadowed any ethical concerns they harboured about the practice. One news agency journalist explained his position by saying it was his job to be nosey adding 'if it is a question of you getting a story or a rival it is always better to have tried yourself and to be told to neff off than not to try at all and have no show in the next day's papers.' (Duncan and Newton 2012: p213).

Research carried out by Cooper found that some media companies are becoming increasingly aware that the 'smash and grab raids on personal data on the internet raise difficult questions' (Cooper 2012: p221). Cooper questions whether journalists' use of social networking sites as a source of photographs, information and people's comments and views is in fact 'the other end of a (very long) continuum to phone hacking' (Cooper 2012: p221). Indeed trawling social media sites for information is now a daily task for most journalists and as research has already shown they are usually the first port of call when a breaking story comes into the newsroom. However some in the industry are beginning to question the ethical implications of plundering these sites. The Guardian newspaper's managing editor Elisabeth Ribbans believes that just because the information has been put out

in the public domain it is not automatically acceptable to print it and insists journalists must consider the public interest of publishing (Cooper 2012). The BBC has also issued new guidelines on the use of material from social networking sites and addresses the issue of celebrities' rights to privacy. 'Whilst some in the media might argue that, once an individual has begun a declarative lifestyle…they cannot expect to be able to set limits on that, people making content for the BBC should ask themselves whether a door that is only ajar can justifiably be pushed further open by the media…And it should be considered that the use of social media content by the BBC often brings that content to a much wider public than a personal website or social media page that would only be found with very specific search criteria' (BBC 2011). The use of technology in this manner gives the journalist a lot of control. 'You become a silent watcher. It is an immensely powerful role and easy to forget the public interest justification. There is a huge disconnect between people putting stuff about themselves on web pages, thinking they are talking to their friends and not realising they are a potential source for journalists' (Smith cited by Cooper, 2012: p227). It could be argued that reporters in this position have an ethical responsibility to social media users but journalists' behaviour and a study of their codes of conduct reveal their ethical standards have failed to keep pace with technological change (Dodson 2012). But it could be further argued that a strong code of ethics is now even more essential to ensure credibility particularly in the aftermath of the phone hacking scandal. The controversy has severely damaged the reputation of the press in Britain with 58% of adults saying phone hacking has had a negative effect on their perception of UK newspapers (Brazilian 2011) it follows that for media to remain credible it must be trusted by its readers viewers and users. In other words it needs to behave with integrity.

## Newsroom Culture – Economic Pressures and their Impact on News Gathering Practices

Fenton (2010) suggests that how journalists make news depends on their working environment which she argues is shaped by 'economic, social, political and technological factors'(ibid: p3). Historically the journalism industry has been accused of falling standards and a decline in integrity and professional standards in particular have been criticisms leveled at journalists for many years. Individuals within the profession have been accused of 'being parasitic, exploitative of human tragedy and generally of being squalid and untrustworthy' (ibid: p558). While some hold the belief that new technology and the internet will ensure a positive future for the industry others believe that technology is used as 'no more than a fix for economic efficiency, resulting in more competition as well as more space to fill, but with fewer journalists to do it…leading to desk-bound, administrative cut and paste journalism' (Fenton 2010: p559).

While Fenton is discussing journalism practice in general terms her argument could be applied to death reporting. Are journalists sourcing quotes and photographs from internet sites because it is more economically efficient? Could it be argued that it allows reporters to remain desk bound and the cost, in terms of both money and time spent travelling to an interviewee's home, is drastically cut? The role of the journalists is to inform accurately (Frost 2000, Sanders 2003) but it is essential to remember that the news is a business model like any other and it needs to make a profit (Croteau & Hoynes 2006). Existing literature suggests that technological development and in turn the increasing need for immediacy in reporting news has led to an increase in pressure on the journalism workforce. Hargreaves (2003) suggests that journalists themselves are worried that technological advances are

turning them into ‘robohacks’ while Compton (2010) states that the rationalisation of labour in recent years has led to cuts in newsrooms, increased job insecurity and reduced salaries and argues that ‘quantitative changes in budgets have resulted in qualitative changes in the work of reporters’ (2010: p594).

To examine economic pressures within the context of this thesis Sykes, Embelton Green Hippocrates and Richards (2003) suggest that the way in which journalists report tragedy is affected by newsroom culture. They argue that pressures do impact on information sourcing, particularly when the reporters rely on official sources rather than direct contact with grief-stricken individuals and that this practice does have detrimental consequences. “These practices perhaps dictated by deadlines, technology and the newsroom culture tend to disempower, alienate, frustrate and devastate victims, survivors and their families.” (ibid: p5). Meanwhile the Phillips, Couldry and Freedman (2010) study found that newspapers are placing increased importance on online opportunities at a time when commercial certainties are no longer guaranteed which, they argue, limits journalists’ ability to act ethically.

**Summary**

Literature specifically dealing with the use of social media sites while reporting tragedy is scarce, indeed only two studies were found to discuss this topic Duncan (2009) and Duncan & Newton (2012). Both research papers focused on ethical questions raised by this specific practice of news gathering but did not fully address the economic implications of the practice. While both discussed the importance journalists place on using social media sites for reporting death they did not research how an increasingly economically-challenged newsroom culture might impact on

this journalism practice and instead focused on whether increased regulation would cause more harm to those interviewed.

The lack of specific literature meant a wider search of related themes was necessary in order to build up a full understanding of the death knock, its purpose and its impact. It was also necessary to widen the scope of this literature review to fully address the reasons why journalists choose to use social networking sites and how they use them. A considerable amount of research has been carried out on both the impact of the death knock on the bereaved (Newton 2011, Sykes et al 2003, Nelson 2001, McLennan 1999, Castle 1999) and also on the journalist (Berrington & Jemphrey 2003, Castle 1999, Duncan & Newton 2010, Muller 2010 and Waters 2008) which suggested that the death knock is a widely accepted practice and contrary to some people's perceptions can be a positive experience for the bereaved if the process is handled with proper care. The literature also suggested that it was one aspect of the job which journalists do not enjoy and as such there is potential for harm to be caused to the reporter. Formal trauma support was discussed as one possible measure to lessen the impact of the death knock on journalists. Literature on death reporting in general was examined to understand why such events are covered by the media and this review also examined work done by other researchers which suggested alternatives to the death knock from both a practical and ethical perspective. As a result of researching the current literature it can be noted that newsroom culture does impact on the death knock process and therefore this thesis will examine whether economic pressures play an increasing factor on a journalist's decision to carry out a digital death knock and the ethical implications of such practice post Leveson.

## Chapter 2 – Methodology

This chapter will set out the methodology for the primary research undertaken for this thesis. The methodology sets out the process of selecting particular research methods whether those methods are qualitative or quantitative and the justification for using a particular method in relation to the research question (King and Horrocks 2010). The researcher must be able to justify without any ambiguity why a particular research method was used for data collection – the choice should not and must not be based on personal preference or be taken on an ill thought out whim. Stokes (2003: p4) states that the 'method should be selected to suit the topic of investigation and not the reverse' and argues that 'there are epistemological reasons for choosing particular methods' (2003: p3). There are two main approaches to research – qualitative and quantitative and each method encompasses a variety of research methods. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with attaching meaning to events and deals with non-numerical data and Denscombe (1998) states a qualitative strategy is one that uses words as the unit of analysis, while quantitative research uses numbers, and is used primarily to generate a theory. The qualitative researcher aims to understand why society or specific groups within society act and behave in a certain way and this is done by observing the people with a particular focus on how they interpret the social world (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative researchers are also more concerned with description insofar as they deal with meaning and behaviour (Denscombe, 1998).

### Research Interviews

Qualitative research strategy is used for smaller studies to answer specific and detailed research questions, where the subject group is limited and the timescale is tight. The purpose of this research is to gain a fuller understanding of how print

journalists in Scotland report tragedy by carrying out death knocks in order to determine whether there have been any significant changes brought about by technological advances, newsroom culture and/or ethical considerations in light of the Leveson Inquiry recommendations. Kvale (1996: p1) states that 'if you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk to them'. Therefore the methodology best suited to this research project involves a qualitative approach.

One of the key methods of qualitative research involves interviewing relevant individuals. Interviews can take several forms and the decision on which method is to be used will depend on the purpose of the research. For example structured interviews, which are strictly controlled to ensure the same questions are asked in the same way and in the same setting, are suited for survey research which is a main feature of quantitative strategy (Bryman 2004). A structured interview in the form of a survey could gauge whether journalists believe the publication without prior consent of material from an individual's social page is an invasion of privacy. However, if the aim is to discover why they think it is or is not an invasion of privacy or why they favour one particular practice over another then an unstructured interview, which allows the interviewee to expand their answers revealing more of their thoughts, would be a more appropriate research method. King and Horrocks (2010: p7) states 'the term 'qualitative interviewing' situates the methodology and method deliberately within the qualitative domain where a broad and holistic approach is taken to the study of social phenomena'. Therefore, qualitative interviewing is the most appropriate choice and will be used to carry out the primary research for this thesis.

King and Horrocks (2010) state that careful consideration must be given to defining the sample of interviewees and that the key is diversity. 'Researchers seek to recruit participants who represent a variety of positions in relation to the research topic, of a kind that might be expected to throw light on meaningful differences in experience' (2010: p29). Any final choice on participants may also be influenced to some extent by the knowledge gained from the literature review and from the researcher's own personal experience. The latter is particularly important to recognise as in this particular case the researcher has personal experience of journalism practice and in particular the process of carrying out traditional death knocks. Therefore I have decided to carry-out semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with one journalist from each of the following areas of print journalism; national newspapers, the local, weekly press, regional publications, tabloid newspapers, broadsheet newspapers and news agencies. I did not include broadcast media in this study because they rely heavily on audio and video interviews in reporting so are less likely to lift quotes from social media sites. The rationale for this particular sample is that it is representative of the mainstream news print media in Scotland which I believe is crucial in order to gain a full understanding of current death knock practices. It will also achieve a depth of knowledge by ascertaining whether there are differences in the journalists' attitudes towards the practices, the journalists' ethical position on the practices and the impact, if indeed there is any, of pressures faced by journalists working in the different areas of print journalism. I chose to restrict the study to journalists in Scotland because I could take advantage of existing contacts to identify suitable interviewees. I believe this benefits the research because there is a either pre-existing contact between the interviewee and myself or the interviewee is a colleague of an existing contact, and therefore there will be a higher level of trust

between the interviewee and the researcher which allow the participants to answer sensitive questions more honestly and truthfully.

It is vitally important that the semi-structured interviews are carried out face-to-face. Harcup (2009) states that in order to achieve the best possible interview the researcher must build up a rapport with the participant. In this study it is particularly important for the primary source to feel comfortable, relaxed and be able to trust the researcher as the interview will require the participant to discuss an area of journalism practice which may involve recalling experiences which are both sensitive and emotional for them. This relationship cannot be built to the same extent via an email interviewee or from a telephone question and answer session. Indeed the most effective method in order to ensure a favourable outcome is the face-to-face interview. This will also allow me to pick up on visual clues as to the participant's demeanour which may reflect his or her willingness or otherwise to the current line of questioning. Therefore by carrying out face-to-face interviews I can, to a larger extent, read the situation, pick up on possible issues and identify quickly when a particular questioning strategy is failing to create and or maintain the necessary rapport. This style is certainly consistent with Roulston's 'Romantic conception of the interview' which is where genuine rapport and trust is established by the interviewer in order to generate the kind of conversation that is intimate and self-revealing (2010: p56). This is important for this research thesis because I will be asking the interviewee to provide ethical reflection on journalism practice. I also decided to offer participants anonymity. This decision was taken because I felt that with journalism practice coming under so much ethical scrutiny in recent years the interviewees would feel more able to answer honestly particularly about practices within their organisation if they could not be identified by management.

Careful consideration must be given to the framing of the research question. King and Horrocks (2010) suggest several issues must be addressed by the researcher. The first is the type of question the researcher should use and therefore it is necessary for the researcher to be clear from the outset the specific knowledge he or she seeks to gain from the analysis of the primary research data. It is also vitally important to consider how to word the question in order to elicit as full a response as possible. 'Open questions are those that provide broad parameters within which interviewees can formulate answers in their own words concerning topics specified by the interviewer' (Roulston 2010: p12). By simply posing the question 'tell me about' or 'can you describe' the researcher is giving the interviewee the opportunity to detail their experience of the relevant topic. This method also allows the interviewer to ask follow-up questions or use a series of 'probes' to guide the interviewee to an area within the topic which is of particular interest. Probes often use the interviewees own words and Roulston (2010) believes this is important to recognise as individuals often use another's words to clarify their understanding of previous communications but she argues that there is an important difference between using 'formulations' of others' words to summarise understanding and using the interviewees own words to formulate follow-up questions. The latter will also allow the interviewee to explore the issue further using the interviewee's own words and therefore the interviewer can distance himself or herself from accusations of 'putting words into their mouths'. The author also highlights some possible pitfalls to open-ended questions which researchers should be aware of before going into the interview. The researcher must ensure the interviewee is fully aware of the specifics of the topic in order for him or her to respond adequately.

The scope of the question must also be addressed by the researcher before setting the question, deciding whether he or she is required to look at an extensive range of

experience or whether a more narrow range is appropriate for his or her research project. In considering the scope and setting it within the context of this research I suggest the interviewees should meet a certain criteria. It was decided that all participants must have worked as a news print journalist for a Scottish publication but I decided against setting a minimum level of experience. This decision was taken because I hoped to get varied accounts of how journalists report death but also I felt there was potential for a journalist who has only been in the job for a year to feel differently towards the online tools available for death reporting than perhaps a reporter who has worked in the profession for fifteen years might feel. Finally King and Horrocks warn against making presuppositions when framing research questions. In order to be able to argue the validity of the research it is important to avoid using leading questions when interviewing participants. However, I have worked as a journalist and carried out traditional death knocks so if a posed question was subsequently considered to be leading it should be remembered that it is being asked by someone who has personal experience of the issue. On occasion it was felt that a theme could be explored further by using the interviewee's personal experience to stimulate a discussion during which the answers to several questions were sought. I have acknowledged my own experience to the respondents and how it has impacted on the research and therefore argue that the validity of the research is intact.

The question structure was determined by the literature review with each question structured as a prompt to allow wider discussion of the main research themes. I drew in many years' experience of journalism interviewing in determining the order of the questions. I started with more general, easier to answer questions in order to allow the interviewee to settle into the exchange, before asking more probing, personal questions which urged them to examine their feelings about the death knock. The

order of the questions was also determined to some extent by the answer given to the previous question asked.

**An Interpretative Rationale**

It is important to recognise that the difference between the two main research methodologies are not restricted to solely technical matters (Williams 1998). King and Horrocks (2010) suggest that differences are also a product of philosophical and theoretical traditions and argue that a 'theoretical understanding of how things fit together is fundamental to the research process' (2010: p11). In deciding on an appropriate methodology for this thesis it was important to develop a rationale underpinned by theory. In this case I believe an interpretative rationale underpins this research project because it focuses on understanding how journalists experience the death knock process and examines whether it impacts on the way in which they carry out the practice. King and Horrocks (2010: p11) state that interpretative research describes 'aspects of a social world by offering a detailed account of specific social settings, processes or relationships'. Qualitative interviewing is a suitable method of conducting interpretative research but King and Horrocks warn that interpretivism is not without pitfalls and the researcher needs to be aware that 'people participate in indeterminate lifeworlds, often attaching different interpretations and meaning to seemingly similar facts and events' (2010: p11). This will be given due consideration when I analyse the data collected from the qualitative interviewing of the participants.

After considering the approaches above I decided that I would begin the interview with an open question – 'please tell me your experiences of carrying out a death

knock - and rely on a number of probes to guide the participant to particular areas of interest within the research topic. I will encourage the participant to consider:

- the impact this particular practice has had on them and if so what coping strategies they have employed.
- the pressures they have faced while reporting death eg. Competition to get the story, newsdesk involvement and even self-inflicted pressures like career progression.
- The ways in which they have avoided carrying out a death knock if they have indeed avoided the practice. Eg. Lying to the newsdesk that no-one was home.
- Whether the impact has decreased or increased over time
- What steps the industry could take to improve the practice. Eg. counselling for staff affected by the process of death reporting.
- How much thought they give to the impact of their presence/questioning has on the bereaved.
- The ways in which they use social media in death reporting
- The reasons they use social media Eg is it to source relevant people to then interview or is it used to source quotes about and photos of the deceased.
- The level of accuracy in death reporting when using digital death knocks and the traditional death knocks.
- The ethical implications of the digital death knocks, particularly the suggestion that this method is more of an invasion of privacy than the traditional death knock.
- The impact the Leveson Inquiry has had on the reporting of death.

I have personal experience of the death knock practice and I am therefore aware that participants are being asked to examine sensitive issues and the interview process itself might remind interviewees of painful experiences. If, during an interview, a participant did show visible signs of upset or distress I believe I can offer credible

reassurance as I have personal understanding of the impact carrying out a death knock can have. However from my experience of working with a range of journalists I believe it is highly unlikely the interview process will negatively impact on the participants in this way. I prepared a document outlining the above ethical concerns and how they might be dealt with and submitted this to Edinburgh Napier University's Ethics Committee. Research integrity is dealt with at school level at Napier and approval was given. Finally, the setting of the interview is important in order to make the participant feel as comfortable as possible discussing sensitive issues. It was therefore decided that I would allow the interviewee to choose a time and suitable location in which they will feel at ease.

**Analysing the Data**

The method of analysing the primary research data is also an important feature of the methodology and while there are a number of options open to qualitative researchers, I believe a thematic analysis of the interview data would be the best approach for this thesis. Difficulties can arise with thematic analysis because it does not rely solely on observing something concrete within an interview transcript – it also involves the researcher making decisions on how to interpret a participant's interview responses (King and Horrocks 2010). There are also opposing ideas as to what constitutes a theme within the interviews which must be considered but King and Horrock (2010: p150) define themes as 'recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perception and/or experiences which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question'. I believe this is an appropriate definition to use for this specific research process and will therefore be used in the decision process. It is also important to address the importance of

examining a participant's response on an individual basis as well as looking at their answers in relation to the responses from all the participants. This 'balancing within-case and cross-case analysis' (King and Horrocks 2010: p150) is vital because of the relevance of context within qualitative research. It is felt that with this research project I will focus initially on within-case analysis but will also rely on cross-case analysis in order to identify any differences in experiences and interpretations between the range of journalists. It is important to also address assessing the quality of qualitative analysis but this too is not without difficulties as there is differing perspectives on defining the necessary criteria (King and Horrocks, 2010).

In quantitative research there are the accepted criteria of reliability and validity but there are a number alternatives available to qualitative researchers and which one any particular researcher chooses will be determined by their own individual position on assessing quality and the research topic. It is a widely held opinion that reflexivity is key to ensuring accountability in qualitative research. Reflexivity involves the researcher looking inwards as well as outwards and in essence it encourages the researcher to look at how his or her own, views, experiences, beliefs etc. might impact on the research (King and Horrocks 2010). This process fosters transparency within the research which in turn impacts on the validity and reliability of the project. It is unlikely the findings of this project will be replicated by an independent researcher because of the subjectivity of the author and it is important to note that replication is problematic in qualitative research King and Horrocks (2010). However, anyone reading the research must be able to understand how and why I came to the conclusions I did and the theory of reflexivity and accountability will help signpost this for the reader.

## Reporting Qualitative Research

Reporting research findings is an important part of the qualitative process and is crucial as the final report is what will be seen by other researchers and interested professionals. Some academics believe that the process of writing up the report is when the final analysis of the data takes place (Miles & Huberman 1984) and so the value of this stage in the research must not be over-looked. Burgess (1984) states there are three main types of qualitative research reports. One relies heavily on 'descriptions which make little or no reference to theoretical perspectives' while another includes 'analytical discussions based on concepts emerging from the study'. The final type, which is most relevant to this research thesis, involves 'substantive accounts intended to contribute to general theory' (Jankowski and Webster 1991: p69) which 'should contain much descriptive material and liberal quotations from those studied' (Lofland 1971: p5). Finally consideration must be given to the presentation of the qualitative research report and Agar (1980) supports an approach which uses a style which will appeal to the group studied.

## Conclusion

I have carefully considered the best method of carrying out the primary research and believe a qualitative approach is the most suitable. Careful consideration was also given to the type of interview conducted which in this case was face-to-face, the type of questions asked which were open questions (see attached appendix 2) and the type of analysis employed – thematic and 'within-case and cross-case analysis'. I then studied the answers to identify similar responses whilst being mindful that the results would be based on the different ways the respondents interpreted the

scenarios they experienced, and indeed in my interpretation of their answers. I adopted a reflective approach – one which acknowledged how my own views, experiences and beliefs might impact on the research – to ensure the validity and reliability.

The six journalists were approached personally by myself via a variety of methods. The weekly paper reporter was contacted via Linkedin, while the regional, agency and freelance journalists were initially contacted by email (see attached appendix 1) after being identified as possible respondents by an industry contact with whom the researcher had an existing relationship. The tabloid and broadsheet reporters were personal contacts – one was approached via Facebook while contact with the other was in person. The interviews were carried over a six month period in 2014. The report relies heavily on descriptive quotations from those studied and I have taken a journalistic approach to the presentation in order to make sense to the group studied.

# Chapter 3 Analysis of Findings

## Death Knock Justification and the Impact on Journalists

The purpose of this research was to determine whether journalists' use of social networking sites when reporting a tragedy has become more prevalent and if so the possible reasons for why this is the case. It endeavoured to examine whether the journalists believed such use to be ethical or indeed thought it was an invasion of privacy and an intrusion into grief and also what impact newsroom culture had on which method was used most often. It also set out to discuss whether the journalists working within the Scottish print media industry believed there were viable alternatives to the current practices and whether they could be adopted in order to remove any media reliance on social media sites. It also questioned whether any of them were realistic options in highly competitive news environment. In order to determine whether social media is used as an alternative and if so why it is used the research examined the emotional impact of the death knock practice on the journalists and the pressures of the current newsroom culture. Finally, it set out to discover whether the Leveson Inquiry had indeed impacted on the practice as suggested might be the case by earlier research (Duncan 2012).

All the journalists interviewed for this thesis agreed that the death knock practice was a necessary aspect of their role in reporting news, was in most cases justified and that there was a public interest defence to approaching relatives. Some of those questioned had actively defended the practice to people who had voiced criticism of it. The tabloid reporter told of incident when she had been asked 'how can you do that? – that's sick' and while she admitted she would not like to be on the receiving end of a death knock she believed there was a public appetite for the information.

‘The people who pass judgements are the very ones who soak it up and want to know. Unfortunately there is a ghoulish demand for it.’

The agency reporter was herself on the receiving end of a journalist’s death knock before entering the profession and while she admits she detests having to do them she did defend the practice.

> It is the kind of the dread type job for me personally As much as I say they are traumatic to do I can’t remember my first death knock. It maybe sounds insensitive but they all kind of blend into one. The only one that really sticks in my head was an occasion when the family were really unwelcoming – I remember the ones that leave me shaking and, when I go home, have me reassessing why I am doing this career to be honest. The death knock is the opportunity to get things accurate rather than picking things up from hearsay or neighbours with which you run the risk of saying something that isn’t true about somebody. In every other aspect of journalism you always give the person their write to respond.

The broadsheet journalist also believed the death knock was a justified journalism practice but questioned whether the media as a whole always knew what was in the public interest.

> I’m not entirely sure they are justified in every single case. It comes down to public interest really and whether someone’s death is really in the public interest and should be in the newspaper. There is a line there and I am not entirely sure we always know where that line is.

The response from the regional reporter echoed the views of the tabloid journalist – that there was a public appetite for death stories. Like the other respondents he too agreed the death knock was a legitimate journalism practice citing accuracy as the over-riding justification.

> I remember my first even editor at my local paper saying to me 'what our readers want to read about is other people's misfortune'. I was working at a local paper covering the justice of the peace court and it was all cases of people chucking chip papers on the ground. I'd asked him how many of the cases he wanted me to transcribe and he said all of them… I had 20 cases. I remember his words and what he said is absolutely true. It has stuck with me to this day and I think people love to read about people dying and tragedy. Sometimes you can go to these doors and you get a hard time from neighbours - they shout abuse at you but these are the same people who will pick up the paper the next day and say 'look at that poor wee girl' or 'look at that poor family' so it is double standards.
>
> It is justified. At the end of the day it is all about selling newspapers and people want to read about tragedy but it is about accuracy and you get that from going to the person at the centre of the story. If it boils down to accuracy of reporting then at the end of the day you have to go to the parents or the house and I can't think of any way round that.

A number of other interviewees could recall occasions when friends had asked them how they could do death knocks or were critical of the practice and they held the same view expressed earlier by the tabloid journalist. One welcomed the fact that people questioned journalists' actions and believes reporters need to do more to explain their role to the public.

Increasingly my answer has been you people keep reading it, you keep clicking on it, you keep feeding it, and you want it. If we didn't do it you would ask why we were ignoring it. There is a human desire to know…somebody has to do that'.

In the case of a life lived in some ways it's recognising the contribution they've made. In some cases like disease it is acknowledging that there is some things we don't know yet, we don't have answers to. There might be charities involved looking for support for things and you might be able to help prevent another one and draw attention to something. There are ones that are harder to justify I guess. People can question everything we do and they do and I am fine with people questioning it. I'd rather they question us, engage with us. I don't think reporters justify or explain what we do enough and we should have been doing that for years. (Freelance)

Recently one of my friend's relatives was death-knocked by a journalist and he phoned me up outraged that this had happened. I explained that there is no ulterior motive – you are there to do a piece on the fact the person has died and ask if they have something to say as a tribute and you get accurate information. You are not there to stitch people up but the perception of journalists is that this is why you are there and so they are defensive. I always find it difficult because I really hate the fact that people would think that of me. I am doing a job and I just want to get a couple of quotes, get the story and do a good job so that they would be happy. It is not my intention to upset or anger them. I have even had comments from other journalists… you do get some who manage to get through their career without having to stand on somebody's door. Yes I have definitely had to defend it. **(**Agency**)**

All the interviewees admitted to feeling nervous about carrying out the practice but further questioning revealed that the reasons behind the nerves to be different. In

most cases the feeling arose from not knowing how the family will react to their presence but one journalist admitted to being nervous about not getting the story ahead of competitors. The tabloid reporter described her first death knock as 'one of the scariest experiences ever – absolutely dreaded it, knot in the pit of my stomach stuff' and the freelance reporter spoke of having feelings of 'trepidation' before approaching bereaved relatives. By contrast the broadsheet reporter admitted to nerves but not about the approach itself.

> I would be quite nervous but it wasn't so much the death knock itself. It is kind of intruding on people's grief and it has to be done sensitively but there is also the pressure from other journalists doing the same thing – are you there first? I think it is more the pressure you are under to get a line on the story - going out that is the over-riding kind of feeling you have got. I don't recall being concerned or apprehensive about doing it – it was just something that had to be done.

All the journalists interviewed agreed that the death knock was the 'dreaded job' and none relished the prospect of carrying it out and while they reported similar feelings prior to carrying out the death knock they responded differently to questions relating to how they felt immediately after carrying out the process. The tabloid journalist spoke at length about her feelings prior to carrying out a death knock and her emotions during the process itself.

> I do recall being absolutely terrified on my first death knock. It was the most daunting, daunting this to have to do. I think it does become easier but I don't think that nervous feeling ever completely goes away. I don't think you become immune to it or desensitised to it at all. There is always that shred of compassion there because you are intruding on someone's grief but I think there has to be and I also think it probably wouldn't be healthy if you didn't

> have a little dose of nerves over it. You don't want to be blasé about something like that, it is too important – it is too sensitive.

The weekly newspaper reporter also reported feeling nervous about carrying out death knocks and in describing her first ever experience of the practice she revealed feelings of nausea and self-disgust. But she reconciled any possible feelings of guilt by ensuring she portrayed the death in a sensitive way and she did not think that she had become less sensitive to the process over the years.

> I felt a bit sick to be honest because obviously the last person they want to see is a reporter so soon after the death of a family member and I could empathise with how the relatives might feel, so I did feel a bit nervous and a bit daunted by it but I was also feeling quite determined the relative would like the outcome of the story because we mostly do death knocks as tribute pieces. I did realise it was part of my job but I did feel quite bad in a sense. I do think you become a little bit hardened to it but it is still hard not to get emotional when you speak to the relative – you have to put your work face on and act as normal and be professional.

The regional journalist agreed that no-one enjoyed doing a death knock and while he admitted it was often difficult to do he believed that it could also be a very satisfying aspect of reporting.

> It is the one job that nobody likes doing and I don't care how tough the person professes to be you know nobody likes doing it and every time you go up the path to somebody's door your heart is in your mouth and butterflies in your stomach a wee bit - just in case you have to run. You just never know what's going to come at you from behind the door. It is challenging in many ways but I have to say when you come away with 'a result' as we would say, it really is quite rewarding. It is great if you come out of there with a picture in your hand and two or three pages of notes.

The need to stay professional was highlighted by a number of the respondents but some admitted that it was not always possible and one believed showing the emotional toll was beneficial. It would appear individual personality dictated which particular approach the journalists decided to take – visible empathy or detached professionalism.

> Once you are in the door and sitting talking to the person you get a sort of sense of how the person is and build a wee bit rapport with them - that bit sort of comes naturally apart from the occasions where I am trying really hard not to cry. I have had one instance when the lady had to pat me on the shoulder which I felt awful about but we are only human. If something really sad is happening right in front of you – you do get a lump in your throat unless of course you are very hardened to death. (Agency)

> There have been times when I have felt my eyes welling up and everybody does it differently but I am not going to try and hide the fact that I am moved. I'm not going to sit and weep because there has to be a professional line but I am not afraid to show them that I am moved. I think that's important – you are making that connection. (Tabloid)

> You know what it is like - we couldn't do our job if we were crying all the time or if we got upset because someone had been killed. Could you imagine if you were covering Dunblane for example? You are expected to get details from the relatives and lot of information so you can't sit there being upset because it is a tragedy - you have to detach yourself from it. Many of these death knocks are real tragedies. I would be lying if I said it didn't get to you sometimes but you do have to desensitise yourself to it. (Regional)

The freelance reporter believed his feelings about the process of approach grieving relatives were a result of his inability to switch off his own emotions as much as other in the industry can perhaps do.

> The feeling is one of trepidation, I guess. I think I am different because I can't switch off as much as others do but I don't think anyone enjoys doing a death knock - it is part of the business and it is part of what we do but nobody relishes it. Nobody goes in thinking I am going to get a great story out of this…they are just hoping they are not going to be told to f*** off or get chased down the front lawn. I always have that trepidation going in because anything can happen. You could have ten in a row that can go really well and then the eleventh one is a complete disaster. Maybe I still have those feelings going in because I haven't done as many as some other colleagues. A former colleague was really good at getting the bereaved to talk but I don't think that was because she had become desensitised to it – I think it was just her personality that either she could switch off more or could empathise. Most reporters can empathise to some extent it is a question of how visible that is to the other person.

The agency reporter also believed her personality and personal events in her life had made the death knock practice an uncomfortable experience for her and that she sometimes struggled to reconcile what she had to do for her job with what she would do personally.

> On one occasion I can recall going to a door and the family were less than welcoming. I think it was possibly only the second or third one I had done. It left me very upset actually. I'm not really the type of person personally who wants to intrude but I see it is our job. I do have difficulty reconciling it. Absolutely yes. My family was involved in a tragedy and had journalists at the door death knocking. Seeing my relatives' reaction to people arriving at

> their door - I've always thought about that. They were very unwelcoming but now I see that these people were only trying to do their jobs.

In terms of death knocks leaving a lasting impact on journalists the interviewees were asked whether they thought about it again after they had completed the interview and whether they were able to process what had happened. It is clear from the answers given that the process of talking to grieving relatives did to some extent affect most of the journalists although the amount it had impacted on them was dependent on the individual. The tabloid reporter spoke of particular scenarios affecting her and cases where she could more easily relate to the bereaved had a greater impact on her.

> I think some of them affect you more than others to be honest. I think there has to be a professional line because you are there to do a job but you are human. There will always be ones that affect you – the ones with children. I've got kids and so the ones with children really, really get me.

She recalled one such death knock which she described as 'the most harrowing' she had done but she revealed she did not switch off the minute she closed the door behind her and left the house. Instead she struck up a long relationship with the bereaved parent - not for the purposes of getting further follow-up stories but because she had formed a genuine bond with the relative.

> It was an unusual death and I found it very, very harrowing. I vividly remember her sitting, cradling mementos on her lap and she just rocked and rocked and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed and I will never forget how that felt. I like to think of myself as quite an understanding, compassionate person. Probably it is my strength to be able to speak to people when they are grieving – that's probably my niche, it is what I do in journalism and in actual fact I stayed in touch with that person for a long, long time. We

> participated in a charity event. I don't think in these cases it should be an in and out job. Sometimes it is because the family don't want to entertain you or sometimes they give you a quick word and a photograph and they don't want to see you again but I always think it is better if you can sort of build more of a lasting relationship.

She did reveal that she did try to discuss her experiences with colleagues but that sometimes things are said to her in confidence and she would not discuss those aspects with anyone. She also said she felt comfortable talking about the impact of a death knock with colleagues and didn't think she would be viewed as weak.

> I will discuss it more so with colleagues than with my family because it keeps it within the confines of work. Sometimes after the story has appeared in the paper I will say to my mum 'that was really tough – she was really upset'. I do feel comfortable talking to colleagues about it rather than family because we are all in the same boat and unless you have actually done a death knock I don't think you can get your head around it. Someone who is not a journalist will never know what it is like to chap that door out of nowhere. I'm perfectly open with colleagues and say that was really harrowing but I don't see that as an admission that I can't take it…it is simply a statement. There are probably some who bottle it up but I am very much a believer in saying it aloud. It is therapeutic for me to talk about it but I'm not saying I'm in bits I am saying the person I have interviewed is in bits.

Another of the respondents reported negative feelings after carrying out a death knock and believes this cannot be avoided despite the pressures on him to get on to the next job.

> You will always have time to think about it, you will review it to some extent. Some colleagues can switch off more than others. I can feel pretty

> shitty after doing death knocks…but that could be more about traipsing about and being told not to come back to the office. (Freelance)

One respondent, however, admitted she did not feel as if she had time to reflect on death knocks and instead newsroom culture forced her to focus on getting the story written rather than on her own emotions.

> I will probably come back and mention it to colleagues but we have a very small staff and things are pretty hectic. We are constantly doing one thing and moving on to the next so you don't spend a lot of time in the office reflecting on it. When I am driving back to work I will dwell on it then after that I just tell myself it is part of the job and I shouldn't dwell too much on it. But I will and I think it depends on the circumstances and how tragic the death is. I will maybe come back in to the office and say to the editor 'it was so sad' but the first thing I get asked is 'what did you get and what did she say?' We will reflect on it a little but then it is time to write it and move on. (Weekly)

The broadsheet reporter revealed his feelings after carrying out a death knock were dependent on whether he was successful in getting the story. He found it difficult to recall a case which had particularly affected him.

> I think I just feel happy that we have got a line on a breaking story and I also find that if people are talking to you, you feel it is going quite well and you are connecting with the people, the families then I feel less bad for intruding. If you kind of get on with them, then it makes it a lot easier. It is worse when you get the door slammed in your face or get chased down the street.

The broadsheet reporter's view was also expressed by the agency writer who said that she had on occasion been left physically shaking as a result of a death knock and the experience had left her questioning her career choice. She stated

that it was not the successful death knocks – the occasions when the relatives invite her in and agree to be interviewed – but rather the doors from which she is chased that impact on her the most.

> As much as I say they are traumatic to do I can't remember my first death knock. It may be insensitive but they all kind of blend into one a bit. The only one that really sticks in my head was the really unwelcoming family. It is the ones where the family doesn't welcome you being there that leave me feeling bad - where I'm shaking and when I go home I reassess why I am doing this career to be honest."

Despite all the journalists interviewed reporting the practice had had an impact on them all but two were adamant that they had never avoided carrying out to a death knock or had ever employed tactics to avoid approaching the bereaved – a practice previous research has suggested does frequently occur (Muller 2010). However, among those who stated they had never refused to do a death knock there were some who admitted that they had thought about employing such tactics, but had never felt compelled to act on it with respondents giving a variety of reasons for this. One of the professionals interviewed confessed that there were occasions when she should have taken the decision not to go to the door.

> I have thought about avoiding it and maybe if I felt really uneasy about a particular death knock I might but I've never really experienced that. I am sometimes very thankful when there is a legitimate excuse for not chapping the door – like the police refusing access. Basically I can understand why some journalists might do it. (Weekly)

> To refuse to do a death knock would result in a bollocking. I can't imagine refusing to be honest. Back in the day as a junior reporter refusing would be a

> black mark for sure. It is part of the job. It is what you signed up for so if you start saying I'm not going to do this, I'm not going to do that you won't last too long. Journalism is still attracting a lot of students wanting to get into the profession and if you are not going to do the job there are plenty of other people out there who will. I've always done a death knock so I can say it has been done. I think in the past I have been asked to go back to a door again and I haven't done it a second or third time. But I have always done it once – to cover my arse basically. There is always a fear that someone else will get the story so you keep yourself right. (Broadsheet)

But two respondents admitted they had lied about carrying out a death knock to their respective bosses.

> I have lied to news desks in the past when they have asked me to go back to a door to try again. I have stayed in the car, given it a while and then phoned the desk and said they have refused again. I know they are not going to change their mind and it is intrusive. I have to say that was the one time when I completely lied to the desk and said I had knocked the door and I had not done so. It was not a story - someone had died from natural causes. It was sad but it happens every day. It was not news. (Agency)

Career progression seemed to be cited as a concern for those employed directly by publications with the freelance journalist stating that the nature of his employment did not put him under pressure to carry out a death knock for career progression and although he had never refused to go on a death knock he also admitted that he had on occasion lied about knocking a door. When questioned further on why he felt compelled to lie rather than tell them the real reason why he didn't want to knock he revealed that he had experienced less than sympathetic news desk staff.

> There have been a couple of situations where the neighbourhood has been such that it was not safe and usually in agreement with the photographer I

> was with I have told the desk I have knocked and there was nobody home. It depends on the news desk or the news editor but there have been certain people in my career - news editors - who I don't think would give a toss about the personal safety or welfare of a reporter.

While another respondent said that while she had never employed avoidance tactics she freely admitted that there had been times when she genuinely believes she should have done.

> To be honest I never have but hindsight is a wonderful thing – I can think of an occasion when I bloody well wish I had. I think when you are on the ground you have to go with your gut. There is a split there about wanting to be loyal to your news desk and doing exactly what you have been asked to do and going with your gut. With no disrespect to the desk – they have a million things on their plate and they need to make sure they are covered when their bosses say 'have we been to the door'. There is a lot of pressure on them too to make sure they have ticked all the boxes. Although I haven't done it I don't disagree with it. I think it depends when it is…if it is a breaking story and everybody is out on the story then I think you have to do it but if there has been a passage of time you would be dam unlucky to have a rival reporter turn up on the same day. I don't champion shirking out but if you have a genuine reason - like if someone you have already approached has asked you to give them a couple of days to think about it then the desk asks you to go back - then I think you are within your rights…I mean fight your ground. Tell the desk you don't think it is a good idea. You are on the ground; the desk hasn't spoken to these people. I would not champion lying to the desk but there are certain circumstances when you make a judgement. It is not the news desk's fault. They are not out on the road, seeing it, dealing with the people. (Tabloid)

The research suggests that the death knocks are widely believed within the industry to be a legitimate journalism practice. All the reporters interviewed agreed that it was justified with a variety of reasons being offered to support this view. The main defence offered was the need for accuracy in journalism but the suggestion was also made that the public demanded the kind of information which can only be sourced from talking to the bereaved. All of those interviewed admitted that it was the most unpleasant part of their job and despite their 'dread' at carrying out a death knock they agreed that it was an essential aspect of death-reporting. However, one of the respondents did raise concerns that perhaps not all death knocks were justified and believed some journalists and news organisations were not always sure of what was in the public interest. Another of the interviewees believed that the profession should be doing more to explain journalists' practices to the public so they understand why they do death knocks.

All of the journalists admitted to feeling nervous before carrying out a death knock and while most cited uncertainty of the relatives' reaction as the main source of nerves the broadsheet reporter suggested that his nerves had less to do with that and more to do with not getting a 'line' on the story. This was an interesting finding because many would argue that tabloid newspapers are traditionally seen as more exclusive driven than broadsheets and rivalry between competitors is also greater. While all admitted they found the prospect of a death knock daunting some believed they had become desensitised to it while others believed it was important to maintain an ability to visibly show empathy to the bereaved. The regional reporter admitted that while it was probably the most difficult aspect of his job it was also the most satisfying when it went well.

Their feelings immediately after carrying out a death knock varied between the respondents. The weekly reporter stated she had little time to dwell on the experience whereas the tabloid journalist spoke of discussing it with colleagues and on occasion her own family members. The broadsheet journalist and the agency reporter said it was the unsuccessful death knocks that had a greater impact on them. It is clear from the anecdotal stories cited by the respondents that death knocks did have an impact on them but despite describing traumatic death knocks – both successful and unsuccessful – they were all adamant that the death knock is essential. Indeed only two admitted ever trying to avoid carrying out a death knock – the freelance journalist stated he had colluded with a photographer to tell his news desk he had chapped the door when in fact he had not. Personal safety concerns were cited as the reason for the deception. So although there are occasions when a journalist might avoid doing a death knock this research suggests the minority would do this.

**Digital Death Knocks – Prevalence and Ethical Implications**

Having gauged the interviewees' stance on death knocks and their impact the journalists' views were sought on how technology had changed death reporting and they were questioned on the emergence, the increasing prominence and ethical implications of digital death knocks. The interviewees had all lifted quotes and or pictures from social media sites when reporting deaths and tragedies but the forcefulness of which they defended such practice and any 'guilt' felt was varied. All of them said social media had a huge impact on the way they did their job. The tabloid journalist told how the information was now at the touch of a button and the old fashioned method of gaining information was being used less.

> I think social media has changed absolutely everything. In the old days you used to just plod the streets – go into every shop and pub until you found somebody with a hardcopy picture of someone and it could take you hours or days. It literally was just pounding the streets asking 'do you know this person, do you know their mother, their father, brother, sister? Do you know where they live? But now at the touch of a button you are logged on and have looked. You know exactly where you are going now. Gone are the days of floundering about in the dark. There are so many legitimate ways of getting information at the touch of a button.

However she said not all advances had been for the benefit of journalists.

> One of the worst things Facebook did was to phase out was the public post search because we used to be able to type in RIP Jimmy Smith and everything, everybody who had posted an RIP came up and that was how you found all the tribute pages and so often that's how you got your name as well and it was all public. emoving this function has made things so much more difficult but it makes you realise just how much you rely on social media.

While she stated she could sympathise with grieving relatives who might take issue with journalists using social media for tributes it would not ultimately stop her using quotes and pictures from sites like Facebook.

> It's tricky because I can see why a grieving mum or dad would perhaps complain – and say I didn't tell you that – which is why I think it is important to death knock because you can say we came to see if you wanted to speak but you weren't feeling up to it. I think you need that fall back. I think you need to be able to show that you tried to do it… but you know what, once it is on the internet it is fair game.

She said she had considered the privacy aspect of using social media tributes even after the family has refused to speak to her and accepted that by doing so she would

be removing control from them, but while she did reveal she had sympathy for the relatives any initial hesitation was quickly brushed aside.

> I have thought about their privacy. People who are grieving aren't necessarily sitting thinking 'if I just put this on this site is it going to get picked up by a paper?' They just pay tribute and I think it sucks. You have gone and somebody says no and basically you have gone against their wishes, it is rotten but at the end of the day I am afraid… a journalist has asked them to speak to them one-to-one and they have said no and then they have chosen to share their emotions with potentially the whole world - you know?

Responding to the suggestion that she may have an ethical responsibility because despite putting it in a public post it critics could argue that the person perhaps never intended it to be in a newspaper and that journalists know this, the tabloid reporter revealed she did feel bad about doing it but that the nature of the media business really gave her no other option. But she emphasised the post must be on a public page.

> It doesn't mean I don't feel a bit bad about it, it doesn't mean I don't feel sorry for them, but unfortunately it is a cut throat business and other papers are going to do it and unfortunately you can't afford to be the paper that doesn't have it. If a member of the public phones up and tells me there is a picture of such and such on a specific webpage I have to be able to see it when I search for it. If I can't then the game's a bogey – we wouldn't use it.

The broadsheet journalist spoke of how technology had made life much easier for him and said he believed it had saved a considerable amount in terms of time and resources across the industry. In contrast to the tabloid reporter's position he said he would use social media tributes as a direct alternative to traditional death knocks.

> It has made a huge, huge difference and it is now much, much easier. If someone dies now, once you have the name of the person, you go on to Facebook and punch it in and normally you get a lot of comments from friends and relatives. It is all there for you whereas before you would be going out and scrambling around to get that sort of input from people. We do fewer death knocks now than we used to but I'd say if we do have to do them then social media is a great substitute. It's all there for you and you can literally cut and paste comments straight into the article and that's what a lot of journalists will do. For my newspaper because of resources etc. if we can get comments online then that is what we will do – we don't need to send someone out and it saves money. I think for some of the bigger papers with more resources they will do both. For us it is time and resources and if we can get comments online it is as good really as getting them at the door and the readers don't appreciate the difference.

He rejected suggestions that by taking comments online and not approaching the bereaved in person he was maybe removing control from the grief-stricken and stated that he did not believe there were any privacy issues with such practice.

> I don't think it is removing control. I think it is what it is – it is a social space which people are entering, they put comments up for the public to read, for others to read. No-one owns that information once it is up there. If the post is on a public site then it is fair game. I don't think it really matters where the comments are read whether it is online or in a newspaper. Our readers could put the name into Facebook themselves and see the same comments.

In response to the suggestion he perhaps had an ethical responsibility to consider the possibility that the bereaved had intended the post for a smaller audience than that of a newspaper he revealed he did have sympathy for the grief-stricken in such circumstances but did not consider it to be a problem. 'I can understand that and I do

have sympathy in that situation but it isn't really an issue for us – no-one has ever complained.'

The agency worker also said she would use quotes from social media sites as a direct alternative to approaching the bereaved in person and believes she does this for the benefit of the grieving individual.

> They've already got enough on their plate without retreating back into their living room after slamming the door in my face and having to deal with that. I've seen it from my own personal experience – it didn't directly affect me at the time but I saw the impact on relatives so I was very aware of it. Some people are automatically defensive when you tell them you are a journalist and they have absolutely no knowledge of how journalists work. Most journalists do a death knock by saying 'Do you want to pay tribute to?' That's the standard line. It is the reason you are there and it is genuinely the reason. When you are knocking on the door it is to find out what impact the person's death has had on the family and what they plan to do to remember this person – there's no other reason but I think the people on the other side of the door don't always see it that way – they see it as an intrusion.
>
> I have used online comments rather than going to the door but it wasn't my decision. I don't think it was to benefit the journalists. I think we had to mark the fact the death has happened - it was being reported absolutely everywhere - but we just knew that by going to the relatives' door we weren't going to get anything. The email had also been circulated asking the media to respect their privacy and we would always adhere to that. We don't use pictures from social media unless there's been interaction online and it has been agreed but we would use comments.

She rejected any accusation that their privacy was being invaded and instead suggested that perhaps the grief-stricken take to social media in order to prevent

journalists coming to their door. This justification for using social media was unique to the agency worker and the explanation was not suggested by any of the other reporters interviewed.

> I don't see this being a problem ethically because if someone closes their Facebook page then you can't see the comments and you can't use them but if it is open and they have put the comments out there on twitter or a tribute site then no I don't see any problem with it. The only time I would have an ethical concern – and we've not done it at the agency – but I have seen other journalists taking comments from someone really young who maybe doesn't really know the difference and they've lifted their photos and they are maybe only 15-16 years old.
>
> If you go to a door and the mother says no and then you go online and there is a heartfelt message to her son I don't see why you couldn't use that. How do you know that she hasn't done that to avoid speaking to journalists? I wouldn't find it comforting to speak to someone I didn't know if I had suffered a death but that is me personally. I also think that I would have the control if I put it on social media site because it would be exactly my words and exactly how I wanted it to come across rather than it being somebody else implying you felt a certain way by looking at a facial expression. I think if there is a way of covering the story in an accurate way without having to approach the most direct member of the family then I would always choose that option. It is sort of the same as the old school method of taking messages from flowers at the scene. It is the same principle. It is lying on the pavement for everyone to read – what's the difference from being something someone can easily read to being in the newspaper.

The regional reporter had by far the most experience in the industry of all the research respondents and while he admitted social media had undoubtedly made

journalists' lives easier and that he had himself lifted quotes from Facebook when reporting a death, he suggested it could be a shortcut too far for the industry.

> Social media sites like Facebook have had a dramatic impact on journalism. Now you don't even have to go to the door. You can get pictures and tributes from friends on Facebook and you do all the time - you see it now in every paper in the land, people getting referred to by their hashtags. It is bizarre really when you think about it and I don't know if it is a good thing or not. It makes life awful easy for the journalist, instead of going out and getting quotes for themselves they just cut and paste them from Facebook into the paper. We do it all the time at my paper. It is speed, really, and easy accessibility but you are cutting corners really. I think you should do both. I think you should follow it up by going to the door undoubtedly. If it happened just before the first edition of the paper then I might rattle it into the paper as quickly as possible using what was on Facebook. Once that was done I would then go out to the house. If I got pictures and quotes that would make the earlier Facebook stuff redundant. If you only had one edition to fill you should go to the house and Facebook should be a last resort.

He believed that using Facebook in this manner was a direct result of the current newsroom culture and initially stated he saw no ethical problem with the practice.

> There is a time issue and there is a staffing issue. It comes back to the newsroom culture. There is also a money issue in newsrooms now whereas papers used to throw money at agencies most papers can't do that anymore. My paper is skint – we can't ask an agency to go out and death knock because we can't afford to pay them. Facebook is one way round it.
>
> I don't see any ethical concerns about using it because it is in the public domain and everyone can see it. What's the difference in picking up a paper and reading what is online. If it was something really inappropriate then I would say I'm not using that (perhaps something about their private life) but

> if it's just a simple tribute then yes I would use it. I'd pick and choose the comments I use. It is the same as having a notebook full of quotes – you pick the best. Some of the tributes are very good.

However after further consideration in which he focused his thoughts on the issue of privacy in relation to the control of information (Frost, 2000), he admitted there were problems with the practice. When it was suggested that by taking information from Facebook rather than giving grieving relatives the opportunity to say no to comments and pictures in the paper the journalist was perhaps removing control from them, the regional reporter went so far as to eventually suggest the use of Facebook in death reporting could be a shortcut too far ethically.

> I've not thought about it in that way before. I have thought about it from a newspaper point of view in that in order to get a better story we should be going to the door. I've not thought about it from the ethical privacy point of view but I think I would agree you are removing control from them. It also goes back to getting the information from the horse's mouth and getting absolute accuracy in your story and accuracy is more important than anything in journalism. The problem again comes down to a lack of staff and lack of money in newspapers and until that is changed then we are going to have a situation where journalists do cut corner, ethically cut corners.

It is clear that the use of social media is being used increasingly by journalists from across the Scottish print industry. All of the respondents agreed that technology had made their lives much easier and all of them had used social media to source information for death reporting. Indeed a number of them revealed their first course of action on hearing the deceased's name is to type it into a search engine and all admitted to using information sourced from social media. The interviewees saw no problem with lifting quotes and photos from sites like Facebook as long as the pages

were public. Despite this some admitted having sympathy for the parents and accepted that the information was possibly never intended to be splashed across newspapers. However the need to get the story seemed to over-ride any concerns for the bereaved – the tabloid reporter said that she had used comments from social media sites even after the family had refused to talk to her. She argued that the bereaved person had chosen not to speak to her as a single individual but had instead decided to put it on a public Facebook page which can be accessed by anyone. Certainly from the interviews it is clear that newsroom culture has impacted on the use of social media when reporting death. The broadsheet journalist believed social media had allowed his organisation to save time and money. While most of the respondents spoke about the ideal being to speak directly to parents the broadsheet journalist and the agency reporter spoke of using social media as a direct alternative to the traditional death knock. The latter believed this course of action benefits the bereaved and went as far as to suggest that placing tributes on social media sites might be a deliberate tactic by the bereaved to avoid interaction with journalists. The regional journalist admitted he hadn't really considered the suggestion that by taking comments from online sites without permission he had removed control from the bereaved – after thinking about it he did state that he thought lifting comments from sites like Facebook was possibly a step too far ethically. Overall it is clear that the use of social media sites is prevalent and that those working in print journalism believe a public social media site is 'fair game'. The majority of those questioned still believe that direct contact with the bereaved is preferable but it would appear that some do not believe it is essential. The fact that some spoke of journalism as a 'business at the end of the day' or commented that both financial and time pressures were commonplace suggests the use of social media in death reporting will only

increase in the coming years unless organisations invest more money to increase staff numbers and relieve that pressure.

**Death Reporting and the Leveson Inquiry**

Journalism practices went under the microscope in 2011-12 when the Leveson Inquiry - a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British Press - was set up in the aftermath of the News of the World Hacking Scandal. Following the Inquiry the existing self-regulatory body, the Press Complaints Commission was replaced with the newly-created Independent Press Standards Organisation. It was set up to address concerns raised about self-regulation but it hasn't gone far enough for many critics and pressure groups who insist more needs to be done to protect an individual's privacy (Hacked Off, 2014). Indeed Hacked Off (2014) states that IPSO only meets 12 of the 38 criteria set out by Leveson for effective, independent press self-regulation leading to it calling IPSO 'another toothless poodle'.

Research carried out during the inquiry suggested that its findings could have an impact on journalism practices and one conclusion stated that a possible consequence of the inquiry would be that journalists could be more inclined to digital death knock rather than face grieving families. 'It could be argued that reporters need more encouragement to include the bereaved in stories about their relatives' deaths, rather than further regulations which could provide them with 'ethical' reasons to avoid that family' (Duncan and Newton 2012: p216.)

Therefore it was important to address the Leveson Inquiry within the context of this thesis to discover what, if any, affect it had on journalism practice in general and on death reporting specifically. Responses were varied but the tabloid and broadsheet

reporters broadly agreed the Leveson Inquiry had indeed had an impact on their practices. The freelance, regional and weekly journalists reported less impact on their day to day operations.

> Leveson brought a lot of stuff out into the open. Everyone knows about the Leveson Inquiry. Everybody wanted to know what those bastard journalists had been up to and I think unfortunately things were done wrongly. There had to be an inquiry, things had to be looked into and it had to happen. Unfortunately it has brought out all the bad bits and people don't realise just how much work goes into playing by the rules. I think that's been very over-shadowed and what gets my goat is when people say 'you just throw anything into the paper'. You know yourself how many stories you have had that never saw the paper because you couldn't stand it up. People just say you put that in the paper and you didn't know if it was true. The number of stories I've had spiked. I know they are true, the boss knows they are true but I can't prove it so it's not happening.

> I think Leveson has highlighted a lot of what is bad about journalism which we know has happened and it is unfortunate. It has left the industry with an awful lot to prove. I think the trouble comes when everybody is tarred with the same brush. You are going to have people who are going to assume that any journalist who turns up at the door is going to execute bad practice at some point. Personally I've had 'yous are scum, yous are this, yous are that' but then I did have that before. I don't really think anybody has stood at their door and said to me you hack phones and so on. I don't know if it is because we are so strict now, but from my point of view my paper would always have knocked the door but the likes of Leveson would make us more likely to knock, to go out, not less likely because the industry has got so much to prove now. I don't think we would want to give anyone an opportunity to say 'they didn't even bother, they didn't even come out'. It is basic decency - I think it is more likely to go the other way and I would tick all the boxes and

if that means an uncomfortable death knock then that's the way it goes. (Tabloid)

I don't think the newspaper industry has changed that much since the Leveson Inquiry to be honest. I think people reflect on it for a certain length of time and then go back to their old ways again to do what is easiest and best. I have heard journalists say we are legally covered so we can still do it. They know it is unethical but they are under pressure to keep the editor happy and if he says there are no legal issues, let's do it - you just go with it – you have no choice. That is just the way it is - as long as you keep your job (and there are hardly any jobs as it is), you just do it. It is the pressures of employment and career. (Weekly)

I think the Leveson Inquiry has had a massive impact on the newspaper industry. Journalists are definitely more cautious. I think for me it hasn't had an impact because the agency I work for has always adhered to the guidelines. Personally I am not more cautious about doing death knocks because at the agency we always did them correctly. I don't think the Leveson Inquiry has made it more likely for you to go to the door. I think if there is a way of covering the story in an accurate way without having to approach the most direct member of the family then I would always choose that option. (Agency)

It isn't affecting the broadsheets too badly but I think the tabloids have to be a lot more careful about who they approach and how they go about acquiring information. There is a whole raft of internal guidance on what you can accept from people, how you can use certain information – there are a whole lot of internal walls about how you can engage with people and use information We do a lot of online training which needs to be done. You get reminders saying you have however many days to comply and if you don't do it you get threatened with disciplinary action. A lot of it is common sense

> but my company want to be seen as being proactive so yes it has had a massive impact on journalism practice. (Broadsheet)

> It has had hee-haw impact on practices and death reporting. Most of the stuff people were complaining about has changed completely since then. There was only something like three paragraphs in the whole 900 or so pages of the report that related to the internet. It was looking at stuff that was decades old and it has already changed since then. The report was minimum ten years too late. The public's perception of journalists was always poor but we never explained it. News organisations are not helping because the BBC will only invite on ex-News of the World people or the editor of the Spectator or someone like that. They never speak to locals, the never speak to regionals and even if they tried to our corporate bosses probably wouldn't allow us to speak. No-one has ever asked me about my concept of ethics or my approach to journalism. (Freelance)

The respondents' views on whether the Leveson Inquiry had indeed impacted on the day-to-day journalism practices varied hugely with the freelance reporter stating it had "hee-haw" impact to the tabloid and broadsheet journalists saying that it had a massive impact on how they conducted themselves. Perhaps this variation could be down to how they individual journalists concerned worked before Leveson – although none of the respondents said they had ever adopted the practices which were investigated by the inquiry. The tabloid reporter stated that her organisation placed a great deal of importance on being able to prove their journalists had adopted good practices when reporting. However, whether this is a knee-jerk reaction which will fade in time remains to be seen – certainly this was the weekly reporter's opinion of the impact Leveson had on journalism practice.

**The Death Knock – Possible Alternatives**

The final aim of this thesis was to ascertain whether there was a viable alternative to the traditional death knock and the increasingly more commonplace digital death knock. While most of the respondents agreed the intermediary option had some merit they were all in agreement that it is not really a viable alternative. The main hurdle cited was the culture of getting an exclusive. Indeed competition between rival newspapers still exists and recent developments, technological or otherwise, have not reduced the need news editors have to get one over their rivals. And while some journalists reported the Leveson did impact on the way they did the job it didn't appear to quell the need for an exclusive line. The tabloid reporter also suggested newspapers want to 'staff' sit-downs with grieving families because they know how best to get the job done, get the emotive quotes and ask the right questions in order to get them. She also cited the importance of building a relationship with the interviewee and was concerned that the intermediary service would impact on a newspaper's ability to build such a relationship with the grief-stricken. Another concern of the pooling/intermediary option was raised by the freelance journalist who believes it has implications for an independent press.

> I don't believe 'pooling' would be a viable option. It is ok for the likes of a Royal visit, where it's very much a watching brief - but death knocking and any subsequent interview is too 'personal' for it to work. News desks are going to want to feel reassured that every little detail has been gleaned from the chat - and for that, they are going to want to send in one of their own. That's just the way it is. This brings me in mind of situations where the news desk buys in copy from an agency. They prefer to send a staff reporter to the door to do a full sit-down....in fact I can think on one occasion when I was sent out with a freelancer to make sure we had everything we needed. I think the freelance journo would have taken exception to being excluded, hence

> why I went with him. The bottom line is, my news editor wanted 'one of us' to be there so he knew the job was being done properly.
>
> When it's something as sensitive as a death knock, bosses like to pick the reporter they feel is most suited to the circumstances, maybe they have something in common with the grieving person or just have a particularly delicate way of dealing with people and making them open up. You take that away with pooling. You don't know if 'the best person for the job' is going in because it's out of the paper's control. And it poses real problems if something is missed or needs clarified. You then need to go back to the pool reporter...who needs to go back to the bereaved...and even then you might not get what you need. There is too much to-ing and fro-ing which news desks don't have time for and you are putting the interviewee through unnecessary hassle at a very difficult time.
>
> Any successful death knocks I have done tend to lead to a bond being developed between me and the interviewee. I believe this is absolutely crucial. It makes that person more open because there is trust. From a purely cynical journalistic point of view, they are also more likely to come back to you with future stories. There is no opportunity for that relationship with pooling. It seems very informal - one person in and out, and quite possibly no future contact.
>
> I do appreciate that a string of reporters knocking the door of the bereaved can be upsetting, but I think pooling would lead to so many follow-up questions from news desks across the land, grieving families could end up more distressed as they are bombarded with additional enquiries**.** (Tabloid)

She also ruled out the possibility of using an intermediary and believed a counsellor's training would in fact prevent them from effectively fulfilling a journalistic role.

> I do not believe an intermediary is the solution. Grief counsellors/police liaison officers are understandably trained first and foremost to be on the side

of the grieving - and to protect them from any more hurt. I think this would prevent them from digging too deep and asking the questions a journalist would. I can imagine you would end up getting little more from this than the kind of statement cops release after a fatality, when the family don't want to speak. It tends to be very general – such and such was a loving mum/dad/daughter etc...and will be sorely missed. A reporter would ask more probing questions.about the deceased's past, precious family memories etc. Morbid as it sounds, I remember sitting in the home of a distraught mum whose teenage son had been killed in a car crash hours earlier and very, very delicately asking her what it had been like to see him in the morgue. These are grim questions but they generate the most emotive answers. I don't believe an intermediary would necessarily push that far meaning the really heart-wrenching quotes could be missed. Bottom line - I think every paper wants to do their own death knocking. (Tabloid)

I don't think the intermediary option would work in the British newspaper culture because everyone wants their exclusive story. I mean can you see the Sun news desk agreeing to that – not in a million years. I don't think they are more likely to agree to something like that because of Leveson. I think journalists will shrug off the bad press and they will quite rightly say it was the minority. I have never come across anyone hacking phones. I think it is a London thing. I think the English ethics and the Scottish ethics have always been quite different - it's a different culture. There are some hard-nosed hacks in Scotland – there always have been - but I think they have the Scottish Presbyterian culture whereas there is the wide-boy culture of journalists in sharp suits down in London.

Pooling is slightly different because you are putting a journalist in but again you still have the pursuit of the exclusive. Once pooling was done some newspapers would still be wanting to find an exclusive and so will try and speak to another relative. (Regional)

If everyone signed up to it then it could work but are you going to have that one local agency reporter who is going to be there for the scoop. In principle it sounds like a good idea. Pooling does happen in some occasions and that works fine but will journalists want something different from the others? Certainly it would leave it open for journalists to then approach other members of the family to get something different. Everyone has the same line and then the news editor of a Sunday says to a journalist to go out and get something different, go and speak to the grandparent. (Agency)

Pooling - I certainly don't see the benefit any more of everyone going and trying to get a different line, particularly with the number of outlets that could descend on a family. But I think pooling is happening already, when out on the street and you bump into fellow hacks and you co-operate, generally, because nobody enjoys doing death knocks. Plus you have police already acting as intermediaries and releasing images and quotes from family members. That is a pooling of sorts.

The problem with the police doing this is that it does not meet the test of the independence of the press, and I would have similar concerns for a grief counsellor. What I'd rather see is reporters trained in interviewing children (this is given as standard as part of Children's Panel training) and of speaking to vulnerable witnesses. Most reporters, I think, have a degree of basic humanity that allows them to be good interviewers anyway, but formal training would help I think.

So I guess I'd rather see pooling around reporters who have added training in speaking with vulnerable persons as the best way to "get information" and maintain journalistic independence. Parallel to that, we need to explain the profession more and better so the public understands why we do death knocks and that they already read them - the public laps up stories gained from death knocks, but don't understand their own role as "actors" in the journalistic process. (Freelance)

However the broadsheet respondent did support the idea of pooling and believes it could replace death knocks altogether. He was not convinced the intermediary service would be workable.

> The pooled interview, if quickly organised, will prevent numerous hacks approaching someone's door. In my view, it should be at the forefront of anyone's mind if they are representing or helping a bereaved family where a death is of media interest. It immediately takes the 'heat' out of a story, as all papers instinctively chase the 'big interview' with a family member when a story breaks - and knocking relatives' doors is often the best way of getting it. Put simply, a pooled interview can - and should - remove the need for death knocks.
>
> I'm not convinced by the idea of appointing a trained counsellor to carry out interviews on behalf of the press - they're not journalists and are unlikely to have a sense of what makes a news story - it might work if they were prepared to ask the questions provided to them by the media but it seems easier to have a journalist do the interview - an experienced hack would be sympathetic and able to conduct a sensitive interview.

The interviewees had mixed views in relation to the possible alternatives to both traditional and digital death knocks. While some welcomed both the pooling and intermediary idea they said that unfortunately they didn't see it happening in practice. Newsroom culture and the pursuit of the exclusive line were the reasons given. The broadsheet journalist however thought that pooling could work however he has stated that there is less importance placed on rival newspapers' performances in his newsroom so that is possibly why he believes pooling is a viable option. Interestingly the tabloid journalist spoke of the need for a journalist to interview the bereaved rather than a trained intermediary counsellor because the journalist has the experience to elicit the emotive quotes which is the ultimate goal of the death knock.

# Conclusion

This research set out to ascertain which methods print media journalists in Scotland currently use to report death and in particular it focused on whether or not there was an increased reliance on technology and therefore social media sites when covering stories which require input from the grief-stricken relatives of the deceased. It examined the journalists' own feelings on the process including whether it was in fact a justified practice, how they themselves felt before during and after a 'death knock' and also whether they give much thought to the impact their presence has on the deceased. This information was sought in order to understand why the journalists might adopt one practice – the digital death knock – over the alternative traditional death knock. The research also set out to determine whether the current practices being used were done so as a result of the journalist making a choice for his or her personal benefit or whether circumstance and current newsroom culture had a notable influence on the decision. It also looked at what, if any, impact the Leveson Inquiry had on the death knock practice as earlier research by Duncan and Newton carried out during the inquiry suggested that it may result in journalists relying more on digital death knocks. Finally the research explored whether the journalists thought there were any viable alternatives to the current death knock or digital death knock.

From the research data gathered from interviews with six print journalists it is clear to see that the death knock is considered an essential journalistic practice. All the interviewees were in agreement on this matter however some reported occasions where they had thought an individual death knock had not been justified. Despite this belief they did carry out the death knock. A number of those interviewed had

anecdotal stories of defending the practice to friends, acquaintances and in some instances colleagues. A particular noteworthy point is that one journalist's family had been on the receiving end of a death knock and she still believed it was an essential part of the job and had defended it recently to a friend who had found himself in a similar situation.

The main reason the journalists had for defending the practice was to ensure accuracy. They stressed that by going straight to the person closest to the deceased they will get the true story about the person's life and the circumstances surrounding his or her death. This is interesting because the use of digital death knock could possibly impact on the accuracy of the information as it is very difficult to verify the identity of a person commenting on a social media site and to ascertain whether they actually know the deceased person.

All the respondents said that the death knock was the least pleasant part of their job and recalled the dread they felt at the beginning of their career. Most reported to still feeling negative when faced with prospect of carrying out a death knock and while the notion of becoming desensitised to the process was considered by them all, some agreed they had indeed become hardened to it while others felt that they had become more used to the practice rather than desensitised by it. The emotional toll of carrying out a death knock varied from respondent to respondent and the research suggests that the female respondents suffered worse than the men. This may be more to do with the fact they felt more comfortable discussing their emotions and feelings with the researcher than the male respondents did or perhaps woman have a more natural, instinctive inclination to empathise which is in itself another research topic. Two of the female reporters revealed they do themselves become emotional during the death knock interview with the bereaved but while they acknowledged the need

to remain professional they stressed the importance of remaining human. One of the male respondents reported that his feelings prior to, during and after the death knock were more concerned with getting in the door, getting a great line for a story and writing the story up promptly than with the dread felt at having to do the death knock.

The research explored the use of digital death knocks and was focused on determining whether it was becoming more commonplace, the reasons for this and the ethical implications of taking comments from social media instead of speaking to the bereaved directly. All the interviewees agreed that technology had indeed aided death reporting and that social media in general had impacted hugely on this aspect of the job. It would appear from discussions with all the journalists that the first thing they do is go online when news of a death comes into the newsroom. The internet was certainly seen as a benefit to their job in general and also in terms of death reporting. They largely rejected any suggestion that they use social media as an avoidance tactic for their benefit and stated that it was less time-consuming to go online and access the information than physically leave the office to visit the bereaved. One admitted to using the likes of Facebook and Twitter as a direct alternative to the traditional death knock while another suggested she would always strive to do both. One respondent said they would always try the family first and then if unsuccessful they would use comments from Facebook, while another of the journalists said that his organisation would use Facebook comments if the deadline was tight and then follow it up by going to the family for the next edition.

Therefore while the use varied between the respondents it is clear that all of them rely heavily on technology when reporting death. All of them defended the practice of lifting comments from these social media sites stating that they are in the public

domain. One journalist said he saw no reason why he should not lift quotes and paste them straight into his article because any of his readers could access the same quotes online. Another of the respondents was unique in her defence in that she suggested that perhaps the bereaved chose to put it up online instead of talking to journalists – they still want to pay tribute, they want it to be accurate but they just could not face talking to a journalist at this stage of their grief. They all reported in-house rules in relation to using comments from social media which ranged from cherry-picking appropriate quotes to only using them if they are accessible to the general public. Most did try to make some checks to ensure the person commenting knew the deceased whenever possible but did admit that it was difficult to be sure there was a relationship. Another reported their employer had taken the decision not to use photographs sourced from social media.

When questioned further on the ethics of lifting quotes and faced with the suggestion that there is an argument that the bereaved post without thinking their comments will appear in a paper, the responses were mixed. While some of the journalists did admit to feeling bad about it they ultimately defended their actions. One suggested that if she had gone to the door and been told no by relatives and then the same relatives went online to share their feelings with the world then really she had no ethical problem. A further suggestion that by taking away the relative's right to say no to journalists they are removing control from them and as Frost (2011) states control of information needs to be considered in relation to an individual's privacy. While one respondent admitted that he had never considered the digital death knock from a privacy perspective, after giving it some thought he did say that he believed it was perhaps a step too far and that the best course of action should be the traditional death knock. Another of the respondents admitted that they had sympathy with the argument but at the end of the day she felt under pressure to get

the story. All of the journalists questioned suggested that newsroom culture and pressures on the industry such as understaffing, a requirement now for journalists to multi-task, a lack of resources, tight deadlines and competition with rival publications influenced their use of social media sites.

There was a clear division of opinion when the respondents were asked to consider whether the Leveson Inquiry had impacted on their journalism practice. Interestingly both the tabloid and broadsheet journalist believed the investigation into the culture, practice and ethics of the press had changed the way they did their job. The tabloid journalist stressed that it was not that she was not doing things properly before but that now she had to be able to prove she had done everything properly – she needed a paper trail of proof. The freelance reporter and the weekly journalist dismissed the impact of the report with the former suggesting that it had made no difference to the way journalists operate and the latter suggesting that any change in practice would be a temporary knee-jerk reaction. The agency reporter said it had not really had any effect on the way she worked as a journalist because her organisation had always been careful to operate within the law while the regional reporter branded the inquiry 'a costly waste of time' which had not changed the way he did his job in the slightest. He also raised an interesting point which could be worthy of further exploration in the future. He suggested that the practices which resulted in the Leveson Inquiry were largely employed by journalists down south and were a result of the more 'macho' personality trait he believes is most common amongst Fleet Street types. 'I think when you go to somewhere like Fleet Street (London) the ethical consequences of your actions are way, way down in the pecking order'.

Finally the research explored the viability of alternatives to the traditional and digital death knock. Previous research, which has been detailed in the literature review,

suggested that ‘pooling’ could be an alternative to journalists from several news organisations approaching the grief-stricken Another alternative described as an intermediary approach has also been mooted in the past. Indeed, the researcher who discussed the latter proposal with representatives from news organisations in London in the late 90s reported a positive response from senior officials within the organisation. However this thesis found that there was no support for the intermediary service amongst the practising journalists questioned for this research study. All were in agreement that it would not work because they argued that either a counsellor’s approach would not fulfil the needs of the news desk or that the pursuit of the exclusive line would effectively rule it out as a viable option. The most significant change within newsroom culture since the Castle’s 1999 research study has been the wider use of the internet and in particular the prominence of social media and while none of the respondents identified this as influencing their opinion of the intermediary service perhaps it should be noted that, by their own admission, social media has made the practice of death reporting much easier. The journalists agreed pooling had its place in certain circumstances – for example a Royal Visit – and all but one questioned its use in death reporting. One respondent even suggested the outcome pooling sought to avoid – repeated contact with the bereaved - might actually lead to an increase because the pool reporter might not cover the angle or line required by other papers which would lead to their staff reporters being sent out to contact the relatives.

In conclusion this thesis has found that the current practice of including tributes from the relatives and friends of the deceased is still a daily reality experienced in newsrooms across Scotland. However the process of personally approaching those relatives and friends has changed considerably since the arrival of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Indeed it seems very apparent that social media sites are

viewed as an essential tool when reporting death and that their use is ethically sound because the journalists believe the comments are posted on a site which is a public sphere. While it was clear the death knock is an uncomfortable experience for journalists it became apparent during the interview process the use of social media wasn't necessarily done to avoid direct contact with the bereaved. Instead the respondents largely cited newsroom culture as reason for their reliance on social media. A reduction in staff and budgets coupled with a 24 hour news cycle meant the immediate access to quotes was an attractive option.

The research study also found that the Leveson Inquiry had not left much of an impact on how journalists report death. Even one of the reporters who believed the inquiry had changed her practices said that, if anything, the Leveson Inquiry would make her more likely to approach the grief-stricken which contradicts the earlier research by Duncan and Newton (2012). This study found little to support the previously suggested alternative methods of pooling and intermediary service and that the traditional death knock is arguably the best method when reporting death. However, it must be noted that unless there is further investment by news organisations to increase staffing levels then reliance on and prevalence of the digital death knock is likely to increase which could negatively impact on journalism ethics and the public's perception of print reporters. The research data suggests that the pressure of working in a multi-media 21st Century newsroom leaves little time, if any, for the journalist to contemplate the ethical implications of their actions during every job. Perhaps the findings of this research study will lend weight to calls for investment in the industry particularly at a time when the ethical practices employed by journalists are being scrutinised more than they have been previously.

# Appendices

## Initial Email Contact

A copy of the initial email/social media message sent to the reporters who agreed to be interviewed for this research study.

Hi,

My colleague has suggested you may be willing to help me with my research thesis. I am researching how print journalists in Scotland report death and I am particularly interested in the use of social media and the reasons why journalists use social media. It would involve meeting up for an hour so I can interview you about your experiences of death knocks and the practices you use when reporting death.

It is confidential and you/your organisation wouldn't be named in the thesis - I would simply be quoting an agency reporter.

I am happy to come to you wherever you are or meet elsewhere - although I will need to record the interview so the location would need to be fairly quiet.

**Interview Questions**

1) Tell me about your experiences of death reporting – what did it involve, how did you go about covering it and how did you feel about it?
2) Thinking back to the first time you did a death knock how did you prepare for it, how did you feel afterwards and were you given any guidance?
3) Have you ever considered what impact your presence/questions might have on the bereaved?
4) Do you think your presence always benefits them or can you tell me about an occasion when you were left feeling that you had caused them more grief
5) Why do you think the death knock is a justified practice in journalism
6) Do you think they are always justified or can you think of a circumstance when you have felt it hasn't been justified?
7) What, if any, ethical concerns do you have about carrying out death knocks
8) When you are sitting with a bereaved person asking them questions about their loved on how are you feeling, what thoughts are going through your head?
9) When you leave the person's company what are you thinking about immediately afterwards and how much time do you spend reflecting on what happened?
10) Do you ever discuss what you have done at work with anyone,
11) Can you tell me about an occasion when reporting a death may have traumatized you to an extent?
12) Have you ever been offered any kind of formal support or counselling and if not is that something you would ever consider doing?
13) What is your overall perception of the journalism industry – what issues are affecting journalists?
14) In your experience in what ways do any of these impact on death reporting?

15) Please describe the current newsroom culture – what pressures exist and where do these pressures come from?

16) How does your own desire for career progression impact on how you do your job?

17) Would you or have you ever refused to do a death knock?

18) Have you ever employed a tactic to avoid a death knock – what did you do?

19) Do you think there is a macho culture in journalism and if so can you explain what you mean by macho culture and how does it impact on death reporting?

20) Research has shown that control of information and accuracy of information is the most important thing for bereaved relatives. Is this your experience?

21) Has technology impacted on death reporting

22) In what ways do you think social media has impacted on the life of a journalist?

23) Explain how you have used it when reporting death.

24) Have you ever used it instead of speaking to relatives? If yes, why?

25) What ethical issues do you see with this and do you think it is an invasion of privacy?

26) From your own experience what is the current public perception of journalists?

27) Can you describe what changes you think the Leveson Inquiry has had on journalism practices and on death reporting?

28) Do you think the practice of 'pooling' or the adoption of an intermediary service could be a direct alternative to the death knock?

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