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Good grief: the newspaper obituary in New Zealand

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

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Introduction

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

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

Theoretical framework

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

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

Last century, many larger newspapers employed obituary writers, craftsmen in the art of obituary writing; very few still do, and certainly none in New Zealand. Obituary writing has become the work of general writers. There could be a number of reasons for their demise in New Zealand, including the lack of time to write them and lack of originality. It could be as Mark Helprin suggests in his 1983 novel Winter’s Tale: ‘The obituary writers drew their incomplete sketches, touring through his life like travelers to England who do not ever see swans, sheep, bicycles, and blue eyes’ (265). In 2010, The New Zealand Herald chose to cease its regular Saturday page of
obituaries as the editorial staff ‘found it was inconsistent in quality and with too many foreign sourced obits’ (Murphy 2013).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Method

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

A qualitative content analysis of three issues of The New Zealand Herald over the past 50 years illustrates the change in how death has been covered, focusing on obituaries. It looks at 1963, 2003 and 2013. Over those decades, however, traumatic
events have increasingly become news staples (Cote & Simpson, 2006). Unexpected death during peace time is now less accepted (Walter et al, 2005) and less inevitable, especially among the young, so is therefore considered newsworthy.

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

![Fig. 1 The New Zealand Herald, 19 February 1963: 3](image)

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

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

CARMONT, Pamela Ellen (Pam). Passed away at home, aged 70 years. Dearly loved daughter of the late Elsie and Jim Scott. Loved by all her cousins. A service for Pam
will be held at Grange Manor, 400 Dominion Road, Mt Eden on Friday 15 March at 10am

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

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

Fig. 3 The New Zealand Herald, 16 February 2003: 26
Another, also accompanied by a photograph, is a tribute to Ronald Ziegler, who was President Nixon’s press secretary during Watergate. On the opposite page (26), three short obituaries run down the side of a larger one. They include brief backgrounds on a shipping magnate who had links to Goering during WWII, an inventor and a property magnate. There is another photograph, this time of Marie-Therese Danielsson, a Swedish-born anti-nuclear activist, and her husband. The obituary is supposedly about her but appears to be more about both of them.

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

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

**Importance of news values**

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

Based on these news values *The New Zealand Herald* ‘covers news stories and extended obituaries within the news pages as we become [more] aware of deaths. For more prominent newsmakers, for example Sir Wilson Whineray [a rugby sporting legend], feature-length tributes are published’ (Murphy 2013).
Although head of news Tim Murphy felt the formal obituaries’ page had its merits, he also stated that it was ‘difficult to sustain week-in, week-out’ (2013). Now the newspaper has adopted another approach to news of deaths, based on news values. This approach follows a trend in newspapers to feature life stories, which have come to represent different eras and generations. Kitch contends that public figures are used to explain national character, ‘telling an instructive tale in which the lives of the famous express the values of “everyone”’ (2000: 172).

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

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

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

A new genre

Part of the change to death coverage in newspapers in the twenty-first century is attributable to how death is now perceived: people tend to live longer and death is not so common among young people. Aries, cited in Kitch (2000), explains that as people have become less willing to accept the naturalness and inevitability of death, the rituals of burial and, particularly, the celebration of the deceased, have taken on greater importance (173). Kitch asserts that what has replaced the obituary is another genre, the ‘death knock’ story. This new genre is also a personal narrative which includes expressions of grief following an introduction which mentions the deceased, along with a phrase which either reflects their respectable character or the futility of their death, for example, father-of-three (Duncan 2012: 598). Like the more traditional obituary, the death knock story has become almost formulaic.
Research is sparse on the transformation of a death knock interview into a news story, but the genre has developed its own stylistics and structural elements (Duncan 2012). For example, emotive or eulogistic quotes from close family and friends are a prerequisite for the story. The language of the quotes, contends Duncan, reflects the pain and suffering of the bereaved. Tabloid newspapers are generally understood to use more emotive language (Hanusch 2008). Emotions are critical, especially the emotions of the ‘chief actors’, as reporters ‘actually home in on emotions like flies to a flowing light’ (584).

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

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

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

**Conclusion**

Reporting death is part of the media’s public service role. However, this role is undergoing a transition. For example, rather than traditional pages of obituaries as were common last century, The New Zealand Herald now focuses on celebrating lives lived with extended coverage of legendary and well-known personalities and it gives much more prominence to unexpected deaths and those left behind to grieve. Alternatively, the Dominion Post has opted for recognising the lives of people less well known in its obituaries, but concentrating also on those with a story to tell. Meanwhile The Press and the Otago Daily Times have continued their regular obituary pages, although they tend to include more contributor content and international obituaries.
This transition explains why the death knock story is now as common as obituaries once were. These are considered more newsworthy because of their dramatic content and they are usually personalised for impact. As Duncan explains, the death knock news story provides the audience with an emotional engagement, not just an informative one. ‘Good journalism, like good fiction, connects with its audience’ (2012: 592).

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