News Portrayals of Cyberbullying as the Product of Unstable Teen Technological Culture

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ABSTRACT

Background With the mainstream integration of social media in contemporary teen culture, concerns regarding cyberbullying are gaining international attention.

Analysis This study seeks not to measure but to examine the construction of cyberbullying as a Canadian social problem. The analysis focuses on news frames of four high-profile teen suicides linked to computer-mediated harassment.

Conclusions and Implications The mixed-method content analysis reveals a dominant social problem frame that reifies complex cases into simplified characterizations that misrepresent more common instances of cyberbullying. Mainstream media attention is an effective method for forwarding claims, defining problems, and inspiring legislative change. However, in the Canadian construction of cyberbullying, public discourse emphasizes extreme circumstances atypical of everyday teen culture.

Keywords Cyberbullying; Frame theory; Content analysis; Reification; Suicide

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte Avec l'intégration des médias sociaux dans la culture adolescente contemporaine, les préoccupations concernant la cyberintimidation gagnent l'attention internationale.

Analyse Cette étude ne cherche pas à mesurer, mais d'examiner la construction de la cyberintimidation comme un problème social canadien. Analyse se concentre sur les cadres utilisés dans la media pour comprendre quatre haut-profil suicides d'adolescents liés au harcèlement par ordinateur.

Conclusions and Implications L'analyse de contenu mixte de méthode révèle un cadre de problème social dominant qui réifie les cas complexes avec des charectérisations simplifiées : un processus qui dénaturent les cas les plus courants de la cyberintimidation. Le media attention est une méthode efficace pour transmettre les revendications, la définition des problèmes et des changements législatifs inspirante. Cependant, dans la construction canadienne de la cyberintimidation, le discours public souligne circonstances extrêmes atypiques de la culture des adolescents de tous les jours.

Mots clés Cyberintimidation; Theorie des cadres; Analyse de contenu; Reification; Suicide

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Introduction

Cyberbullying is an emerging social problem that has gained advocacy across the globe and, following the high-profile suicides of Amanda Todd and Rehtaeh Parsons, is currently in the stages of being established as a Canadian social problem. Extant research on cyberbullying focuses primarily on surveys and quantitative approaches aimed at establishing its status as a problem worthy of social consideration. Such research relies heavily on paper, phone, or online surveys completed by adolescents and focuses largely on describing the profile of cyberbullies and victims while distinguishing differences between bullying and cyberbullying. A review of the literature reveals emerging experts and social actors advocating legal changes and educational reform in response to what they portray as both a local and a global concern. Most of this literature comes from psychological, legal, criminological, or educational perspectives.

What the literature lacks is an examination of the construction of cyberbullying as a social problem. While many articles systematically consider high-profile cases or legal precedents, almost none investigate the media treatment of the issue; rather, they tend to view cyberbullying as an existing problem requiring measurement and intervention instead of a problem that is socially constructed. Shaheen Shariff (2009), a Canadian researcher, laments the lack of qualitative studies. She notes that news media clearly frames cyberbullying according to certain patterns but acknowledges a lack of research in this area. Perhaps the only study to specifically address the media framing of cyberbullying was conducted in New Zealand in 2011. Katey Thom, Gareth Edwards, Ivana Nakarada-Kordic, Brian McKenna, Anthony O'Brien, and Raymond Nairn (2011) investigated the media frames of three high-profile suicides attributed to cyberbullying. One other potential exception is a case study by Dawn Zinga (2010) that focuses on international cases and potential legal responses, but which does not specifically apply framing theory. A small section of this article takes a brief look at Zinga's case study and the media treatment of news coverage of Megan Meier's suicide (an American case).

Canadian attention to anti-cyberbullying is moving from provincial to national responses. Even before the vast media attention paid to the deaths of Todd and Parsons, the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights received an assignment to research cyberbullying in November 2011. This assignment was a result of Canada's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Ha, 2014). In December 2012 the committee issued a report titled "Cyberbullying Hurts: Respect for Rights in the Digital Age" (Jaffer & Brazeau, 2012). In June 2013 the Coordinating Committee of Senior Officials Cybercrime Working Group issued a report to the federal, provincial, and territorial ministers responsible for justice and public safety. The report was titled "Cyberbullying and the Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Images" (CCSO, 2013). It focused on looking for gaps in the criminal code. In response to this report and public pressure regarding cyberbullying, legislators proposed Bill C-13, the Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act, in the fall of 2013. This legislation received royal assent in November 2014 and became law in March 2015.

Most cyberbullying research adopts a positivist approach and examines it as an extant problem. While this approach allows for a quantitative analysis, it overlooks the consideration that in order to measure and study this issue, one must first define the

term and the parameters of the study. In essence, each study of cyberbullying examines past use of the term in order to construct its meaning. By examining how others defined the parameters of which behaviours qualify for the term cyberbullying and which do not, each positivist study participates in the construction of its definition, all while treating the phenomena as an existing problem measured and quantified by the study. Such stances rely on an objectivist epistemology. This study takes a constructivist approach to the examination of cyberbullying, which recognizes that an understanding of cyberbullying develops through the shared meaning established through everyday usage. For example, peer aggression delivered through media is not revolutionary. Nevertheless, the application of the term cyberbullying is common enough to easily distinguish it from harassment through passing notes or other older forms of media. The distinction between what is currently considered cyberbullying and what is often termed bullying is socially constructed. The meaning of the term is dynamic and evolves in a manner reflecting common use. While attention to the issue has progressed internationally, this progression has been largely driven by public discourse generated from news coverage of teen deaths. This is certainly the case in Canada.

In order to analyze the construction of cyberbullying, this study conducts a frame analysis of the media coverage of four teen suicides associated with peer computer-mediated harassment. This research focuses on the news coverage of the deaths of Jamie Hubley, Amanda Todd, Rehtaeh Parsons, and Todd Loik. Analysis reveals a dominant frame of cyberbullying as a social problem in public discourse mediated through mainstream media. This dominant frame tends to shift focus from individual accountability to unstable teen technological culture. The oversimplification of complicated cases effectively frames cyberbullying as a social problem, but fails to convey the complexities of each case or the full nature of cyberbullying.

Nature of cyberbullying

A review of 28 studies conducted in 12 countries (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK, and the U.S.; see Appendix) shows that international cyberbullying prevalence varies by country. Despite the variance in statistical findings over the twelve countries involved, there are several trends in the numbers that hold true across each of these studies.

The first common trend in these studies is that cyberbullying is less common than other forms. Some, such as bullying expert Dan Olweus (2012), argue that cyberbullying concerns are overly inflated and that the public focus should remain on conventional bullying. Indeed, all of the 28 studies (see Appendix) that measured cyberbullying against conventional bullying reported conventional bullying showing a higher rate, most reporting it about twice as common as cyberbullying. For example, Qing Li (2007) reports 54 percent of students surveyed in Canadian schools as conventional bullying victims and 25 percent as cyberbullying victims; 32 percent were bullies and 15 percent cyberbullies. These studies agree that there is a clear overlap between conventional bullying and cyberbullying. As Philip Rodkin and Karla Fischer (2012) claim, "Cyberbullying and traditional bullying may be gateways for one another … the existence of one makes the other more likely" (p. 630). Even studies that emphasize the unique nature of cyberbullying tend to acknowledge the likelihood of cyberbullies and

victims to also be involved with conventional bullying in some form or another. Sameet Hinduja and Justin Patchin (2012) acknowledge Olweus's (2012) concerns that bullying remains more prevalent in schools, but contend that cyberbullying still deserves attention in its own right.

Most of the international studies sought to separate respondents into categories such as cyberbullies, cyber victims, and uninvolved. However, seven of the 28 studies also allowed a category for those coded as combined cyberbully/victim. Most research discussing bullying traits or effects acknowledge an overlap between cyberbullies and victims. Rodkin and Fischer (2012) argue that bullying is a relationship. They admonish researchers to resist coding respondents into categories of victim and perpetrator. "This procedure puts bullies and victims into separate boxes and overemphasizes their separateness … Reality is more complicated" (p. 631). Robin Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia Agatston (2008) agree, "Bullying is more accurately understood as a group phenomenon in which children may play a variety of roles" (pp. 32–33). They list a continuum of eight roles participants may take, ranging from the person who initiates the bullying to the one who is bullied, noting overlap and movement between roles. An important lesson here is that both bullying and cyberbullying are phenomena involving complicated social roles among many parties.

Sheri Bauman, Russell B. Toomey, and Jenny L. Walker (2013) see the overlap between victim and bully as evidence that power is less of an issue. "The strong correlation between being victimized by cyberbullying and cyberbullying others indicates that the dynamics of cyberbullying may be different from traditional bullying. Cyberbullying may be more of a reciprocal behavior and less about power differential" (p. 347). A public attitude that the victim deserved harassment due to his or her retaliatory actions as a bully is a potential hurdle for victims' advocates. Scholarly attempts to categorize and quantify this social problem risk reifying complex issues and varied instances into overly simplified catchphrases, yet some simplifications may be necessary for broad public awareness campaigns.

Framing theory

In order to apply a constructionist approach, rather than the more common a priori stance taken in the literature, this article uses framing theory to position its analysis of the news media's treatment of cyberbullying. Framing theory is one of the more mature and fully developed concepts in communication studies. It works well with social problems research because of its emphasis on the style of presentation claims makers adopt. Frame analysis is important because it reveals the subtle beliefs that affect message delivery and prime an audience to endorse the ideology promoted by claims makers of social problems.

Applications of framing theory vary in their definition of the terms "frame" and "framing." However, many researchers rely on Robert Entman's definition.

> Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (1993, p. 52)

Framing is an interpretation and presentation of reality. For Erving Goffman (1974), to frame is to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" (p. 21). Jenny Kitzinger (2007) compares framing to photography. To reconstruct a scene, a photographer makes choices about which details remain in focus, which are out of view, and which are left in the background, as well as how fuzzy those background details look. In this manner, a photographer "frames a particular view" (p. 134). This metaphor supports Stephen Reese's (2010) claim that, "Frames organize and structure, and thus are bigger than topics" (p. 18). In the photography metaphor, an analyst might describe the subject of the photo as the topic while the choices about focus, detail, and the angle of the shot would all be worth exploring as aspects of the frame. As Kitzinger (2007) observes, the mere act of explaining framing theory involves crafting and applying a frame. It is about choices. Frame analysis, then, involves identifying the choices of claims makers as well as the effects of those choices. Entman (2010) describes framing as "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (p. 336). Applying frame theory to the analysis of news text, then, requires a close examination of the assembled narrative. Referring back to Entman's (1993) earlier definition of framing, such analysis would consider how claims makers define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies.

Entman (2010) also suggests that exposure to competing frames does not reduce framing effects but complicates them. Christian Baden and Spohie Lecheler (2012) also note that frames not only "manipulate belief importance" (p. 376) but also convey new information. These findings rest on a psychological or cognitive approach to framing studies. Frames affect thinking most often when respondents have a certain base of knowledge to connect with. This knowledge base is culturally situated. Without an existing set of beliefs, what others might call schemata, frames have no foundation to form lasting impressions. To the other extreme, when frames characterize an issue people already know much about or about which they have deep set opinions, a new frame is not necessary and so has little enduring effect.

Many scholars have noted the importance of culture when considering frame resonance. Reese (2010) claims that frames are embedded in a web of culture—a "historically rooted but dynamic cultural context" (p. 18). Porismita Borah (2001) notes that, "Individuals use a set of available beliefs stored in memory" (p. 252; see also Chong & Druckman, 2007) and suggests that, similar to Baden and Lecheler (2012), ambivalence is key. Michael Brüggemann (2014), also recognizes that, "the individual is always nested within different contexts" and that frames grow out of culture, which "manifests itself at the individual, organizational, and social level" (p. 67). He claims that journalists draw from a frame repository in order to craft their stories.

The presence of frames in news writing does not necessarily suggest bias. One of the foundational tenets in journalistic writing is objectivism. Another is balance. Reporters write with the intention of fairly representing all sides of an issue. They also aim to remove any evidence of their own opinion in their writing. Instead, a journalist relies on the quotes of his or her sources in order to express any opinion or value statement present in his or her writing. A news article may contain all these elements and

still convey certain frames. That is due to the essential nature of frames. "Even the most 'objective' or 'neutral' journalism will inevitably contribute to the social construction of reality" (Brüggemann, 2014, p. 65). Journalists must make decisions about which facts are more relevant and which sources are more valid.

Methodology

The data set for this study was prepared using a gender balance of cases. News coverage of two male and two female Canadian teens whose suicides were associated with computer-mediated harassment was selected. Using Factiva, a keyword search was run applying both the first and last name of the victim to a date range framed between the date the teen died and the date when government officials announced proposed legislation or policy changes as a result of the suicide. The search was limited to Canadian publications.

Jamie Hubley, a 15-year-old from Ontario, died on October 15, 2011. On November 30, 2011, officials announced the Ottawa Accepting Schools Act. This date range produced 154 unique articles, once duplications were eliminated from the set. Amanda Todd, a 15-year-old from British Columbia, died on October 10, 2012. Just five days later, on October 15, 2012, officials announced a House of Commons motion to study cyberbullying. While the motion was already in process, media coverage following her death purportedly caused an earlier release for this motion. Five days of news coverage for Amanda Todd produced 192 unique articles. Rehtaeh Parsons, a 17-year-old from Nova Scotia, died on April 7, 2013. A few weeks later on April 25, 2013, officials announced the Nova Scotia Cyber Safety Act. This date range produced a set of 407 unique news articles. Finally, Todd Loik, a 15-year-old from Saskatchewan, died on September 9, 2013. Though Loik's province already had cyberbullying legislation in place following the trend of past deaths, officials announced the Saskatchewan Anti-Bullying Action Plan on November 14, 2013. This date range produced a data set of 48 unique articles once duplicates were eliminated (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Chart depicting the quantity of articles as well as the duration of time between Death of the victim and announced policy change for the full 801 article set

The analysis process began with a quantitative content analysis of a data set of 815 articles from the Factiva keyword search. These articles were saved as separate documents and given a name using the teen's last name followed by the newspaper name and the date of publication. If more than one article appeared per publisher on a given date, a number after the title of the newspaper was added. It should be noted that while most of this data set focused on newspaper publications, the Factiva search also returned a handful of radio announcements and printed CTV interviews.

These articles were uploaded to the mixed method research tool Dedoose. Each article was coded with the following identifiers: date of publication, victim of focus, genre, publication title, and gender of victim of focus. During this initial process of coding, the data set was reduced to 801 articles due to duplications. For example, newspapers in two cities, both of which are affiliated with Postmedia, sometimes published identical articles with slightly different titles. In this case, Factiva did not recognize the duplication but the coded identifiers revealed it.

Next, mixed method qualitative content analysis and quantitative content analysis were conducted on a reduced portion of the data set. In order to code the data, it was necessary to bring the data sample for each victim to a more evenly distributed set. In order to not skew the results with a disproportionate sample, steps were taken to evenly represent the news coverage over time and publications and across subjects. This prevented a simple analysis of exactly 50 articles each. Given that the smallest sample, the Loik articles, initially had 50 articles (before further duplications were identified), the aim was to select at least 50 results for each victim. Using what Davis Deacon, Michael Pickering, Peter Golding, and Graham Murdoch (1999) call the systematic sampling method and Richard W. Budd, Robert K. Thorp, and Lewis Donohew (1967) call the interval method, the articles were selected in each set following a chronological order. The Hubley set began with 154 articles, so in practice, one article was coded and the next two were skipped as they were arranged in Dedoose (according to the title assigned according to last name, publication title, and date). A total of 51 Hubley articles were coded. There were 192 Amanda Todd articles, but coding one in four of them produced less than 50, so one in three articles from her set were coded. This produced 64 articles. The Parsons set included 407 articles, so one in seven of that set were coded, which created 58 qualitative content analysis coded documents. Finally, the Loik set produced only 48 unique articles, so each one was coded.

The qualitative content analysis of the reduced data set involved interpreting the content of each article for both latent and manifest meaning. As Yan Zhang and Barbara M. Wildemuth (2009) recommend, the unit of analysis was defined as a theme. In application, this varied from a single word, such as "depression" or "suicide," as examples of the category of effects to the several sentences it might take for a claimant to blame the death of the victim on cyberbullying. During the analysis, these units are referred to as excerpts. Once each excerpt was coded, Dedoose and Excel were used to quantitatively examine the qualitatively produced results.

Headlines and photo captions were coded as well as the primary text. Analysis included eight categories. The categories for analysis began with Entman's (1993) definition of what frames do: definition, cause, moral judgment, and remedy. Four other

categories—effect, blame, establishing a pattern, and defensiveness—were applied to the analysis. This created a total of 4,249 excerpts with 18,251 codes attached. Each excerpt, even if it overlapped with other excerpts, was assigned one category, one claimant tag, one specific or general tag, and as many primary and secondary descriptors as necessary to convey the full manifest and latent meaning of the excerpt.

Reification of the teenage victim

The dominant frame present in the public discourse of Canadian mass media frames cyberbullying as a social problem. This frame reifies complex cases involving diverse individuals in order to establish a pattern and suggest a solution. The concept of reification is often associated with Karl Marx, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and the Frankfurt School of thought (Honneth, 2007). Axel Honneth (2007) credits Georg Lukács for coining the key concept of it as taking an abstract concept and making it into something concrete or embodied. In this sense, the abstract concept of cyberbullying is reified by the concrete details of the lived experiences embodied in these teens. However, Honneth (2007) discusses reification in another sense as well. "It signifies a type of human behavior that violates moral or ethical principles by not treating other subjects in accordance with their characteristics as human beings, but instead as numb and lifeless objects — as 'things' or 'commodities'" (p. 19). News portrayals of these suicides systematically overlooks the complicated details of each case and reduces their portrayals to characters representative of a cause. Lukács, according to Honneth (2007), thought journalism was the "apogee" (p. 19) of social reification. He saw reification as "a relation between people" that had "taken on the character of a thing" (p. 21). It is essentially objectifying something human. For Honneth (2007), the alternative is "empathetic and existential engagement" (p. 29). Ultimately, Honneth sees reification as "forgetfulness of recognition" (p. 57). While abundant news coverage of a teen's death might not, at first, seem to be an instance of forgetting to recognize that teen, the manner in which the teens are portrayed illustrates a character, the cyberbullying victim, rather than an actual human recognized for all the complexities of full personhood.

Although media coverage of the death of each of these teens leads to proposed policy change, coverage varies significantly with each victim. Only one-fourth of the articles in this data set are for the two male victims. Fully half of the articles focus on Parsons. After Hubley's suicide, it took 45 days for Ottawa to announce the Accepting Schools Act. During this time, an average of 3.42 articles about his death were published per day. The five days between Todd's death and the House of Commons motion to study cyberbullying averaged 38.4 articles per day. For Parsons, the 18 days between her death and the announced Nova Scotia Cyber Safety Act produced an average of 22.61 articles per day. Finally, the 48 days between Loik's death and the announcement of Saskatchewan's Anti-bullying Action Plan had only an average of one article per day. Media gatekeepers opted to focus more on female victims than on males. This is unsurprising given that heteronormative gender stereotypes are more likely to portray female teens as sympathetic victims than gay or straight male teens.

The press coverage of each teen suicide begins with a description of complicated, individual issues and develops into simplified characterizations of a victim who died because of cyberbullying. Dominant public discourse frames new legislation restricting

non-consensual distribution of intimate images as the solution to the cyberbullying problem. While this legislative response to the dominant frame may genuinely protect potential victims, media coverage also reflects a minority voice arguing that these teens and the circumstances leading to their suicides are more complicated. Nevertheless, acknowledging the minority voice calling for the recognition of individual circumstances does not support the creation of a unified social problem. Media gatekeepers and politicians each benefit from treatment of cyberbullying as a valence issue. The less covered and competing frame in Canadian news coverage, however, argues that these teens are real people living complex lives with deep suffering preceding their deaths and that they do not deserve to be martyrs for a cause.

Jamie Hubley: October 15, 2011–November 30, 2011

The first articles published on Hubley's death refer to him as a "15-year-old" and the "son of Kanata South Councillor Allan Hubley." The brief articles indicate that he "died suddenly" ("15-year-old son," 2011); however, no mention is made regarding suicide, bullying, cyberbullying, or Hubley's sexual orientation. Initially, Hubley's death made the news because of his father's high profile as a politician. The teen kept a Tumblr blog, which allowed reporters to research several personal details they used to infer a cause for Hubley's death. Once his struggles with intolerance were quoted, Hubley went from being a 15-year-old to being an "openly gay teenager" (Ahearn, 2011).

Not only was the word "gay" attached to his name in nearly every article, but the topic of homophobia dominated the discourse. Although reporters invoked the term cyberbullying while discussing the harassment Hubley faced, it was done more as a way to demonstrate the inescapable nature of that harassment. One reporter, for example, noted that "cyberbullying has created a new problem. There is no longer any refuge" from hate based on sexual orientation; Hubley "knew that his tormentors were reading his blog" (Mallick, 2011) . Unless an article refers to Hubley's blog, most of the news coverage refers to his harassment as bullying rather than cyberbullying. Though the term cyberbullying appears, it is not emphasized.

The consequences of not reforming are portrayed as dire. Even though the first few Hubley articles mention his death without a specific cause attached, 107 effects excerpts mention suicide, while only 38 mention his death without indicating self-harm. This leaves Jamie Hubley reified as a "gay teenager said to have taken his own life in part because of bullying" ("Bullying-Suicide," 2011). It was "bullying that pushed [this] gay teen to take his life" ("Schools no place," 2011). This characterization apparently contrasts with how his family perceived his life and his death. "He was not, as one headline suggested, a 'Canadian gay teen driven to suicide by bullying,'" one article counters (Chianello, 2011). "Sadly, four youths under the age of 19 are 'known' to commit suicide every week in Canada, according to 2007 statistics. Surely many of them had blogs and Facebook accounts, yet their stories don't become major media events. Jamie's did for two reasons: his father is a public figure and Jamie was bullied" (Chianello, 2011). The article continues with an appeal from Hubley's parents. "But now that the glare of the media attention has dimmed, what the Hubleys want people to know about their son James is that he was a real person whose complex life shouldn't be hijacked for a cause, no matter how worthy" (Chianello, 2011).

With a few mentions of cyberbullying, the Hubley articles frame homophobic bullying as a problem requiring public attention and social reform. According to his family, Hubley did, in fact, face homophobic harassment. However, he struggled with depression they do not portray as caused by either his sexuality or the harassment he faced. They also claim dissatisfaction with the oversimplification of his experiences as portrayed in the press.

Amanda Todd: October 10, 2012–October 15, 2012

Amanda Todd did not become a high-profile case because of a well-known parent as Hubley did. Three weeks prior to her death, Todd posted a video on YouTube chronicling years of persistent threats and harassment from an unknown internet predator. She also detailed how that harassment spilled over to her lived experiences at school and in her community. The aesthetics of this video are noteworthy. Todd does not sit before the camera complaining about what she has suffered. She positioned the camera in such a way that her face is not the focus of the camera. She looks down and does not engage eye contact with the viewers. Instead, she stands before the camera holding pages of ordinary paper on which she has handwritten her story. She holds up these papers, one at a time, for a nine-minute explanation of how trapped she feels as a result of cascading harassment stemming from a moment years before when she agreed to lift her shirt for someone communicating with her over a webcam. Todd's YouTube video went viral, receiving well over a million views worldwide within two days of her death. No one issued a press release following her death. Her silent video generated enough international social media attention for mainstream media gatekeepers to address her story.

With an emphasis on social harassment, print media reifies Amanda Todd as a victim who spoke out through social media but died because of bullying. "A 15-Year-Old Vancouver Area Girl Killed Herself After Posting a YouTube Video Where She Told Her Story of Being Bullied" (Mui, 2012). The blame is placed on bullying. She is the "Port Coquitlam, B.C. teen who took her own life Wednesday following years of torment from bullies" (Orton, 2012). The online nature of her harassment is not lost in this reification. "Todd, 15, was found dead in a Port Coquitlam home last Wednesday—five weeks after posting a YouTube video outlining the abuse she endured both online and in person" (Stechyson, 2012).

Rehtaeh Parsons: April 7, 2013–April 25, 2013

News coverage for Rehtaeh Parsons' death focuses on cyberbullying stemming from sexual assault. Though most teen acquaintance rape and suicide cases are not considered newsworthy, Parsons died just months after Todd while cyberbullying was still a topic of public discourse. Parsons' parents also utilized social media sites, such as Facebook, to lash out at the justice and education system for what they called an inadequate response to her rape case. The tenor of these articles is not characterized by the sorrow and sympathy common in Todd's coverage. Rather, the tone reflects the two most common categories of excerpts found in this data set: blame and defensiveness.

Across all four cases, seventy percent of the excerpts assigning blame for the death of the teen describe bullying or cyberbullying as the cause of the death. As with the other teens, blame in Parsons' case is most commonly placed on bullying or cyberbul-

lying; however, unlike the other teens, news coverage also conveys blame for her death on the sexual assault as well as the inaction of others. Statements made in the neutral reporter voice stating that she "killed herself after an alleged rape and months of cyberbullying" (Lea, 2013) link her death to both cyberbullying and rape, leaving the choice of blame to the reader.

Blame, in this data set, moves from inaction and rape to cyberbullying as the story develops. In the earliest stories, quotes from Parsons' parents blame the RCMP and school officials. Take, for example, one article just two days after her death: "A grieving mother's questions about the handling of her daughter's allegations of sexual assault, an incident the girl's mother says led to the teenager's suicide" ("Death of Nova Scotia Teen," 2013). Several articles quote the parents as claiming that their daughter was "disappointed to death" and that "the justice system failed us completely" ("System failed," 2013). They questioned, "How is it possible for someone to leave a digital trail like that yet the RCMP don't have evidence of a crime? What were they looking for if photos and bragging weren't enough?" (Quan, 2013).

By April 11, Glenn Canning and Leah Parsons, Rehtaeh's parents, met "with Nova Scotia Justice Minister Ross Landry after he announced Tuesday night that his department was looking for ways to review how the RCMP handled the allegations" and "Landry initially ruled out the possibility of a review, but he said Wednesday that his change in position was driven by the public outcry over the case" ("System failed," 2013). Later, "Nova Scotia Premier Darrell Dexter and Rehtaeh's mother Leah Parsons met with Stephen Harper, and her father, to discuss legislation which might prevent a recurrence" (Martin, 2013). Following these meetings, all new quotes from Parsons' parents blame cyberbullying and rape rather than inaction for their daughter's death. "The family of the 17-year-old Nova Scotia girl says she committed suicide after a photo of her being sexually assaulted was circulated" ("Crime-Victims-Week," 2013).

Seeking to avoid libel, journalists are careful to never accuse an individual of a crime of which he or she has not been convicted. Even though Parsons' parents claim four male teens were present and participated in their daughter's rape, even when citing the parents as a source, reporters are careful to call the incident an alleged sexual assault rather than a rape. They also do not identify the accused underage perpetrators. This tends to shift focus from teens who committed violent acts to the "photo of the alleged incident [that] was distributed" ("Nova Scotia Mounties Reopen," 2013). A secondary effect of this passive construction and others like it, "a picture of the alleged assault was passed around" (Visser, 2013), is that without identifiable perpetrators, blame naturally shifts from individuals to the medium they use in their harassment. Since it is an uncommon journalistic practice to identify male teens as rapists and high school students as internet predators, by process of default, emphasis shifts to the circulated photo and reporters inadvertently take a technologically deterministic stance, blaming technology rather than teens for the suffering of the victim.

By the second half of the news coverage in this data set, Parsons is reified to a girl who died because of the circulation of a photo of her rape. It was the "death of a Nova Scotia teenager, allegedly driven to suicide by sexual assault and cyberbullying" ("NS-Bullying-Suicide," 2013). "The family of the 17-year-old Nova Scotia girl says she com-

mitted suicide after a photo of her being sexually assaulted was circulated" ("Crime-Victims-Week," 2013). The Parsons news coverage refers frequently to the death of Amanda Todd and seeks to establish a pattern of cyberbullying, one that heavily defines it as the non-consensual distribution of intimate images (77 definition excerpts with circulating humiliating photos descriptors). Nevertheless, the public discourse does not escape the style of debate common with rape accusations. Even with overwhelming public anger and calls for action, those closest to the alleged perpetrators seek to defend them and lash out at Parsons. What some might call "slut shaming" appears on memorial Facebook pages in Parsons' honor, and RCMP officials, while agreeing to re-open the case and investigate further, are reluctant to charge male teens involved in an incident in which the female came to the party willingly and chose to consume alcohol. The Nova Scotia Cyber Safety Act focuses on preventing cyberbullying, and news coverage reifies her death as one caused by cyberbullying which, in turn, was caused by the circulation of a photo of her sexual assault. Despite the cyberbullying focus, claims makers in her case underlie the injustice of rape more than online harassment.

Todd Loik: September 9, 2011–November 14, 2013

"After another tragic death of a bullied teen" (Mahoney, Sept. 2013), Todd Loik's death is simplified to one more instance in a pattern of suicides caused by cyberbullying. His death does not make the news due to a famous parent or a viral video. He does not garner the attention of famous advocates because he suffered homophobic harassment, as Jamie Hubley did. Nor is he portrayed as the vulnerable victim of an unseen perpetrator as Amanda Todd was. Though his parents reached out to the media in a similar manner to Leah Parsons, Loik does not appear in newspapers due to a surge in attention from social media. His harassment remains somewhat undefined and vague, usually characterized simply as cyberbullying with descriptions coming almost solely from his mother.

As the most recent case, it is unsurprising that excerpts establishing a pattern appear most commonly in Loik articles. Despite the fact that news coverage in Loik's death provides greater opportunity to connect with past deaths of a similar nature, it is unlikely that media gatekeepers would have published details on Loik's death without the affiliation with cyberbullying and the pattern emerging through media channels. Even earlier articles in the Hubley and the Todd set contain many excerpts establishing a pattern of cyberbullying. Looking at the entire data set, most pattern excerpts are generic claims that a pattern exists (73 excerpts). Connections to a specific person are most commonly tied to Amanda Todd (51), followed by connection to a specific case but not one examined in this study (44). Some excerpts connect to Rehtaeh Parsons (38) and some to Jamie Hubley (11), with only eight specifically referencing Todd Loik. Of course, if another suicide tied to cyberbullying receives news coverage following Loik's death, this number might be higher. However, given the low profile of his case, it is unlikely.

Details in Loik articles focus heavily on cyberbullying in general and on past cases. "Todd Loik, 15, killed himself earlier this month in North Battleford, Sask., after facing a torrent of cyber-bullying" (*Globe and Mail,* September 27, 2013). His story is almost

lost to the pattern of "Recent tragic deaths, including those of Amanda Todd, Rehtaeh Parsons, and Todd Loik" (*Postmedia,* October 16, 2013). Loik's mother characterizes the harassment he endured as relentless online bullying through social media, but she also referred to bullying in general. "Todd Loik, 15, committed suicide because students hounded him with 'nasty' messages, mother says" (*Postmedia,* October 15, 2013). Readers are never provided with the graphic details that spur such outrage over the victimization of Todd and Parsons. In fact, though the Loik articles contain the second-highest percentage of definition excerpts (26.6 %), most of the definition excerpts refer specifically to other cases. There are 21 excerpts describing the circulation of humiliating photos even though no such actions are claimed to have happened in his harassment.

The details of Todd Loik's harassment, his life, his interests, are lost in the reification of him as a small part in a larger pattern. "Loik, 15, was found dead Sept. 9 after he was reportedly taunted repeatedly on Facebook and through texts. His tragic story follows similar experiences by other Canadian teens" (QMI Agency, 2013). "His was just the latest in a series of deaths that have been blamed on cyberbullying" (Wente, 2013). According to this mediated construction, he is simply the latest victim of something the public has come to expect: cyberbullying leads to teen suicide.

Discussion

The literature shows that marginalized groups are more likely to be cyberbullied (Rodkin & Fischer, 2012; Shariff, 2009). In the four cases examined here, this was most emphasized with Jamie Hubley. His cyberbullying was generally attributed to his sexual orientation. The cyberbullying of Rehtaeh Parsons was also somewhat associated with "slut shaming," typical of rape discourse; however, this characterization was more common from the discourse of members of the general public rather than reporters. Amanda Todd was generally portrayed as a complete victim. Though she willingly lifted her shirt to provide the image used to harass her, no public discourse vilifies this choice or portrays her as an otherwise marginalized teen. By openly admitting and owning her mistake through her online video confession, Todd gains complete public support. She becomes the beautiful teen who made a grave mistake and is not conveyed as a member of a typically marginalized group. Todd Loik, a white male whose sexual orientation is not openly identified or discussed in public discourse, is also not portrayed as someone others would expect to be harassed. However, he also receives the least news coverage. Vulnerable groups make better victims for a cause.

Sympathetic victims and simplified patterns are effective for spurring legislative responses to issues on the public agenda, especially when they are framed as a valence social problem. The power of enduring words from victims' social media accounts, YouTube videos, and the sympathetic figures of their parents as advocates for the cause demonstrate what Joel Best (2013) claimed about the power victims have to own and define social problems. In mass media, that ownership is framed in a way to create a story worth publishing. While victims make only six percent of the claims in this data set and their family members make 13 percent, reporters make 44 percent of the claims. This is interesting given that two-thirds of the excerpts coded refer specifically to a victim and not cyberbullying as a general issue. Though victims may have the power to

own social problems, in print news, it is the writers who frame their story. This often involves simplification in order to resonate with what slowly becomes a familiar pattern leading to political response. However, quick-fix legislation reflecting this valence social problem frame of cyberbullying will likely not change much in the daily lived experiences of the one-third of teens who regularly face cyberbullying in its varied forms (Sabella, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2013; see also Li, 2007; Swearer, 2012).

The teens in the news are portrayed as clear victims of an injustice. Rodkin and Fischer (2012), however, contest the clear lines between victims and perpetrators. Kowalski et al. (2008) see cyberbullying as a group phenomenon. The cyberbullying that concerns school officials is more indicative of a group dynamic of peer conflict than what Hubley, Todd, or Parsons faced. The cyberbullying Loik experienced is likely more reflective of the instances measured by cyberbullying studies. However, the details of his case are largely ignored in media portrayals of his harassment. Of the four teens in this study, he is also the only one whose parents did not testify in federal Bill C-13 hearings.

Dominant frame

Framing studies from the field of psychology demonstrate that a medium knowledge base creates the most enduring frame effects. In the time frame of this data set, the Canadian general public advanced from occasionally hearing the term cyberbullying to the concept being established as a social problem addressed through local, provincial, and federal legislation. The dominant frames presented in this data set primed the general public to see cyberbullying as an important social problem on the public agenda.

The dominant frame relies first on individual schemata, such as the notions of tragedy and suicide. These schemata build to primary social frameworks, such as the notion of teens being reckless in general and needing protection through adult figures and legal guidelines. The primary framework of technology being an out of control and threatening entity is also necessary to the dominant frame. Because any given frame has alternatives, it is worth examining dominant frames, which often gain momentum due to cultural resonance (Van Gorp, 2007). Similar to stock images, cultural stock frames recur within a given society and are easily activated. Cognitive perceptions of uncontrollable technology create the cultural stock frames that since technology is dangerous, since teens need protection, and since cyberbullying leads to suicide, which is a tragedy, then cyberbullying is a new social problem. Since old laws struggle to keep up with advancements in technology, and since technology is to blame for these deaths, the solution is an increase in public awareness followed by new legislation to restrict the use of dangerous new media. The consequence of inaction is portrayed as further teen deaths. Without schemata and cultural stock frames that resonate with the Canadian public, hard news stories conveying the deaths of these teens would not have generated follow-up feature news pieces or editorial stories. Without the sympathetic victims and a sense of guilt and responsibility for these teens on the part of the general public, the cyberbullying social problem frame would have been swallowed up in the temporary memory of yesterday's news.

This dominant frame of cyberbullying as a social problem treats it as a valence issue in this data set. It is portrayed in such a tragic tone that no claims makers could

ethically advocate for cyberbullying. Later news articles, beyond this data set, focusing on the federal legislative response seek to represent cyberbullying as a position issue in which the protection of vulnerable youth conflicts with internet privacy rights. Position issues are recognized social problems with deeply imbedded polarized positions in the general public. This movement seeks to establish safe ground for a counter argument against cyberbullying legislation. However, by the time these news articles seeking to make cyberbullying a position issue reach the forum of public discourse, the more resonating frame of cyberbullying as a valence social problem endures. This is because cyberbullying has been overwhelmingly present in the social problems market place (Best, 2013), particularly following Todd's and Parsons' deaths. The frames presented in their news coverage set the tone for public perception on this issue.

The first trend common in cyberbullying literature is that it is less common than other forms of harassment. Some, such as bullying expert Olweus (2012), argue that cyberbullying concerns are overly inflated and that public focus should remain on conventional bullying. Indeed, all of the 28 studies (see Appendix) that measured cyberbullying against conventional bullying reported a prevalence for conventional bullying showing a higher rate, most reporting it as about twice as common as cyberbullying. These studies agree that there is a clear overlap between conventional bullying and cyberbullying. As Rodkin and Fischer (2012) claim, "Cyberbullying and traditional bullying may be gateways for one another . . . the existence of one makes the other more likely" (p. 630).

The pattern presented in these cases represents only the most extreme circumstances. In opinion articles, general public claims makers comment on the circumstances of these teens by relating to something they experienced. However, each correlation reveals a far less extreme circumstance of harassment. The four deaths in this case study also involve more complexity than just cyberbullying. Conditions of peer-on-peer physical aggression, depression, rape, international sexual extortion, and homophobia all contribute to the despair each teen faced before choosing suicide. While some of these details appear in the news coverage of their deaths, the details are often swallowed in the larger narrative of cyberbullying as the centre of discourse. Their lives are reified to create a clearer and more consistent frame of cyberbullying as a social problem, despite the fact that this frame is likely inconsistent with the more common forms of electronic-mediated harassment youths experience on a daily basis.

Public discourse on cyberbullying tends to shift focus from the fingertips of the youths involved in harassment and, in the cases that make the news, more criminal actions to a focus on unstable teen technological culture. A more measured response to what is framed as the social problem of cyberbullying might include less restriction on teen technology use and more education of respectful and civil behaviour. This should be expected of teens and adults alike. For the more extreme cases that make headlines, the preventative measure of enforcing existing laws against sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, exploitation of a minor, extortion, as well as physical and verbal harassment should be emphasized. It is important that public discourse not condone bullying or cyberbullying as a normal part of maturing and as something

all individuals must endure in teen culture. This begins by emphasizing an expectation of a culture of respect, both in the classroom and in peer communication.

There are several problems attempting to distinguish cyberbullying from what many call "traditional" bullying. First, there should never be a form of harassment that is described as traditional. Second, research indicates a great deal of overlap between in-person peer harassment and electronically mediated harassment. Being unkind should not be criminalized. However, the cases in the news largely portray criminal activities, and they should be prosecuted. It should not take the death of a vulnerable teen and international attention to lay charges and fully investigate claims of victimization.

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Appendix 1

Cyberbullying prevalence by country

Study	Year	Country	Study type	# of participants	Ages/Grades	% Cyberbully victims	% Cyberbully perpetrators	% Both victim and perpetrator
Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift	2009	Australia	Survey	3,112	9-19	4.5% (cybervictims only) 4.5% (cyber and bullying victims both)		1.5% (both cyberbully and cybervictim) 5.4% (bully and victim on online and in-person bullying)
Walrave & Heirman, using TIRO study	2008	Belgium	Survey	1,318	12-18	34.2%	21.2%	
Quing	2005	Canada	Survey	177	Grade 7	24.9%	15%	
Quing	2006	Canada	Survey	264	Grades 7-9	25%	17%	
Pettalia, Levin, & Dickinson	2013	Canada	Survey with described scenarios	260	12-15	17.3%	5%	44.6%
Schultze-Krumbholz, Jakel, Schultze, & Scheithauer	2011	Germany	2 Surveys, 3 months apart	412, 1st survey 267 (both surveys)	Grades 7-9	7%	5.3%	4.4%
Festl & Quandt	2013	Germany	Survey	408	12-19	4.9%	10.8%	6.4%
Olenik-Shmesh, Heiman,	&	Eden	2010	Israel	Survey	242	13-16	16.5%
Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink	2006	Netherlands	Survey	1,211	Grades 6-7? (final-year primary school and first-year secondary school)	23% (during present school year; past 6 months)	16%	

Study	Year	Country	Study type	# of participants	Ages/Grades	% Cyberbully victims	% Cyberbully perpetrators	% Both victim and perpetrator
Pyzalski	2010	Poland	Survey listing behaviors	2,143	15		25%	
Estevez, Villardon, Calvete, Padilla, & Orue	2010	Spain	Survey	1,431	13-17	30.1%	25.8% (males) 16.4% (females)	22.8%
Sticca, Ruggieri, Alsaker, & Perren	2013	Switzerland	Two surveys, 6 months apart	835	Grade 7	22% (in past four months)	14% then 13%	
Erdur-Baker	2010	Turkey	Survey relying on Olweus's Bullying Questionnaire	276	14-18	32% (victims of both bullying and cyber-bullying)	26% (Bullied in both cyber and physical environ-ment)	
Mobile Bullying Survey	2005	UK	Survey	770	11-19	20% (ever)	11% (ever)	
Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett	2006	UK	Survey	92	11-16	22% (in last two months)		
iSAFE America	2004	USA	Survey	1,566	Grades 4-8	42% (ever, with 7%	frequently)	
Patchin & Hinduja	2004	USA	Survey linked to popular mu-sician's web-site	571		30%		
YISS-1	2004	USA	Phone Survey	1,501	10-17	4% (ever)	12% (ever)	
Harris Interactive	2006	USA	Phone Poll	824	13-17	43% (in past year)		

Appendix 1 (continued)

Study	Year	Country	Study type	# of participants	Ages/Grades	% Cyberbully victims	% Cyberbully perpetrators	% Both victim and perpetrator
Pre-Teen Caravan	2006	USA	Phone Survey	503	6-11 (years)	17% (in past year with 4% saying	more than 5 times)	
Pre-Teen Caravan	2006	USA	Phone Survey	512	12-17	36% (in past year with 6% saying	more than 5 times)	
YISS-2	2006	USA	Phone Survey	1,500	10-17	9% (ever)		
Growing Up with Media	2007	USA	Survey	1,500	10-15	35% (with 8% targeted monthly or more)		
Kowalski & Limber	2007	USA	Survey relying on Olweus's Bullying Questionnaire	3,767	Grades 6-8	18% (in past two months)	11% (in past two months)	7% (in past two months)
Pew American Life	2007	USA	Survey	935	Teens	38% (of girls who use internet often) and 26% (of males who frequent the internet)	32% (of those who use the internet often)	
Raskauskas & Stolz	2007	USA	Survey	84	13-18	48%	21%	
Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell	2007	USA	Survey	1,588	10-15	34% (in past year)	21%	14.3%
Hinduja & Patchin	2010	USA	Survey with definition of cyberbullying	4,400	11-18	20%		