A History of Suicide Reporting in Canadian Newspapers, 1844–1990

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ABSTRACT  This article explores Canadian reporting on suicide and the ways it changed over 150 years. Archival research on the reporting practices of two long-standing newspapers presented here shows that suicide was not always taboo in the media. In fact, the silencing and tiptoeing around reporting on suicide only began in the mid-twentieth century. Early newspaper accounts frequently included reports on suicides, both local and far removed, including details on the exact manner of death. As public perceptions of suicide, and the laws surrounding it, gradually shifted from considering the act a crime to considering it an aspect of psychiatric malady, reporting on suicide changed. Once suicide became an untouchable subject in newsrooms the stigma became entrenched, making it hard to address in any meaningful way for decades.

KEYWORDS  Communication history; Print culture/Journalism; Newspapers

RÉSUMÉ  Cet article explore les reportages canadiens sur le suicide et la manière dont ils ont changé depuis 150 ans. Une recherche dans les archives sur les pratiques de deux journaux longuement établis montre que le suicide n'a pas toujours été tabou dans les médias. En effet, la circonspection et le silence entourant le suicide aujourd'hui ne remontent qu'au milieu du vingtième siècle. Les reportages antérieurs mentionnaient souvent les suicides, tant locaux qu'étrangers, et donnaient des précisions sur comment la personne est morte. Les reportages cependant ont subi l'influence de changements dans la perception du public et la loi envers le suicide. Dans le passé, on considérait que cet acte était un crime; par la suite, on l'a envisagé comme le symptôme d'un trouble psychiatrique. Dès lors que le suicide est devenu un sujet intouchable dans les salles de rédaction, le silence sur le sujet s'est installé, de sorte qu'il est devenu difficile de soulever la question de manière significative depuis plusieurs décennies.

MOTS CLÉS  Histoire de la communication; Culture de l'imprimé/journalisme; Journaux

Introduction
In recent years there has been increasing discussion about coverage of suicide in mainstream news media as issues of mental health move from the private to the public sphere. Media ethicist Nick Russell (2006) says there was a newsroom rule of “No suicides. Except” (p. 155), meaning that it was general practice not to report a suicide, unless it involved a high-profile person. However, the research presented in this article

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will show that this so-called tradition of “No suicides. Except” is not nearly as long-standing as some might believe. In fact, suicide was regularly discussed, and in quite shocking detail, in the Canadian press of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that reporting on the suicides of everyday people (in contrast to high-profile individuals) dwindled away and eventually became taboo. In this article, I provide an overview of the findings of archival research on media coverage of suicide over the past 150 years in two Canadian newspapers with historic roots and well-established reputations: the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star. This historical research is important to consider because journalism scholars cannot make claims about traditions or how suicide reporting may be changing without an understanding of how the topic was historically covered in the press. An historical exploration of Canadian coverage of suicide has not be done before; this article aims to fill that gap by illustrating how suicide reporting has changed over the past 150 years.

Western cultural meanings and attitudes toward suicide are not fixed and stable, but have changed over time.1 Ukrainian psychoanalyst Gregory Zilboorg (1996) contends that the first suicides often took the form of human sacrifices or voluntary reunions with the dead. Many stories and descriptions of human sacrifice are characterized, Zilboorg argues, by the fact that those who were sacrificed were volunteers. In Greek mythology, the gods of sleep and death—Hypnos and Thantos—were brothers, showing the close relation between the two states of sleep and death.2 Yet British writer Al Alvarez (1971) reminds us that “[e]ven in the civilized Athens of Plato, the suicide was buried outside the city and away from other graves; his [sic] self-murdering hand was cut off and buried apart” (pp. 64–65). Later on, the ancient Scythians regarded it as a great honour to take their own lives when they became too old for their nomadic way of life, thus saving younger members the trouble and guilt of having to kill them (Alvarez, 1971). The Romans looked on suicide with neither fear nor revulsion, but instead as a carefully considered and chosen validation of the way they had lived (Alvarez, 1971). In fact, one could go before the Senate and ask approval to end one’s own life.

Despite the later condemnation of suicide by Christian authorities, the beginnings of Christian teachings were actually a powerful incitement to suicide, with the glory and emphasis on martyrdom. The Bible contains no law forbidding suicide (Alvarez, 1971; Durkheim, 1966), and a number of suicides are referred to in the Bible with no hint of condemnation (Mayo, 1992). However, a population who will gladly end their own lives for a chance at the glorious afterlife proved to be problematic for the authorities of the time. It was at the 452 Council of Arles when St. Augustine declared suicide a crime. Eventually civil legislation followed the lead of canon law, which added material penalties to the religious penalties (Durkheim, 1966). The Christian prohibition and condemnation of suicide had a deep and long-lasting impact. In Europe during the Middle Ages, a death was investigated and a judgment would then be made by the local authorities on whether the deceased person was felo de se (which literally means “felon of themselves”) and therefore guilty of self-murder, or non compos mentis (“not of sound mind”), rendering them innocent of a crime (Marsh, 2010). Historical accounts show that it was common to punish severely those who took their own lives
through gruesome indignities to the corpses and financial penalties for the families. As suicide researcher Ian Marsh (2010) points out, these punishments were a stark and visible reminder that self-killing was considered a form of transgression, a challenge to the authority of God and sovereign, with both symbolic exclusion and material consequences as a form of redress. During this time, suicide was represented as a threat, not only to individuals but also to the population at large, with suicide discussed in terms of contagion and fear of epidemics (Marsh, 2010). Throughout this time, however, the term “suicide” was not used to describe these deaths. The word was not coined until the middle of the seventeenth century and did not become part of popular discourse until the eighteenth century; prior to this, one was either a criminal and a sinner, or mad (Marsh, 2010). The term eventually became widely used, replacing phrases such as “self-slaying,” “self-killing,” and “self-murder,” which Marsh (2010) argues is a reflection of the changing conceptions of the individual subject. Pioneering suicidologist Edwin Shneidman (1985) suggests this difference in terms was subtle but significant—now one could “commit suicide,” dispensing of the notion of the immortal soul, indicating a shift in the relationship between human beings and their God.

The discourse of self-inflicted death is neither neutral nor without connotations. As Stuart Hall (1997) explains, discourse “governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others” (p. 44). Similarly, Michel Foucault (1994) argues that things mean something and are true only within a specific historical context, or episteme. In The Order of Things (1994), he argues that each episteme has its own discursive formations whereby things appear as a meaningful construct, but through history new epistemes can arise and replace existing modes of thinking and knowing. Hall (1997) echoes this, emphasizing that meaning is constructed and produced, and does not inhere in things. Meaning is the result of a signifying practice, a practice that produces meaning and makes things mean (Hall, 1997). This is very much the case with suicide, as the meanings of this act and the terminology used to describe it have changed over time. I work from Hall’s approach to representation and argue that suicide does not have a stable, true meaning, but instead a meaning produced by humans in a culture. By examining the representations of suicide in media coverage, insights can be gleaned on how suicide is perceived in Canadian society and how these perceptions have changed over time.

Sources and method
To conduct this archival research, I required access to digital archives of Canadian newspapers. Digital archives allowed for searches of vast quantities of coverage on suicide across a large span of time. The purpose of this research was to get a sense of what “everyday” reporting on suicide looked like, making searches for coverage of particular famous suicides on exact dates on microfiche not suitable. However, using digital archives for general searches for suicide-related terminology across a large span of dates greatly limited the newspapers I was able to search, as only the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star have complete digital archives dating back to their founding. In addition to having complete digital archives, these two newspapers are the two highest circulating English-language daily newspapers in Canada (Newspapers Canada, 2012).
Therefore, this historical research is centred on the coverage contained in the *Globe and Mail* since it began in 1844 and the *Toronto Star* since it began in 1894. The limitations of this approach and the ways in which my future research will complement this historical work are detailed in the section below titled “Limitations and further research.”

Although this research was not undertaken with the goal of performing a quantitative content analysis, the sampling technique was informed by the studies and recommendations of media content analysis scholar Daniel Riffe (and colleagues). Riffe, along with Stephen Lacy, Staci Stoddard, Hugh Martin, and Chang Kuang-Ko (see Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin, & Kuang-Kuo, 2001) argue that simple random sampling in media content analysis studies is inefficient compared to other types of sampling due to the cyclic nature of media content (such as the rather scant news in Saturday editions compared to larger Wednesday editions, and the impact of advertising cycles on news content). Lacy et al. suggest that a better sampling technique that takes into account these fluctuations in daily news coverage is stratified sampling that yields constructed weeks. This involves identifying all Mondays, and randomly selecting one Monday, then identifying all Tuesdays, and randomly selecting one Tuesday, and so on, to construct a sample week that ensures each day of the week is equally represented. Riffe, Charles Aust, and Lacy (1993) found that a minimum of two constructed weeks were required to reliably represent an entire year’s content. Building on this premise, Lacy et al. (2001) suggest three approaches for long-term studies of newspaper content—one of which is to select two constructed weeks from each year; however, to avoid sampling from each and every year over such a large span of time, a constant interval, such as every two or five years, should be selected. Unfortunately, there is no published evidence about what type of interval would work best. Based on these suggestions, this archival research is based on a random stratified sample comprising a constructed two-week sample of individual articles that explicitly mention terminology related to suicide from each of the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* for every 10-year interval since 1900. The coverage prior to 1900 was examined but in a less systematic way, as *The Globe* began in 1844 but did not move to daily publishing until 1853, while *The Star* began regular daily publishing in 1894. A supplementary search was also conducted for all articles on potential suicide deaths that never explicitly mention suicide through the search term “no foul play is suspected,” as is explained below.

**Early Canadian news coverage of suicide**

The first newspapers in Canada looked quite different to the newspapers of today. They were just a few pages in length and incredibly dense, with few illustrations and drawings to break up the grey monotony of the small print. As Wilfred Kesterton (1984) explains, prior to the twentieth century, news stories were not designed for the selective reading of busy readers. Instead, “[n]ews accounts were written in chronological order and in a discursive, literary style” (p. 7). According to Stephen Ward (2004), the first popular paper in Canada was George Brown’s successful and influential *Globe* (predecessor to the *Globe and Mail*), which was founded in 1844 by political reformers and Free Kirk Presbyterians. Minko Sotiron (1997) points out that for most of the nineteenth century, the layout and content of Canadian newspapers resembled that of the four-page *Toronto Globe* in 1844:
Page one usually offered lengthy non-political articles lifted from the British and American press and, when the British and Canadian parliaments were in session, almost verbatim reports of the debates. Page two, the most important page, contained the editorials. Page three presented “commercial intelligence,” snippets from the foreign press. The advertisements were found on page four. By 1865 not much had changed, except that there were more advertisements and they were found on more pages.

( pp. 4–5)

Not only did early Canadian newspapers resemble each other in form and content, as outlined by Sotiron, but they also frequently borrowed news reports from each other. Many of the nineteenth-century articles examined for this archival research were taken directly from other Canadian newspapers by The Globe, often smaller regional papers, as well as from British and American newspapers. Canadian newspapers mentioned as being the source for articles on suicide included the Hamilton Journal and Express, the Hastings Chronicle (Belleville), the Guelph Advertiser, the Quebec Chronicle, and the Kingston News, while American newspapers mentioned included the Milwaukee Sentinel, the Buffalo Advertiser, and the Boston Post. Based on Sotiron’s assertion about the content of Canadian newspapers resembling that of The Globe for much of the nineteenth century, and the fact that many of the reports were often taken directly from other newspapers, the suicide coverage examined here is likely representative of what was contained in other early Canadian newspapers.

The news coverage of suicide during the nineteenth century was vastly different to what we have become accustomed to today. The Globe and Mail reported on individual suicides since it first began (as The Globe) in 1844. The first suicide story in The Globe appears on October 22, 1844, on the fourth page. The article is illegible in many places, as the paper was not well preserved, but it is an excerpt copied from a British newspaper about two gamekeepers who killed themselves a day apart, apparently due to the anxiety and dread of an impending visit from an important person (perhaps the owner of the wildlife preserve). Suicide deaths were treated as everyday occurrences and received small mentions along with other local, national, and international information. When the Toronto Star began publishing in 1894 (as the Evening Star, and later as the Toronto Daily Star), it also reported on individual suicides with full names and information about the method.

Gory and graphic details
Explicit details were often provided in the reports of suicides, such as the type and sometimes even exact amount of a poison taken, or details on how people cut their own throats or the passage of bullets through bodies in self-inflicted gunshot wounds. On September 4, 1847, The Globe ran a small blurb in a list of notices on the second page that stated: “A carpenter, named Nimbs, committed suicide in Niagara, on the 28th ultimo, by swallowing 55 grains of opium.” It was followed immediately by a brief about the monthly meeting of the Toronto Building Society the following Monday. These were just matter-of-fact pieces of information being passed along to the readers, and the reporting of a suicide was not based on whether a person was high-profile. Other poisons that were explicitly mentioned in articles on suicides throughout this
time included chloroform, strychnine, ammonia, carbolic acid, formaline, laudanum, and Paris Green (a brand of rat poison). In a piece on December 9, 1848, The Globe details how Sergeant James Wilson in New Brunswick killed himself while under the influence of liquor by “means of a pistol and powder only—the contents entering one of his cheeks and out of one eye” (p. 3). The article goes on to detail how the man “lingered about 36 hours afterwards, when death terminated his sufferings.”

Perhaps one of the most detailed and gruesome accounts can be found in The Globe on July 26, 1853, taken from the American press and given the headline “Horrible Case of Suicide” (p. 2). The report detailed how a wealthy American man had jumped in front of a train in New York, “the whole train passing over him literally smashing him to pieces.” The extremely graphic detail of the state of the body can be found in the excerpt of the article contained in Figure 1. A classic example of the detail given to the method of suicide even in short reports on local deaths can be found in Figure 2, while another example of the rather gruesome and highly unnecessary detail given to the exact cause of death can be found on February 16, 1848, in The Globe:

An emigrant made a most determined attempt to commit suicide at Lloydtown a few days ago, by cutting his throat with a razor. He severed the windpipe nearly across. Dr. Ball was promptly in attendance, but owing to the extent of the injuries inflicted, but faint hopes are entertained of his recovery. He had lost his wife and children in the summer, by the emigrant fever, and has been in a desponding state ever since; and to this his neighbours attribute the rash act. (p. 2)

Figure 1: Excerpt from The Globe, July 26, 1853, p. 2

As seen in this example, and in Figure 2, suicide was often referred to as a “rash act” in early newspaper accounts, especially when explaining the circumstances surrounding the death. For example, on July 15, 1848, The Globe ran a small piece from the Boston Post on Edward Phillips, a young man in Vermont who shot himself after coming into considerable wealth. The second last sentence of the small piece on his death states: “An affair of the heart is said to be the cause of the rash act” (p. 1).
Many of the reports on suicides attempt to identify a single cause, a rationale, for the death. When a simplified reason could not be attributed for the death, reporters would state that the cause was not yet determined, as if there would at some point always be a singular reason found in every case. The rationales range from a person not being of sound mind, to trouble in love, to a personal or economic disgrace of some manner. The headline on a suicide story in the *Evening Star* on April 30, 1894, was: “Builder fails in business and shoots himself” (p. 1). An article taken from the *Hamilton Journal and Express* by *The Globe* on August 12, 1852, states:

The deceased was about forty-six years of age, and held a situation on the line of railway near London for some time, from which, it is thought, he was dismissed; and that the dismissal so preyed upon his mind, that he determined to destroy his life. (p. 3)

A December 2, 1854, article in *The Globe* reports on a ship captain who shot and killed himself, explaining: “the deceased had been in a very despondent mood for the last few days, on account of a great loss he occasioned the owners of the vessel by paying too high a price for its freight home” (p. 1). Other stories included statements such as “It is thought that [he] is insane” (*Evening Star*, March 21, 1894, p. 1); “committed suicide by hanging herself, whilst in a state of mental derangement” (*The Globe*, November 9, 1850, p. 3); “He was in a melancholy state for some time past, and it is thought that he committed the rash act while labouring under insanity” (*The Globe*, November 21, 1850, p. 2); “Embarrassed circumstances are stated to have been the cause of his self destruction” (*The Globe*, July 28, 1871, p. 1); and “Old age made him despondent” (*Evening Star*, July 10, 1894, p. 4).

Suicide notes

Some of the articles mentioned suicide notes and a few even included reprints of these letters. *The Globe* reprinted in full a letter by Thomas Steele, the Irish politician involved with the Catholic Emancipation movement, written to his friend immediately prior to his suicide attempt (from which Steele died several days later) in spring 1848. The letter was several paragraphs long, the last three of which can be viewed in Figure 3. On December 4, 1849, *The Globe* printed in full one of the notes left by a woman who apparently jumped to her death at Niagara Falls, stating, “The following is a copy of the letter addressed by Mrs. Miller to Mr. White, of the Eagle Hotel” (see Figure 4). The *Evening Star* published a small item in the middle of the fourth page on August 17, 1894, with the headline “His Dog, Not his Wife” and the subhead “Woman driven to suicide through abuse.” The article includes a reprint of a short note she left for her husband before killing herself: “I have been your dog and not your wife; now it will end. It seems hard to part from my children; treat them different from what you did.

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*Figure 2: Excerpt from The Globe, January 1, 1848, p. 3*

Suicide.—A girl named Jackson, who resided about a mile from town, committed suicide this afternoon by cutting her throat with a razor, from ear to ear. No cause assigned for the rash act.
me.” The article goes on to state: “When arrested [the husband] expressed no surprise that his wife had killed herself. He admits the cruelty and says she cried once before to die.” These deaths would not even be reported on now, let alone with such detail.

**Figure 3:** Excerpt of a letter reprinted in *The Globe, May 27, 1848, p. 1.*

“Before you receive this to-morrow, I will have ceased to live, I am quite weary of existence, although, of course, as a matter of many firmness, in private society, I depute myself as if I were without a care.

“I shall manage the matter in a way that there shall be no cause for the ceremony of a coroner’s inquest and post mortem examination. When a thing of this kind must be done, the more quietly and less theatrically it is done the better.

“I am, with most grateful feelings for all your kindness to me for so many years, as a private and public journalist,

My dear, — — — —

Affectionately yours—Farewell for ever!

Thomas Steele.”

**Figure 4:** Suicide note reprinted in *The Globe, December 4, 1849, p. 1.*

The following is a copy of the letter addressed by Mrs. Miller to Mr. White, of the Eagle Hotel:

To the Proprietor of the Eagle Hotel.

My mind is made up. I have no wish to live any longer. I shall go where my body will never be recovered. No one shall gaze on my mangled remains. Please take care of my two little boys till they can be sent to Detroit where their grandparents reside: They are the sons of Major Miller of the army, now in Florida, and grandsons of Hon. John Norvell, Detroit, Michigan. Please forward my letters and protect my children till some of their relatives can come for them.

MRS. J. G. MILLER.

**Attempted suicide**

Both newspapers reported not only suicide deaths, but also about people who attempted suicide, especially those who faced charges for their attempt. The front page of the November 5 *Evening Star* in 1894 included the following small article of a man appearing before police court on a charge of attempting to commit suicide:

LAYCOCK AT LIBERTY.

The Would-Be Suicide Placed in His Father’s Care.
Albert Laycock was neatly dressed when he stood in the dock at Police Court
to-day and pleaded not guilty to a charge of attempting to commit suicide.

His father was present and promised to take charge of him. He was liber-
ated on bail, and the case was enlarged for a week.

In my research I found numerous other examples of attempted suicides that were
reported in detail, often with full names and methods mentioned. The Globe carried a
report from Britain on September 26, 1850, that named a man who had “attempted to
commit suicide in his cell by butting his head against the wall with all his force, break-
ing the scalp from the forehead to the crown” (p. 2). On page 1 of the March 21, 1894,
Evening Star, an article entitled “HE WANTS TO SUICIDE” detailed how an elderly
man had tried to kill himself by taking poison; however, when the doctors managed
to revive him, he said he would do it again as soon as he got the chance so he was ar-
rested. The Globe carried a report from the Milwaukee Sentinel on April 29, 1852, about
a woman who had tried to drown herself in a lake “in consequence of some hard words
from her worser [sic] half” (p. 3). These types of revelations were quite common and
not considered exclusively private matters of no public interest, as they are now.

Coroner’s inquests
Coroner’s inquests were reported in detail, including possible motives for suicide and
the findings of the inquest judges. The front page of the Evening Star on January 23,
1894, featured a lengthy column on an inquest into the body of a man found in the
Humber River that took up almost the entire first column, of the eight on the front
page. It featured numerous headlines and subheads, the third being “Very Much Like
Suicide.” The article gives the names of the inquest jurors and details all the evidence
before them about the discovery of the man’s body. While at the time of the report it
was not know whether the man had been murdered, drowned accidentally, or pur-
posefully ended his life in the river, the article includes an entire section speculating
about the potential reason that would have led the man to choose suicide. The article
states: “If Bacon committed suicide there is only one explanation of the case, and it
was for disappointment in love.” Apparently the man went missing shortly after he
found out that a young woman he loved had married another man. The verdicts of
the coroner’s inquiries often assigned a singular cause to the suicide, such as despon-
dency from being out of work or temporary insanity, indicating that it was not just re-
porters who sought a singular cause in each death, but also the medical profession-
als of the time. Examples of coroner’s verdicts on suicide cases found in newspaper ac-
counts throughout this time included the following:

“The Coroner’s Jury returned a verdict of Felo de se.” (The Globe, March 11,
1845, p. 3)

“The verdict of the Coroner’s Jury was ‘temporary insanity.’” (The Globe,
July 5, 1848, p. 2)

“[A] verdict returned to the effect that ‘the deceased in a fit of temporary
insanity, caused by intemperance, threw himself into the river, and was
drowned.’” (The Globe, June 20, 1850, p. 3)
“The Jury returned an unanimous verdict of ‘Wilful Suicide.’” (The Globe, November 21, 1850, p. 3)

“[T]he Coroner’s Jury were of the opinion that his death was caused by voluntarily taking Strychnine under the influence of temporary mental derangement.” (The Globe, November 4, 1851, p. 3)

“An Inquest was held, and the jury found that the deceased was not insane, but that she had been impelled to the dreadful act by despair in consequence of being abandoned by her seducer, William Sandford Dewel.” (The Globe, March 9, 1852, p. 1)

“[T]he Coroner is of the opinion that the deed was committed while in a fit of temporary insanity.” (The Globe, March 13, 1894, p. 1)

“Verdict of ‘suicide, while despondent and out of work.’” (The Globe, April 28, 1894, p. 2)

Simply ruling the deaths as self-inflicted was not enough; a cause—a rationale—for such behaviour was often stated in the coroner’s verdicts for suicide deaths. By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, suicide was “regarded with sympathy rather than with abhorrence. It is spoken of as a ‘misfortune’ rather than a crime” (Henson, 1897, as cited in Gates, 1988, p. 166), though it remained a criminal offence. Along the same lines, Alvarez (1971) concludes that what had once been a mortal sin became a private vice, something shameful to be avoided and necessary to tidy away:

[Suicide became accepted] as a common fact of society—not as a noble Roman alternative, nor as the moral sin it had been the Middle Ages, nor as a special cause to be pleaded or warned against—but simply as something people did, often and without much hesitation, like committing adultery. (p. 235)

While suicide remained a crime, many people were deemed to be suffering from a fit of despondency or temporary insanity, excusing them from being fully responsible for such an act. The emphasis on the mental state of individuals who killed themselves continued to grow in the twentieth century, foreshadowing the current highly medicalized conception of suicide that is now widely accepted.

Early-twentieth-century coverage of suicide in Canada

Sotiron (1997) argues that ownership of the Canadian daily press became highly concentrated in the period from 1890 to 1920 because there was a transition from the politically oriented newspapers of the nineteenth century to the corporate entities of the twentieth. During this period there was “a rapidly expanding urban population, increased literacy, the economic boom of the Laurier era, and a growing national market for consumer foods” (p. 4), all of which contributed to the profitability of new newspaper ventures. During the Victorian era, journalism moved from partisan to a more objective, modern style. According to Ward (2004), the failure of partisan papers such as the Toronto Empire and Montreal’s La Minerve seemed proof that strident partisanship did not pay. Kesterton (1984) adds that the influence and reliance on advertising
led newspapers to become “unprovocative, impartial, standardized and ‘public service’ in their approach” (p. 83). Another factor contributing to this transition from partisan to objective reporting was the growing reliance on wire services for news reports. When the Canadian Press (CP) was founded in 1917—through an annual government subsidy that lasted until 1923—it made traditional objectivity its defining principle. Ward (2004) explains that CP was impartial for the same reason that the Associated Press (AP) was—reports had to be free of political bias if the agency was to satisfy over 100 newspapers. CP showed how to employ an objective reporting method and disseminated the rules of objectivity in its well-used stylebooks (Ward, 2004); these are still mainstays in the Canadian journalism industry today.

At the turn of the twentieth century, individual suicides of both high-profile and everyday citizens continued as regular items reported in the pages of Canadian newspapers. The graphically intrusive nature of the coverage continued, as it had in the nineteenth century. Numerous examples can be found of gruesome accounts in early-twentieth-century coverage, such as the article in The Globe on June 30, 1910, of a man who lay down across some railway tracks in Owen Sound. The report details how he died: “His head was severed completely from the body, and the lower part of his face was too mutilated for recognition” (p. 7). Attempted suicides were also still reported and treated as matter-of-fact news pieces. The Toronto Daily Star reported on March 2, 1900: “Mrs. Samuel Oliver, of St. Thomas, tried to cut her throat with a butcher knife, on Friday, but the injury is not serious” (p. 6). This small notice was one of several items included under the heading Provincial News Notes, along with small one- or two-sentence blurbs about a fire, a woman being sent to jail for a month for shoplifting, an upcoming shareholders meeting, and several local deaths. Suicide letters were still referred to and, as in nineteenth-century coverage, occasionally suicide notes were reprinted in full, such as the one the Toronto Daily Star reprinted in the article titled “Aged suicide left pathetic letter” (May 19, 1910, p. 3). Suicides both local and international were reported, such as the small item in the Toronto Daily Star on January 12, 1900, of two U.S. army men who killed themselves in Manila (p. 8). It seemed no suicide death was beyond reporting, whether a young woman in a London, Ontario, hospital (The Globe, August 15, 1900, p. 7); a Woodstock farmer who hanged himself in his barn while his family celebrated Christmas in the house (Toronto Daily Star, December 27, 1910, p. 3); a wealthy Italian baron who jumped from a window in his palace after finding out he could not wed his mother’s housekeeper because she was in fact an illegitimate daughter of his own father (Toronto Daily Star, October 29, 1910, p. 20); or a man from a prominent New York family who shot himself in the bathroom of his aunt’s home (Toronto Daily Star, June 19, 1920, p. 28).

The term “suicide” was often used in the headline or first sentences—the cause of death was clear and not obscured or merely alluded to in any way. However, the beginnings of an interesting shift can be found in a small article from The Globe on September 4, 1930, with the headline “Irish artist dies” (p. 3), which does not mention the fact his death was suicide until the final sentence. Although this appears to be out of the ordinary at the time, since most articles were forthright about whether suicide was a factor, it marks the beginning of this shift into a peculiar format for suicide
coverage, whereby the death and details about the person are mentioned without any indication of suicide being the cause, until the final sentence, which sometimes still does not refer to suicide but instead that “no foul play is suspected.” The use of this phrase is discussed in greater detail in the next section. While the overall number of mentions of suicide in newspaper reports does not greatly increase (see Figure 5), mentions of suicide in relation to war and politics increase, as well as more abstract and distant examples. During World War II, vague mentions were made about German suicides as well as the suicides of “hundreds of Jews” (Globe and Mail, June 28, 1940, p. 6). Terms like “suicide squad,” “suicide attack,” and “suicide bomber” begin to appear in relation to World War II coverage, especially to describe Japanese kamikaze pilots. Other than this suicide-related war terminology, however, coverage of suicide in the early twentieth century was quite similar to the coverage of the nineteenth century. Not until the mid-to-late-twentieth century can more noticeable shifts be gleaned from the coverage.

Figure 5: Total number of articles returned for suicide-related terminology for every 10-year interval, 1850–1950

* Included 1894 instead of 1890, as this is when the Evening Star began publishing.

Mid-to-late-twentieth-century newspaper coverage of suicide in Canada

Media scholars Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone (2001) explain that modernism became the established vocabulary for newspaper authority during the mid to late twentieth century. This involved a streamlined front page with a hierarchical story placement that informed the readers what mattered most. Barnhurst and Nerone found that while Victorian newspapers seemed crowded and busy, modern newspapers appeared more purposeful and organized. As newspapers grew longer, the paper was divided internally into sections that further compartmentalized and labelled the news (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). Another marked difference in newspapers during this time was the elevation of objectivity as the most important feature of the journal-
ist’s craft. According to Kesterton (1984), objectivity rose to prominence because modern dailies aimed to please as many and offend as few as possible. The rise of objectivity also had an impact on the layout, with modern newspapers keeping fact and opinion apart by isolating news and editorials from each other.

Sensational or crime-related suicides predominate

Over the years the reporting on more sensational deaths took over from the more mundane and everyday-type suicides. This can perhaps be attributed to the increasing size of the population (and increasing number of suicides) or the lasting effects of sensational-type reporting, sometimes called “yellow journalism,” popularized by Americans William Randolph Hurst and Joseph Pulitzer. The bizarre and sensational stories of suicides from all over the world were printed in small blurbs, such as the piece that the Toronto Daily Star ran on January 16, 1940, entitled “Bald at 29 too much, dead” (p. 5). The story was of a man in Los Angeles who died of suicide by asphyxiation because losing his hair bothered him greatly. On February 20, 1950, the Toronto Daily Star included a small item from Reuters about a 15-year-old boy in Italy who had thrown himself under a train rather than face his father with a bad report card from school. The report was titled “Report bad, boy, 15 dives under train” (p. 19). On May 17, 1950, the Globe and Mail ran a small piece about a house painter in France entitled “Swallows shirt in Third Attempt at Suicide, Dies” (p. 3). It explains how a man tore up his shirt and swallowed it while being treated in the hospital for the injuries from his first two attempts.

Attempted suicides were still reported in the mid-twentieth century and those involved could still be charged with criminal acts, until attempting suicide was finally removed from the Criminal Code of Canada in 1972. Yet by the 1960s, many of the articles mentioning suicide were related to criminal cases, such as numerous murder-suicides or people charged with crimes who attempted suicide while in custody or out on bail. The Toronto Daily Star ran a CP article about a 17-year-old who shot himself in the chest on a golf course after firing a shot at a police officer and narrowly missing (p. 17). The Globe and Mail ran a small item on October 6, 1960, about a Windsor man who was in custody on vagrancy charges and hanged himself by his coat in his cell (p. 5). In another example, on December 21, 1970, both the Toronto Star (p. 23) and the Globe and Mail (p. 5) included articles based on a CP account naming a 17-year-old boy who hanged himself by his pyjamas in his cell in a Guelph juvenile detention centre. Jailhouse suicide was given quite a lot of coverage in comparison to other suicides, as numerous inquests were held and suggestions made on improving the surveillance and response mechanisms in Canadian prisons.

These types of stories, along with numerous murder-suicides and the occasional highly sensationalized suicide story, were predominant, while the everyday stories of local suicides, once common in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century press, tapered out and disappeared for the most part. This leads to speculation on whether this is an indication of the growing privacy accorded to most individuals, but denied to those associated with crimes. It also suggests a growing focus on the suicides of those in official institutions, while the far more numerous occurrences of suicide outside these institutions appear to be considered more private in nature.
Photographs accompanying articles on suicide

While photos rarely accompanied articles on individual suicides, on June 16, 1950, the Toronto Daily Star included an American AP wire photo of a man hanging off a bridge by his fingertips but who was talked down by police who urged him to “think of his poor mother” (p. 27). A large photo of inquest jurors touring the Toronto police station where a man in custody hanged himself was featured on the front page of the Metro section of the Toronto Star in early 1970 (January 22, p. 65). In May of 1980, the Toronto Star ran a small photo at the bottom of page A16 of convicted Montréal financier Michele Sindona on a stretcher being rushed to hospital after slashing his wrists in a U.S. prison cell. In March 1990, the Toronto Star carried an AP photo of relatives grieving over the open coffin of a high-ranking Romanian military officer who had died by suicide (March 4, p. A4), and just a few months later the Globe and Mail carried a Reuters photo of a funeral procession marching behind the closed coffin of a Lithuanian man who died of self-immolation while staging a political protest in Moscow (May 1, p. A9). Articles on murder-suicide were more likely to carry photos of the deceased or even police at the crime scene than articles that detailed an individual suicide.

“No foul play is suspected”

From the mid-to-late-twentieth century, articles that reported on deaths but made no mention of suicide even if it was the case became more common. Obviously these articles were not included in the digital archival search results for articles explicitly mentioning suicide, but instead were found through searching for the now commonly used phrase at the end of stories about mysterious deaths: “No foul play is suspected” (along with minor variations on this phrase). The use of this statement, usually in lieu of any mention of suicide, increased throughout the 1970s and 1980s and continues today. The phrase “no foul play is suspected” first appears in The Globe on January 5, 1903, in an article about an elderly man found dead in his apartment (p. 12). The cause of death could have been natural, accidental, or suicide, but it is left ambiguous in the article, other than to say “no foul play is suspected.” The number of articles using this term became more and more common over the twentieth century, with a large spike in the use of this statement particularly in the 1980s (see Figure 6). Many of these deaths may have indeed been accidental or natural, not just suicide—all that is clearly known is that homicide is not suspected. The term is also used not only when a body is discovered, but also in some missing persons cases or even fires to assure the public that no malicious intent is suspected to be behind these incidents. In some cases it is quite likely that the deaths being discussed in these articles were suicides based on the information provided in the articles, but no such statement is made other than the death not being a result of foul play.

For example, a CP article in the Globe and Mail in 1991 about an inmate found hanging in his cell leaves little possibility other than suicide (January 3, 1991, p. A7). This is also the case in an article that ran on August 12, 1977, on the death of the son of former Ontario premier John Robarts. His son was found dead of a gunshot wound to the head, his body discovered in an isolated area with a firearm nearby, with a police inspector quoted as saying “foul play is not suspected” (p. 2). Interestingly, several articles use this term while also stating that the death was likely the result of suicide, an
odd redundancy for journalistic writing, because a death being suicide automatically means there is no foul play in question. In a CP article in the Globe and Mail in early 1989, the headline was “Charged in son’s death, father, 42, hangs himself” (January 4, 1989, p. A3), yet at the end of the second paragraph is the statement “Foul play is not suspected.” In a 1987 Toronto Star article about a woman found dead behind the wheel of her car in the garage with the ignition on, the coroner states that her death appears to be suicide. This is immediately followed by a quote from local police, who say “no foul play is suspected” (April 14, 1987, p. A7). The rise in the use of this phrase can perhaps be partly attributed to the growing concern in the 1970s and 1980s around the potential copycat effect of reporting on suicide—using this phrase provided a mechanism for reporters to allude to suicide without actually saying it.

Figure 6: Total number of articles returned for “foul play is not suspected” (and similar terminology) for every 10-year interval, 1900–1990

Reporting suicide becomes taboo
The World Health Organization (2013) has focused international attention on the issue of suicide, noting that in the past 45 years, suicide rates have increased by 60 percent worldwide. While there has been a global increase in suicide, in Canada the increase mainly occurred in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 1998). According to the Centre for Suicide Prevention (1998), the population of Canada more than doubled from 1950 to 1995, yet the number of suicide deaths increased threefold—from 1,067 in 1950 to 3,970 in 1995. It was during this time period of increasing numbers of suicides that the issue of suicide contagion, especially imitation linked to media coverage of suicide, was explored in numerous empirical studies. The threat of a copycat effect began to loom over many newsrooms, where it was feared that covering suicide could be construed as questionable ethical conduct. While Émile Durkheim (1966) concedes that suicide can be contagious within localized areas and that different suicides almost always resemble one another to an astonishing degree, he concludes that contagion of suicide is from individual to individual, and never goes as far as to af-
fect the overall societal suicide rate. Therefore, he challenges the notion that suicide contagion has social effects, contending: “Within a narrow circle it may well occasion the repetition of a single thought or action, but never are its repercussions sufficiently deep or extensive to reach and modify the heart of society” (p. 142). He addresses those who have called for the prohibition of printing suicides and crimes in newspapers in order to curb their imitative power, arguing that such a prohibition might succeed in slightly reducing the annual total but could hardly modify their social rate.

Sociologist David Phillips was one of the first to challenge Durkheim’s assertion that imitative factors had little impact on the suicide rate through empirical studies. Phillips published multiple studies indicating patterns of increased suicide rates following publicity suicide deaths received in the media (see Phillips, 1974, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1982). Many studies followed, inspired by Phillips’ attempts to link media coverage of suicide with increased occurrences of suicide immediately following the coverage. Although many of the research studies suggest there may be some correlation between media portrayal of suicide and suicide rates, these correlations fluctuate across variables such as age and gender. In addition, many of these studies have been found to be conflicting and oftentimes inconclusive (see Stack, 2005), though this did not seem to diminish the widespread acceptance of the copycat effect in many newsrooms. According to Russell (2006), many newsrooms have a standing rule against covering suicides, in part because of the evidence of imitative suicides resulting from coverage. Apparently some newsrooms feel the solution “is to not mention how the person died in news stories or obituaries—in effect laundering the news and protecting the community from reality” (p. 117).

**Shift in perceptions on suicide: From criminal to exclusively medical**

According to suicide historian Olive Anderson (1987), in the twentieth century, suicide became an issue of “an introspective agony” and essentially an “escape from depression” (p. 420). The linking of depression and suicide by psychiatrists became generally accepted among the public, resulting in a long-lasting medical truth that carries major clout in current Western understandings of suicide. While early news coverage on suicide often referred to the mental state of individuals, in recent decades the equation of suicide with mental illness, in particular depression, has become standard. From 1960 to 1990, this transition from likely link with mental illness to known “truth” can be seen in the coverage. A science column in the *Toronto Daily Star* in 1960 reported on the promising results of a drug trial for suicidal alcoholics (March 3, p. 18). Even in a religious column that told the story of the power of prayer in saving one woman from suicide, the columnist relies on the authority of psychiatrists who assert that suicidal people “have a great need to feel more important and needed” (*Toronto Daily Star*, April 6, 1960, p. 28). The tone is not one of condemnation in this article extolling the virtues of prayer, but one of compassion. The *Globe and Mail* carried an AP report about the American Medical Association’s 1970 convention, which included a session on suicide where a psychiatrist urged doctors not to ignore suicidal talk from patients (June 26, 1970, p. 11), and a few months later the *Globe and Mail* reported the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was calling for the removal of offences such as drug addiction and attempted suicide from the category of crimes in Canada, and to
instead have these matters referred to health authorities (December 8, 1970, p. 11). An article in the Toronto Star in 1980 reported that a national brain tissue bank was to be set up at a psychiatric institute in the city. Among the conditions to be studied was suicide, “which some scientists say may result from an organic illness” (October 30, p. B15). In her book on end-of-life ethics, bioethics philosopher Margaret Pabst Battin explains that

suicide has come to be seen by the public and particularly by health professionals as primarily a matter of mental illness, perhaps compounded by biochemical factors and social stressors, the sad result of depression or other often treatable diseases—a tragedy to be prevented. (2005, p. 164)

The discussion of suicide solely in terms of it being a psychiatric issue has continued and has become even more prevalent since 1990, but is beyond the scope of this particular article.

Conclusions
This archival research brings new information to journalism and media studies by showing how reporting on suicide has changed over the course of some 150 years. It is clear from this research that suicide was regularly reported on in the Canadian daily press of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and not kept hidden from the public as one might expect in the Victorian era. Details on suicide deaths and attempts were regular features of the daily newspapers, and not only in regard to prominent and powerful people. The suicides of farmers, local tradespeople, teenagers, foreigners, military personnel, professionals, politicians, and of those in distant and remote places around the world were all reported. This practice began to change around the mid-twentieth century, as suicide reports shifted focus to sensational deaths or highly prominent individuals. There was also a growing focus on suicide deaths and attempts made by those who were incarcerated for various crimes. Murder-suicide was always reported and continued to be the one form of suicide that was consistently chronicled across the entire 150-year span analyzed. However, individual suicide deaths, often committed in private, became taboo, and this coverage dwindled until it was unlikely that such a report would be carried in the Canadian press.

The changing perceptions of suicide from a criminal to a predominantly medical, in particular psychiatric, phenomenon was a long and gradual one. John Maltzberger and Mark Goldblatt (1996) argue that it was French psychiatrist Jean Esquirol (1772–1840) who led the way in medicalizing insanity and, in the process, suicide. Esquirol argued that suicide was madness and madness was medical; therefore, suicide was medical (Hacking, 1990). As part of the process of medicalizing suicide, individuals who wished to die became patients, “victims of disease, … thus taken to have a diminished responsibility for their actions” (Marsh, 2010, p. 144). Sigmund Freud and Karl Menninger were other key figures who popularized the notion that suicide directly correlated to depression, and was an individual psychological issue beyond the realms of the social determinants that Durkheim famously concluded were the causes of suicide.

According to Anderson (1987), with the medicalization of suicide far less concern is afforded to one’s social standing (for instance, the shame that may have accompa-
nied the revelation of debt or sexual impropriety) or financial security (such as the loss of work and the threat of destitution). The medicalization of suicide also brought widespread acceptance of not only psychiatric links to suicide, but also neurological. John Mann and Shitij Kapur (1991) argue suicide is likely a result of a dysfunction of the serotonergic system (especially low 5-HIAA levels, postsynaptic receptors, and related biological markers). Those who point out that suicide rates in the population at large have not declined since the introduction of antidepressant drugs (Maltsberger, 1992), which are believed to target the serotonergic system, seem to go unheard in the scramble to pinpoint the potential neurological factors leading to suicidal activity.

While the linking of suicide almost exclusively to psychiatric and neurological causes is widely accepted, there are those who challenge this notion. Lisa Lieberman (2003) argues: “Therapeutic strategies that treat suicide as an illness, medicating the depression while ignoring the underlying motivations that drive people to end their lives, effectively diminish individual responsibility for the decision to die” (p. 7). According to Marsh (2010), the linkage of mental illness and suicide is, on the whole, accepted uncritically within medicine and psychiatry, government and media. He argues that within this dominant discourse, mental health patients are positioned as passive victims of illness processes that may push them into self-destructive behaviours. He also argues that the “compulsory ontology of pathology” leads to subjugated knowledge, in that “suicide being understood almost solely in relation to notions of illness, diagnosis, treatment, prevention, etc. has disqualified other ways of approaching the subject” (p. 72). In other words, a way of discussing suicide outside the terms offered by psychiatry and medicine is absent, or at least in short supply (Marsh, 2010). Echoing these concerns, Zilboorg (1996) states that our society has been led by silent consent to the assumption suicide is the act of an abnormal individual who must be a psychopathic person. Austrian writer Jean Améry takes a Foucauldian approach in his critique of the medicalization of suicide, stating, “[T]oday it is sociology, psychiatry, and psychology that are the appointed bearers of public order, that deal with voluntary death as one deals with a sickness” (1999, p. 97). Even Harvard psychiatrists Maltsberger and Goldblatt note:

Suicidal phenomena are too complex, too rich in meaning, too elusive, to be caged in a psychiatric or neurobiological box. They will not be reduced. That suicide is not merely an epiphenomenon of depression is demonstrated by at least two inescapable facts: the majority of depressed patients are not suicidal, and suicide occurs in a substantial number of persons after depression has lifted. (1996, p. 144)

In response to those who link suicide with depression in the vast majority of cases, one of the founders of suicidology, Shneidman (1996), contends that depression is not the same as suicide—one just need look at the fatality rates to see the enormous difference. He points out that it is quite possible for a person to live a long, albeit unhappy, life with depression; yet this is not true of anyone in an acutely suicidal state. The critiques of the medicalization of suicide bring to light the importance of a comprehensive and complex approach, not just to studying suicide, but also in media reporting on the issue. Shneidman suggests an approach that does not favour medical or social
determinants, but instead looks at suicide as the complex phenomenon that it is. It was near the end of his long career and pioneering work on suicidology that Shneidman (1996) reached this conclusion, suggesting that suicide occurs when the “psychache” (his term for psychological pain) is deemed by that person to be unbearable. This means that suicide involves different individual thresholds for enduring psychological pain, but does not rule out social factors being the causes of this pain exclusively in favour of individual mental illness, or any other factors for that matter, resulting in the pain. Most importantly, Shneidman takes a balanced approach:

The most evident fact about suicidology and suicidal events is that they are multidimensional, multifaceted, and multidisciplinary, containing, as they do, concomitant biological, sociological, psychological (interpersonal and intrapsychic), epidemiological, and philosophical elements. (p. 637)

While this seems like an obvious statement, it bears repeating in light of the incredible emphasis currently placed exclusively on mental illness in causing suicide. As Shneidman (1985) aptly points out, “[W]e cannot hope to find a single cause for human phenomena as complex as self-destruction” (p. 225). This is advice reporters and editors must keep in mind as public perceptions of suicide change in light of its medicalization and there is a growing appetite for open and in-depth reporting on this topic.

Limitations and further research
The scope of this article was to conduct the first (known) scholarly exploration of suicide reporting from the nineteenth century through to the end of the twentieth century. While I acknowledge the limitations of focusing on just two daily newspapers, both located in Toronto, I believe there are still many transferrable traits in this coverage and I hope to confirm this in future research of an expanded scope. As pointed out, many of the reports on suicide were taken from smaller regional papers prior to wire services being available, and with the growing reliance of all newspapers on wire services in the twentieth century, it is fair to assume there is much similarity between the coverage of suicide in these two large Toronto-based daily newspapers and that in smaller local dailies and weeklies. This article has been limited to discussing the results of archival research on suicide coverage; it does not address current policies and practices of Canadian newsrooms on this topic. This aspect will be addressed in a forthcoming article, based on the research and interviews I have conducted, as well as in-depth analysis of suicide coverage from 2000 onwards.

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Notes
1. The brief history of these cultural meanings presented here does not touch on the very different conceptions of suicide in Eastern cultures, for example Japan. There have been several histories of suicide published: see Anderson, 1987; MacDonald & Murphy, 1990; Marsh, 2010; Minois, 1999; and Murray, 1998, 2000.

2. The connection between suicide and the wish to sleep is taken up by Friedlander (1996).

3. The Globe was merged with the Mail and Empire in 1936, becoming the Globe and Mail.

5. Robarts himself would make headlines just a few years later when he also died by suicide, a fact that could not be avoided by journalists who wrote about the shocking death of the former premier.

6. The drug mentioned in this article was actually the first antidepressant in the monoamine oxidase inhibitor series that was discontinued in most of the world a short time later, as it was found to cause severe liver damage.

References


