

**Challenging Respect and Social Norms for the Dead Through  
Reactions to High-Profile Deaths on Twitter**

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Sociology  
December 2020

## **Abstract**

This research aims to explore reactions to high-profile deaths in the social media platform Twitter, with two main research questions at its core. Firstly, what type of responses to high-profile death manifest in the social media environment of Twitter? And, in the age of social media, what is the current relationship between social media and mainstream news coverage? A thematic analysis of Tweets collected from six cases of high-profile death was conducted, covering a range of types of deaths. The data reveals two core themes. Firstly, what has been conceptualised as 'unnegotiable sympathy' - an inflexible, almost compulsive display of sympathetic response, no matter how the death occurred or the characteristics of the individual. 'Bad' deaths appeared to garner higher levels of sympathy than those considered 'good', suggesting fear of suffering 'bad' death a factor for these compulsive sympathetic responses. Secondly, this research considers how the online social media environment is a separate social space with its own unique set of norms, values and behaviours, observed through discussions around high-profile death on Twitter. Social media's relationship with news media is also interrogated in this research through the online Twitter reactions to high-profile deaths, allowing an observation into how social media both helps and hinders news media in the current age of social media.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis was completed with particular support and enthusiasm from my supervisor Dr Ruth Penfold-Mounce. Upon our first meeting where we discussed ideas for the thesis, nobody could have predicted that within a matter of months we'd been working through a global pandemic which would pose a range of challenges and difficulties. The way in which we were used to working completely changed, but Ruth has remained consistently supportive, motivational and encouraging through it all (albeit from a social distance), for which I am extremely thankful.

I would also like to thank Carol Robinson for being the TAP member for this research project, whose help and support has been greatly appreciated throughout the year.

I must also acknowledge my undergraduate tutors, Dr Matthew Spokes, Dr Jack Denham and Benedikt Lehmann whose book 'Death, Memorialization and Deviant Spaces' was an influential source of inspiration for this project. Being introduced to the Sociology of Death and Mortality during my third year of my undergraduate course sparked an immediate curiosity and interest in the subject area, without which this project would not exist.

And finally, I must show my appreciation for all of my friends and family who have supported me over this extremely difficult year.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Growing up in the age of social media on Twitter, I have witnessed and participated first-hand in the sharing and discussion of breaking news online. The news that seemed to stick out the most to me was celebrity deaths. These would be met with extraordinarily emotive outpourings of grief and sympathy, even from people previously uninterested in the individual. Along with these outpourings, I noticed that these online reactions never occurred without a darker commentary on the individual's deservingness of sympathy lingering within the masses of Tweets. Whitney Houston, Amy Winehouse and Peaches Geldof's deaths were deemed by some to be a preventable waste due to being drug related. Paul Walker's death was regarded by others as being reckless after causing the crash of his own vehicle. David Bowie's death was met by past accusations of paedophilia. After being shot, Xxxtentacion's death was shrouded by suggestions of potential domestic abuse towards his pregnant girlfriend. Kobe Bryant, too, faced similar accusations after dying in a helicopter crash.

It is clear that no matter how loved these individuals were, no matter how tragic their very public death may have been, there were always some individuals that used the opportunity of a high-profile death to offer criticism. This was reflected by one journalist in reference to ex-UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher's death, observing: "one of the most curious strands in the early comments was Tweeters predicting that there would soon be abusive Tweets. There soon were" (Barford, 2013). Easily predicted, it seemed that abuse was a given in times of highly emotive news stories such as these. I, myself, accepted that this was just the way the Twitter environment, or the the Twittersphere as it will be referred to within this research, reacted in those times of grief expressed online.

This nonchalant view of mine, however, changed when suddenly it was a member of my own family on the receiving end of online backlash following their death. The experience of accidentally stumbling across Tweets of abuse directed at a close family member who had died just 24 hours previously under devastating circumstances both in the context of their death and the way in which they died led me into a spiral of emotions and questions around

the lack of humanity I was observing. I questioned how on earth someone could so vehemently criticise someone who was no longer around to defend themselves. I questioned why such language and responses were acceptable on Twitter – surely there were rules against this? I questioned why the media coverage was allowed to spread the news which only furthered the masses of hate I was reading.

But then I began to consider the situation from a different perspective. I wondered whether the response would have been the same without the media's involvement. I considered the fact that people are free to react to situations based on the information they have been given. If they are reacting on the basis of incorrect facts, or half of the truth, of course it is going to appear to be unfair. It also led me to reflect on my own perception of death, and the respect we expect to be given towards the dead. Thinking back on all of the other cases of high-profile deaths I had observed in my time on Twitter and the backlash they received in death, I questioned: *why should* the dead be exempt from criticism? Why does society – myself included – feel so horrified at the prospect of speaking ill of the dead?

It was these considerations which lead me to the conception of this thesis.

As a result, the research aim of this thesis is to explore high-profile deaths in social media on Twitter. There are two main research questions that will aid the research in addressing this aim:

- What type of responses to high-profile deaths manifest in the social media environment of Twitter?
- In the age of social media, what is the current relationship between social media and mainstream news coverage?

This thesis contains five additional chapters upon the introduction. Chapter two is the literature review where existing literature is reviewed to provide an understanding of how the social media environment interacts within itself and existing social norms more generally (Chung et al, 1998), and also with social norms around death and the “darker forms of communication” (Leonard and Toller, 2012, p.391) which may arise as a result of



this. Furthermore, it will consider how news coverage can influence society (Kitzinger, 1999) and how it often tackles coverage of deaths and the struggles that come with this (Hanusch, 2008). And lastly it will investigate considerations around how a 'good' or 'bad' death can influence the resulting public sympathetic responses, and the way 'bad' death can be similarly defined across many cultures and societies (Seale and Van der Geest, 2004).

Chapter three is the methodology which presents the selected research methods, sampling and data collection as well as ethical considerations. A thematic analysis of Tweets collected from six case studies of high-profile deaths which were highly covered by mainstream news media outlets will be conducted. The need for only high-profile deaths to be considered for this study is justified by the acknowledgment that only a small number of deaths are ever actually deemed newsworthy (Walter et al, 1995) and that "the public salience of such reported deaths is proportionate to their extraordinary features" (Walter et al, 1995, p. 583). Chapters four and five are the analysis chapters that reveal through thematic analysis the patterns of responses in the Twittersphere which are conceptualised as 'unnegotiable sympathy' and also reveal Twitter to be a unique social space whilst considering unique online behaviours and the influence these may have on provoking social change. The final chapter offers concluding thoughts and reflections on the research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive review of key literature in three main research areas. These are: news coverage of death, social media use and death, and ideas around what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' death. This literature review chapter establishes a foundation upon which an understanding of how media coverage and the Twittersphere can challenge respect for the dead in certain cases of death, and how wider societal opinions may be reflected within discussions around the high-profile dead online. It will also make way for an understanding as to how news media operates in the current age of social media.

### **2.1 News Media Coverage of Death**

As this research focuses on high-profile deaths, media coverage of death is a critical area of literature to be reviewed. This provides an understanding of the existing work regarding representations of grieving in the media and the influence of media coverage.

The process of over-emphasised representation is known as 'media sensationalism' – a process which will be central to understanding the outcome of this research as it focuses on high-profile cases of death. 'Media sensationalism' refers to patterns of over-exaggeration and distortion of facts within the traditional mainstream media (newspaper articles, online news articles, radio broadcasts and news television broadcasts), usually resulting in shifts in public behaviours (Kitzinger, 1999). Research suggests that mainstream media outlets consciously and purposely 'frame' certain events or information with this intention (Reese, 2007). It has been further suggested that the news itself is a tool for constructing society to be centred around shared emotions (Pantti and Sumiala, 2009). Due to the considerable reach of mass media and the power it retains from this reach (Cotter, 2003), it is widely accepted that media can be used, with its fear-mongering characteristics, to control society (Altheide, 2013). Doss (2002) highlights the media coverage of the Columbine shooting as a prime example of the media's influence on public mourning, noting: "within moments of the traumatic events that gave these sites meaning, the media were live, on the spot, shaping and directing that meaning" (Doss, 2002, p. 71). This highlights the need to consider how these constructed shared emotions (Pantti and Sumiala, 2009) promoted by the news may

be accompanied by political bias and hegemonic agendas around race, class and gender (Entman, 2007) that exist within news media. This has been echoed throughout many studies into the political bias of mainstream media (Baron, 2004; Morris, 2007).

With social influence of media sensationalism and its impact on framing social norms in mind, it could be helpful to consider how the process of media sensationalism may stretch to social norms around death specifically. Walter et al (1995) highlight the conflicting literature around whether death remains private or exists in the public space, but conclude that it is the media that “generates a public discourse on death” (Walter et al, 1995, p. 593). Mellor and Shilling (1993) argue that a ‘privatisation of meaning’ within modern society has caused ‘the sacred’ (such as traditional religious understandings and perspectives on death) to lose its meaning over individual’s lives, leaving the active task of constructing meaning for individuals themselves (Mellor and Shilling, 1993, p. 413). This may highlight the power of the media in using public experiences of death to shape how death is felt privately. Because the ‘sacred’ guide is no longer relevant within our daily lives, the media steps in to replace these lost values. Considering the media as the driving force behind shared and individual feelings, this may also help us to understand why different deaths may derive different social reactions. For example, if the media demonises a suicide as being selfish, or a drug overdose as being reckless, personal internalised opinions around these situations may be replaced with the discourses that the media promotes. Hanusch (2010, p. 37) claims: “there always exist struggles over the meanings of death, and how these deaths are represented to audiences is part of this struggle.” In other words, what does the death represent? What ideology does it support? This may help us to understand the function of socially difficult deaths. The idea that mainstream media may control society’s responses to certain deaths may be cause for concern due to the fact that “literature shows that the media appear to place different values on people according to their age, gender, status, as well as on the cause of death” (Hanusch, 2008, p. 2). This suggests a turn away from what could be a social force simply shaping society’s behaviours (such as condemning drug use after an overdose, reckless driving after a car accident) into an argument that involves, race, gender and class discussions too.

## 2.2 Social Media Use and Death

As this research aims to analyse public responses on social media, we must approach literature that suggests what sort of behaviours we could expect to see, both in terms of general social media use and in terms of discussions around death online. As this research touches on deaths that were made high-profile by their media coverage, it is worth noting that research into the perceived honesty between mainstream media and social media found that 75% expected mainstream media to be honest as opposed to only 44% who expected social media posts to be honest (Wright and Hinson, 2008). That being said, Zhao et al (2011) observe that Tweets categorised as containing news topics were the least likely to contain opinion and are therefore more reliable compared to other topics such as 'family' or 'education'. This may give way to the suggestion that in some instances news media still manages to remain influential in the social media environment.

In order to understand the types of behaviour observed on Twitter during this research, we must analyse literature around social regulation of behaviour in the online environment, and how the environment may also provoke certain behaviours. Johnson-Eilola and Selber (1996) use Foucault's theory of governmentality to suggest that online forums use rules and regulations to elicit self-policing behaviours. Although this research is over two decades old, the same can be suggested in terms of modern-day social media websites with their often compulsory acceptance of terms and conditions. This may suggest why online abuse is not the norm on the vast majority of online platforms. Furthermore, Chung et al (1998) suggests that, in conjunction with official regulations within internet forums, social norms are still an influential aspect of governmentality within the online space. This highlights how, although criticisms of the dead are not officially prohibited from the online space, such opinions are less likely to be posted on public social media forums. These ideas around a perceived governmentality within the online environment (Johnson-Eilola and Seber, 1996; Chung et al, 1998) are reflected within inclusions of the report feature on most online social media platforms. Because criticisms of the dead cannot be actively regulated using an algorithm in the same way racist or homophobic language is, social media networks may be reliant on the self-surveillance behaviours these features elicit due to fear of having their accounts reported by others.

This criticism directed towards the dead online similarly reflects existing ideas of internet 'trolling', defined as "interpersonal anti-social behaviour within internet culture" (Craker and March, 2016, p. 79). This behaviour centres around attempts to provoke a reaction from the victim or others online by being overly shocking or rude (Craker and March, 2016). We must also consider the ease of anonymity of interpersonal behaviours online as a key factor of online abuse and trolling, as this element of anonymity may prevent individuals from holding back from their anti-social behaviour as they may believe they will not face consequences (Heirman and Walrave, 2008). Heirman and Walrave (2008) also highlight the potential for 'infinite audiences' as a key driving factor of cyber bullying or online abuse. This may help us to understand the satisfaction individuals may derive from such actions, especially in cases of celebrity death where the individual may have had a large following. The communal and anonymous characteristics of social media platforms may also reflect existing literature around the impact of deindividuation and the resulting onset of aggressive behaviours (Diener, 1979; Mann et al, 1982). This literature may therefore suggest an element of a 'mob mentality' which may occur within the online space, which offers a suggestion as to why traditional norms around respecting the dead may be so easily subverted in the online context.

We must also consider social media as having positive functions, too. For example, social media may help to contribute towards positive social change. Shirky (2011) highlights the characteristic of freedom to share and distribute information as a key aspect of social media's ability to elicit social change. Furthermore, Aaker and Smith (2011) suggest that social media can only bring about social change effectively if the crisis or situation being shared meets four key characteristics: having a focused goal, grabbing attention, being engaging, and calls to take action (Aaker and Smith, 2011). This formula may be particularly influential in cases of traumatic or 'newsworthy' death such as murder or celebrity suicide, as these are more likely to gain public attention and serve as a warning against it occurring again.

Existing research has also touched on specifically death-related social media sites and common death-related social media behaviours, which may help to understand the patterns in social behaviours that similarly occur on mainstream social media sites such as Twitter.

Leonard and Toller (2012) suggest that social media sites may give a platform for individuals to express feelings towards deaths more freely, but simultaneously acknowledge that the anonymous nature of these websites may result in “darker forms of communication” (Leonard and Toller, 2012, p.391), allowing a possible suggestion for how conversations around the dead, and criticising these individuals, may lead to anti-social behaviours to occur. Socolovsky (2004) highlights the extent that social media is influential in constructing memories around the dead. This may offer a positive outlook on social media’s impact: it gives individuals the ability to construct experiences of mourning which may help them to cope with the loss. However, Socolovsky (2004) also notes that the language and images used on such online forums may result in subjective experiences based on individual reactions to different posts and may not always be positive. This therefore suggests that the influence of social media on the grieving process may not be universal and thus cannot be generalised. Building on Socolovsky’s (2004) ideas around memory making functions of online forums around death, we may apply Denham’s (2016) insights into the memory making function of museum exhibits and how this influences how the deceased are remembered. Interpreting this in the online sense we can consider social media posts in the same light as museum exhibits due to their permanence and availability to be viewed by the public. This highlights the extent of which digital memorialisation (such as memorial Facebook pages) can influence the collective memory of an individual – for good or bad.

Touching back on the ‘darker’ communication that comes with death related social media interactions (Leonard and Toller, 2012), Brubaker et al (2012) similarly note that online posts around death generally consist of more negatively emotive language in comparison to pre-death posts about the same individuals. However, this could simply reflect the general human tendency for anxiety around death (Becker, 2007; Cozzolino et al, 2014). Lingel (2013) also highlights the ‘disruptive’ nature of social media in the grieving process by altering traditional death rituals, but highlights the positive impact of the communal characteristic of social media and the importance of this when dealing with bereavement. However, this ‘communal’ aspect of death related social media use, Lingel (2013) argues, is not always consistent and thus may be detrimental to the individuals seeking support this way. This is supported by suggestions by Rossetto et al (2015) who propose that seeking support during bereavement online may prevent individuals from coping properly with

adjusting to life after their loss, but highlights the positive potential for emotional expression provided by the online environment. This positive factor echoes the 'continuing bonds' theory put forth by Maddrell (2013), which proposes that the bereaved continue communication with the dead in order to help them process the loss. Here communication acts as a 'transitional stage' (Maddrell, 2013), and reflects Lofland's (1985) suggestions that the behaviours associated with this 'transitional' grieving stage are heavily influenced by a social shaping process and the interactional setting – a key finding if we are to understand the potential influence of social media. Yet, mirroring Socolovsky's (2004) ideas around the subjective nature of images used on death-related websites, Heng (2018) notes that not all visual media is able to continue these bonds, and argues the need to carefully select what media is used to help contextualise the practice of grieving for the individual.

### 2.3 Reactions to 'Good' death, 'bad' death and memorialisation

Within the realm of Death Studies, a large proportion of literature focuses on the concept of what constitutes a 'good death' or a 'bad death'. This is key to this study as it will help us to understand why different types of deaths, or the characteristics associated with them such as age and race of the deceased, may provoke different reactions. Traditionally within death studies, the understanding of what could be considered a 'good death' is largely used to contribute towards improving end-of-life care and medical practices, yet Emanuel and Emanuel (1998) suggest that these ideas remain rooted in societal death denial, with the focus on a 'good death' centred around 'longevity' of life, reflecting the human instinct to prevent death by any means. This idea of 'good death' is being increasingly institutionalised, with the concept being used to help transform the hospice experience for those who are dying, families of the dying, and those who care for them (McNamara, et al, 1994).

However, not all deaths occur in this environment, and not all deaths can be considered 'good'. Seale and Van der Geest (2004) suggest 'bad deaths' as ones that are typically 'socially disruptive', such as "violent death, a suicide, an unexpected death in childbirth, a death away from home, or where a body cannot be returned home for burial" (Seale and Van der Geest, 2004, p. 883). Existing literature around how reactions towards 'bad' deaths currently shows how reactions to different types of deaths may differ between context, location and social meaning. Suicide is one example of how these reactions may differ. This

type of death often provokes highly emotive reactions throughout society from health care professionals to family and acquaintances (Wurst et al, 2011). Young (2002) notes a considerable difference in social reactions towards suicide between Western societies (eg. Europe, USA and Australia) and Japan, highlighting that the act of self-sacrifice is highly admired in Japanese society. However, within a Western study of reactions to suicide, Batterham et al (2013) found that the most common views of individuals who commit suicide were they are “punishing others,” “selfish,” “hurtful,” “reckless,” and “weak,” (Batterham et al, 2013, p. 19). Frey et al (2015) also note that the highest levels of stigma associated with suicide were found within the social networks of victims. This may explain anti-social interpersonal interactions around suicides online. Leonard and Toller (2012) found that a large number of posts on a website designed to accommodate grieving families and open up discussions around death “only serve[d] to further stigmatize and shame survivors of suicide by negatively evaluating and harshly judging their deceased loved ones or even the loved ones themselves” (Leonard and Toller, 2012, p. 12).

Dying alone is another type of ‘bad’ socially difficult death which may serve a social purpose. Seale (2004) suggests that the media uses lonely deaths to frame societal failings, such as a person dying alone in a hospital bed, or an elderly person neglected by their family or social services. It is widely accepted that whilst dying at home is generally observed to contribute towards what is perceived as ‘good death’ (Klinenberg, 2001; Caswell and O’Connor, 2015), dying *alone* at home is described as a “powerful symbol of social abandonment and failure” (Klinenberg, 2001, p. 503). However, Caswell and O’Connor (2015) present an alternative narrative for those who exist in social exclusion prior to their deaths, suggesting that many of these individuals may make the active choice to withdraw from society as a form of ‘social death’. Kellehear (2009) even suggests that making the choice to die alone in old age presents “individual triumphs of agency, resistance and dissent” (Kellehear, 2009, p.6), arguing that this change in perspective should be widely accepted in order to better equip end-of-life care practices. Further literature suggests that the tragic nature of dying alone, paired with the acceptance that many individuals who die alone may have made that active choice, may cause a feeling of ambiguity within media reporting of such cases. This could suggest society’s ‘ambivalence’ towards the idea that we should be able to choose how we die in modern society (Turner and Caswell, 2019). This is



an idea which, as Walter et al (1995) suggest, is undermined by the media's representations of these deaths as tragic which in turn results in calls for social action to control how we can die (and live). Seale (2004) highlights how the media discourse around lonely deaths is more often focused on inducing sympathy, but notes that certain characteristics about a person's life may be subject to criticism, including whether they purposely isolated themselves from family or were homeless. This again may work to warn people against particular lifestyles which are deemed undesirable or socially illegitimate (Caswell and O'Connor, 2015). Using this idea around media framing of lonely deaths to warn society against certain lifestyles, it will be interesting to observe later on in this research whether the same pattern occurs for other types of deaths too, to warn against choices such as drug use or an individual's sex life.

We must further consider how such deaths are viewed by other societies, as this may introduce us to cultural similarities and differences within the idea of 'good' and 'bad' deaths. Van der Geest (2004) concludes that a peaceful death is frequently considered a 'good' death across most cultures – an idea supported by a large number of studies into cultural definitions of good and bad deaths (Ko et al, 2013). It is therefore what is considered a 'bad' death that best illustrates cultural differences in non-western perspectives on death. One example of these differences lies in the Buddhist belief of Karma, which suggests that bad death may occur due to misdeeds during an individual's current or past life (Formoso, 1998). Furthermore, this idea of spirituality informing ideas about 'bad' death is reflected in a study of the people of Kwahu-Tafo – a town in Ghana – who attributed the untimely death of a woman to being due to witchcraft (Van der Geest, 2004). On the other hand, spirituality positively informed ideas around death in one study on Mexican American's perspectives on 'good' and 'bad' deaths, illustrate death as being viewed as "a response to God's calling" (Ko et al, 2013, p. 18). Furthermore, Ko et al (2013) acknowledge that within the Mexican American perspective, the experience of a 'good' or 'bad' death also applied to the families and those left to grieve too. For example, whilst a sudden death was generally considered a 'good' death for the deceased due to their lack of suffering, this could be a painful experience of 'bad' death for the remaining family of the deceased (Ko et al, 2013).

Whilst it is important to note that this research aims to focus on reactions to death, it is important to also consider how society may react to the deceased individuals themselves, those who lived socially difficult lives: the 'difficult dead' (Spokes et al, 2018). This will allow us to draw a distinction between which responses in the data stem from reactions to the death and which have occurred as a reaction to the individual.

Foltyn (2016) notes: "famed or ordinary, dead bodies evoke a variety of symbols, understandings and ambiguity, and hold different meanings, depending upon the perspective of the individuals considering them" (Foltyn, 2016, p. 246). With this in mind, we must acknowledge how Spokes et al (2018) posit the concept of the 'difficult dead' as an idea around the dead whom are considered problematic, with 'difficult heritage', a life and a physical body that society should refuse to glorify due to the history attached. Riisøy (2015) acknowledges historical practices of denying bad individuals a respectful burial due to the actions taken in their life. This may reflect a social need to make a physical example out of certain individuals – supporting the idea that these difficult, tragic deaths may offer themselves as "contemporary parables about morality and social norms" (Penfold-Mounce, 2018, p.11). This also echoes Denham's (2016) contributions around museums and their role in memory making for the dead, reflecting on the permanence of memorialisation and lasting memories. It has also been suggested that shrines for the dead, existing in the public sphere, "become subject to conflict and controversy [...] where different audiences with different agendas compete for power and control" (Doss, 2002, p. 71). Spokes et al (2018) question how, if possible, we can "memorialize the dead and preserve the architecture of the past without enshrining a space for dark tourists to make their own" (Spokes et al, 2018, p. 2). Although Spokes et al (2018), Denham (2016) and Doss (2002) consider memorialization in the physical sense, we also need to consider memorialization by means of public perception and memory. This could suggest a need to ensure certain individuals are not remembered purely for their crimes, as this may also result in anti-social positive attention towards individuals who should not be celebrated.

Instead of focusing on the difficult social meanings attached to a high-profile individual's body, we could reflect on the difficult social meanings attached to their actual death instead. In essence, in the same way Spokes et al (2018) posit that society should refuse to

glorify these individuals for their life histories, we must question whether society should also refuse to glorify individuals for the type of death they suffered and use these instances as a 'lesson learned'. Jan-Margry, and Sánchez-Carretero (2007) highlight how socially traumatic death often results in calls for social change as a replacement for physical memorialisation. An example of this is highlighted by Pantti and Sumiala (2009) who present the case of the sensationalised death of a police constable in 1958, and how it was presented via the media as a threat to social order. The death was used to present calls for the social order to be "restored through the effective action of officials and the obedience of the people" (Pantti and Sumiala, 2009, p. 132). This may lead us to consider how socially traumatic death such as the case studies proposed for this study actually require public scrutiny in order to bring about positive change, offering support for the suggestion that there is in fact a functional need for difficult and bad deaths within society. These calls for 'obedience' could be alternatively viewed as a form of social control, as mentioned previously (Altheide, 2013; Entman, 2007), and thus the social change that comes as a result of this may not be as entirely positive as first perceived.

#### 2.4 Conclusion

This literature review chapter puts forward existing ideas around news media coverage, social media behaviour, and ideas around what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' death and how social meanings of death may cause implications in memorialisation. Identifying these three broad categories of literature allows us to begin to consider the research aim – to explore high-profile media-centred deaths in social media on Twitter – in the context of the wider world of research. With this in mind, we move onto the methodology chapter which will outline which cases of high-profile death have been selected as well as a justification for Twitter as the social media site through which the data will be extracted.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The aim of this research is to explore high-profile deaths on Twitter, with two central research questions. Firstly, what type of responses to high-profile deaths manifest in the social media environment of Twitter? And secondly, in the age of social media, what is the current relationship between social media and mainstream news coverage? This study focuses on the social media microblogging site Twitter, on which these manifestations can be observed. This study also entails six case studies of different high-profile deaths. These six case studies will then be subject to thematic analysis to capture any general patterns and trends which may help us to draw conclusions in tandem with the research questions.

### **3.1 Twitter as a Data Source and Sampling**

Gundecha and Liu (2012, p.2) argue that “social media gives users an easy-to-use way to communicate and network with each other on an unprecedented scale and at rates unseen in traditional media”. This research seeks to analyse communication within the social media platform, Twitter. Twitter was chosen as the source of social media data due to its real-time, chronological textual data, condensed into 140 characters (increased to 280 characters in 2017), which presents a timeline of easily digestible data pieces. Fischer and Reuber (2011) highlight the ability to draft, rewrite, and revisit other’s posts unlimited times, without the necessity of being ‘friends’ or necessarily ‘following’ others, as a key influencing factor on the socially interactive aspect of Twitter. This may influence users to construct posts purposefully, feeding off how other’s present their opinions and how their reaction may be perceived by others. Whilst this may lead to less validity within individual’s posts – they may not convey their true opinions – this will instead reveal how users present opinions which they may feel expected to hold by their wider online community. The only limitation of this is that it may be difficult to identify which opinions are legitimate and which are superficial, crafted to fit the dominant agenda. These practical characteristics of Twitter are a beneficial for this research.

Zimmer and Proferes (2014) acknowledge how many researchers choose Twitter because of the terms and conditions, which subsequently allow third parties access to “use, copy,

reproduce, process, adapt, modify, publish, transmit display and distribute such content in any and all media or distribution methods” (Twitter, 2020), thus not requiring consent from those who posted the data. As summarized by Zimmer and Proferes (2014, p.250): “Twitter has emerged as a valuable resource for tapping into the zeitgeist of the internet, its users, and often beyond”. However, a limitation of using Twitter as a data set is that online interactions more often occur within communities (Gundecha and Liu, 2012). As noted already, there may be cases where the Twitter users do not share their honest opinions due to an unwillingness to go against the dominant ideas within that group, such as fan base or political party. However, Gundecha and Liu (2012) also acknowledge how these social media communities are extremely dynamic in that these groups are always expanding, reconnecting and changing.

This research will employ a non-probability purposive sample in which the researcher will use advanced search of key terms to select between 250-300 relevant Tweets per case study. A purposive sample is beneficial to this study as it ensures that only relevant information and data is selected for the study, thus resulting in strengthened internal validity (Tongco, 2007). However, this method of data collection comes with a number of limitations. For example, what the researcher may perceive to be relevant data may be perceived as irrelevant to another. Therefore, the researcher must be trusted to make an attempt at remaining unbiased and impartial, and not select data just because it agrees with the prior assumptions or expectations of the researcher (Tongco, 2007).

### 3.2 Selecting the Case Studies

In order to approach the aforementioned research questions, six cases of high-profile death were selected in order to observe collective reactions and patterns. As Burgess et al (2018) concludes: “celebrity death is a major cultural event that has especially acute and amplified dynamics in the context of digital and social media, where it operates as a social media ritual” (Burgess, et al, 2018, p. 18). These ‘amplified dynamics’ will help the researcher to draw conclusions which can be applied to reactions to death more generally. Whilst not all of the cases may explicitly feature what we would consider ‘celebrities’, they all had high-profile deaths which propelled them into the media spotlight and forefront of social conversation. It is this conversation within which we seek to identify patterns and themes

between the case studies. Yardley (2000) highlights the importance of acknowledging the socio-cultural influence on the individuals who are creating the data in what they refer to as 'sensitivity to context'. Bearing in mind the need for sensitivity to context aids the researcher in avoiding unnecessary generalisations about the data, and those interacting in the online environment, especially in cases where different time periods are being considered (Robinson, 2014). We must accept that the behavioural patterns observed within these mediums change over time. In 2012 it was reported that only 16% of internet users used Twitter (Duggan and Brenner, 2013) compared to 24% in 2016 (Greenwood et al, 2016), and thus with such an increase in users it cannot be assumed that the responses to celebrity death may be presented in the same way. Leetaru (2019), on the other hand, found that between 2012 and 2018, although the number of active Twitter users increased, the number of Tweets being sent had remained at a consistent level, perhaps presenting evidence to suggest that Twitter may be being used in a different more passive way than it had been in the past as there had not been a Tweet increase in line with the increase of users. As this research includes case studies of deaths that occurred between 2013 and 2020, this is important to keep in mind.

A gender balance was also sought within the case studies, as media coverage surrounding high-profile males and females differs. Historically, many forms of television media were accused of attempting to tackle any accusations of gender imbalance with the 'token' female individual amongst the line-up, whether that be a character in a TV show, a guest on a panel show, or a news presenter (Gauntlett, 2003, p. 37). Therefore, it would be significant to consider whether women continue to receive less attention than their male counterparts. It is also of interest to the researcher to consider whether gender differences in themes or language were perpetuated within discussions around death in the social media environment.

Using Twitter as the primary data source for public reactions to death, there are a number of important factors to consider. Firstly, all Tweets gathered from all six case studies exist with the 'Top Tweets' category in the search tool. This section generally features Tweets within the search term that received the most engagement. Whilst this may stand as a positive, as it shows Tweets which received the most agreement or support in the way of

Retweets (RTs), likes, or replies, it may also be that provocative Tweets sparked debate or controversy and therefore appeared due to their increased engagement. Therefore, the researcher must be careful when attempting to draw conclusions from the data set and consider the possibility that the algorithm may lend way to decreased reliability in some instances. On the other hand, the algorithm may allow for consensus opinions to be more easily observed, which would be of considerable value in drawing conclusions in relation to the research questions and aim. Tweets which occur within the 'Top Tweets' subsection of Twitter searches are also influenced by who the user of the account performing the search follows and interacts with. However, because the researcher had not interacted within any of the accounts, search terms, or Tweets featured within any of the case studies, this is deemed to have had no impact on the Tweets highlighted from the search.

Due to the use of the advanced search feature on Twitter, the search was conducted to select only Tweets written in the English language. Because of the world-wide impact of a number of cases studies used within this research project, this was deemed necessary in order to limit the amount of unusable data that the search would turn up. One subsequent limitation of this, however, is that it may result in unintentional ethnocentrism, which Chen (2010) suggests occurs when the researcher does not take intercultural sensitivity into account. Chen (2005) highlights the internet's influence on the interconnectivity we experience in the world today, allowing for lines of communication and interaction to be blurred between cultures. This study's inability to make use of this valuable feature of the internet may mean that cross-cultural examination of reactions to each case study is not possible, and thus the results may only be generalisable to English-speaking cultures.

Tweets resulting from advanced searches taken place per case study were gathered and analysed by the researcher. This allowed for the manual sifting of Tweets such as spam Tweets and copied Tweets, and also allowed the researcher to pick out general 'rest in peace'/'RIP' Tweets which offered little individual insight. This meant the researcher had a duty to construct a strong, valid and representative bank of data, in order for the conclusions to maintain integrity to the study aims. Notably, the subjective nature of qualitative data may mean that the researcher may not perceive some pieces of information as particularly relevant, or perceive the Tweet in the way that the user intended. The same

issue of subjectivity arises from the fact that Twitter only allows for up to 280 characters per Tweet (formally 140 prior to 2017), as users may not have had the characters available to put their point across as fully intended and thus may allow for misunderstood perception.

Subjectivity in qualitative data may not be an entirely negative characteristic. Parker (1999) notes the importance of theory-guided observations in qualitative research, suggesting that there is a range of different positions from which a text can be observed, which helps to build a better well-rounded understanding. Parker (1999) also suggests the need for researchers to maintain reflexivity in their interpretations, being open to a range of different theoretical readings of their data. Ratner (2002) argues that it is beneficial for the researcher to acknowledge the potential for subjectivity within their research, as it allows them to “reflect on whether it facilitates or impedes objective comprehension” (Ratner, 2002, p.3). Ratner (2002) goes on to suggest that in order to draw objective facts from qualitative data, subjective interpretations are required to promote deductive reasoning from a number of different perspectives.

In order to obtain a greater understanding of responses to death, a representative range of types of high-profile deaths were selected. High-profile deaths which stimulated little social media response, or which provoked responses from niche groups were deemed not representative of the general population’s reactions. An example of this is the death of rapper XXXTentacion (known as X), who was murdered due to gang violence in 2008. Despite provoking an overwhelming and polarising reaction, response to X’s death came predominantly from fans online, due to his beginnings as a ‘Soundcloud rapper’ (a sub-group of unsigned rappers who are often unknown to the mainstream music community). Although the online community dedicated to X reacted strongly to news of his death, these reactions could not be generalised to wider society. An active choice was made to avoid the inclusion of deaths which may have been unsurprising to the general population, as these would not provoke enough of an observable reaction. Although still tragic, these deaths may not be considered ‘difficult’ as they do not stimulate social or moral conflict beyond the fan base.



### 3.3 The Case Studies

#### Case 1: Flack, Caroline (2020)

Caroline Flack was a well-known British TV personality known for presenting 'Love Island' before allegations of domestic violence had her replaced. These allegations of violence against her boyfriend were rife in the mainstream media despite Flack not actually being convicted. On February 15<sup>th</sup> 2020, Flack took her life as a result of the constant hounding by mainstream media, media accusations and online abuse that circulated within social media.

Tweets for this study were selected from those posted between February 15<sup>th</sup> 2020, the date of Flack's death, and April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the date that the data was collected, due to the fact the inquest into her death had been adjourned until an undecided later date. The search term "Caroline Flack" was used to collect the data.

#### Case 2: Ibbotson, David (2019)

David Ibbotson was not in the public eye before his death. He died as a result of a plane crash, whilst flying Cardiff City striker Emiliano Sala back to the UK from France. Whilst Sala's body was found 17 days after the crash, Ibbotson's body still has not been recovered. The controversy around his death stems from two sides. Firstly, the news media heavily blamed Ibbotson for the death of Sala, portraying him as an incompetent and careless pilot and constantly questioning his flying qualifications (see: Independent, 2019). Secondly, Ibbotson's death was often disregarded due to the publicity around Sala – with the media often neglecting the fact that Ibbotson had also lost his life in the same tragic circumstances.

Data collected for this case study required an advanced search using the key term "David Ibbotson". Data included Tweets posted from between January 21<sup>st</sup> 2019, the date of the accident, and April 6<sup>th</sup> 2020 – the day on which the data for this case study was collected. This is due to the fact Ibbotson's body had still not been found and thus is an ongoing case. This case also included additional data that appeared within the 'Latest Tweets' tab as the majority of the data that appeared within the 'Top Tweets' tab using the key term for this case was skewed by the popularity of Sala and lacked focus on Ibbotson.

### Case 3: Thatcher, Margaret (2013)

Ex-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher died as the result of a stroke, which would typically be considered a 'normal' death for an 87-year-old woman. What makes her death different to the other selected cases within this study is that it is the difficult social reaction to news of her death and life history of Thatcher which causes conflict, rather than the actual event of the death occurring. Her death was met with celebration by many (Neild, 2013).

"Margaret Thatcher" was the key search term used in the advanced search for this case study. The data was selected to show Tweets posted between April 8<sup>th</sup> 2013, the date of Thatcher's death, and April 19<sup>th</sup> 2013, two days after her funeral. The timeframe for this case study is considerably smaller than others due to the immense nation-wide reaction to her death. A smaller time frame was needed to ensure a manageable size data sample could be collected. In addition to the replicated search terms for each study, general commentary on Thatcher's life was omitted from the data sample to ensure the focus of the data remained on her death.

### Case 4: Millane, Grace (2018)

Grace Millane was not famous prior to her death - it was the media attention around her murder that turned her into a household name. Millane was backpacking around New Zealand after graduating from university when she was murdered by a date she had met online. Whilst women are typically more likely to be murdered by an intimate partner (Kellermann and Mercy, 1992), it was the context around her murder which sparked major media interest. Details around her sexual preference for BDSM were highlighted as the accused used this as defence for her murder, stating that the death had been accidental, the result of sexual misadventure (Hurley, 2019).

Data for the Millane case was taken from an advanced search of Tweets using the key term "Grace Millane" posted between the December 9<sup>th</sup> 2018 when her body was first found, and March 20<sup>th</sup> 2020, two days after the news revealed that the suspect was appealing their conviction. These dates were selected as arguments within the data around gender bias as well as scrutiny of the media coverage began to build over time.

### Case 5: Monteith, Cory (2013)

Famous prior to his death for playing the 'good boy' persona, Finn Hudson, on 'Glee', Cory Monteith's sudden death shocked the public due to its surprising and tragic nature.

Monteith had been recovering from a heroin addiction when he relapsed, his reduced tolerance resulted in an accidental overdose (O'Sullivan, 2017). His death was met by many opposing views; whilst many fans acknowledged the heart-breaking nature of his death and mourned for him, many others branded his death selfish and wasteful.

Data collection for Monteith involved use of an advanced search within the Twitter search tool. The advanced search looked for tweets using the key term "Cory Monteith", dating between 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2013 – the date of his death – and 5<sup>th</sup> October, 2013 – two days after the publication of the final coroner's report into his death. The decision to look at data dating after the publication of the final coroner's report is to allow the public and media a chance to react to any information that this report may have revealed.

The advanced search also removed Tweets containing the hashtag "#MTVHottest" (a hashtag used as method of voting in an online-based MTV competition) as well as Tweets mentioning "tribute" or "episode", as within the specified time frame, a tribute episode of Glee for Monteith was released. The decision to remove Tweets containing these terms from the data set was to ensure relevance to the research question. For example, Tweets about the tribute episode are less likely to involve a valuable commentary on reactions to death or media coverage of the deceased, and thus may result in irrelevant data being collected. Similarly, the 'MTV Hottest' competition relies on users spamming the hashtag with the individual they would like to win, thus these Tweets were also unlikely to be of any research value within the study. A common occurrence within Tweets observed within the hashtag were quotes from songs or direct quotes from various characters from 'Glee' used to commemorate Monteith, as well as commemorative Tweets copied directly from other users en masse – these were also omitted from the data collected as they were deemed to have no value within this study.

### Case 6: Rigby, Lee (2013)

Lee Rigby's death was inherently politicised due to it being the result of an act of terrorism, as the perpetrators stated the motive behind their attack was to take "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" in regards to Muslims dying as a result of British foreign policy in the Middle East (Dodd, 2013). Rigby's death provoked a sense of anger amongst the British public, leading to an increase in Islamophobia and subsequent 'revenge' attacks across the UK (BBC, 2013).

An advanced search was conducted using the key term "Lee Rigby" in order to obtain data for this case study. This advanced search presented tweets from 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2013 (the day after he was murdered, and the day he was named publicly as the victim of the attack), and 21<sup>st</sup> December, 2013 (2 days after his attackers were finally found guilty). The choice for available data to stretch until two days after the attackers were found guilty was to allow the public time to react to the news, and ensure vital reactions were not missed.

### 3.4 Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was used in order to identify patterns and trends within the data set. Any reoccurring themes observed will help the researcher draw conclusions as to how society may feel towards certain deaths as a whole. Braun and Clark (2012, pp 60-69) offer a six-step process of conducting thematic analysis as follows:

- 1) familiarising yourself with the data
- 2) generating initial codes
- 3) searching for themes
- 4) reviewing potential themes
- 5) defining and naming themes
- 6) producing the report.

Braun and Clark (2012) argue that by following these steps, a thorough and sophisticated analysis can be undertaken, thus allowing the researcher to come to more valid conclusions. Using the qualitative data derived from this study, an inductive analysis of themes will be used in order to begin to highlight emerging themes within the study. Pope et al (2000) suggest that this method of inductive analysis is beneficial to the researcher due to its

inclusive nature; themes are not reduced to simple codes and can be extended to encompass any particular opinions or important information to any extent to which they exist within the text, meaning the thematic categories are unlimited. Alhojailan (2012) highlights the absence of pre-existing themes as a positive element of thematic analysis; this allows the analysis process to be finely adapted to the study at hand.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

The ethical implication of anonymity remains challenged by the very public nature of social media and online practices of data storage (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). As per point 16 of the British Sociological Association's 'Statement of Ethical Practice' (BSA, 2017, p. 5) states: "it is important to safeguard the anonymity of research participants", the researcher must therefore commit to ensuring anonymity to the best extent possible. This will include the anonymization of any usernames or references to the user profile; each Tweet used within the following chapters will be referred to as '@CasestudyData1' for example. The anonymity requirements will also mean that any potentially identifying information contained within the Tweets such as personal information, locations, or specific identifying language which may be unique to the account user will be omitted.

Furthermore, although point 18 of the BSA (2017) guidelines suggests a need for informed consent from participants involved, the previously mentioned Twitter terms of service state that if accepted, as is required to use the site, third party users have the freedom to "use, copy, reproduce, process, adapt, modify, publish, transmit display and distribute such content in any and all media or distribution methods" (Twitter, 2020). This research also does not require the use of active human participants and will not purposely provoke certain behaviours for specific use in this study. This study simply aims to gather information produced by individuals at their own free will, all of which will have been published between one and seven years prior to the writing of this thesis. It can also be assumed that users who Tweet publically using key words without the adoption of privacy measures on their account are aware that they are easily visible to the rest of the website's users. With these factors considered, it should be understood that informed consent is not required in this instance.

### 3.6 Conclusion

The method for this research, in order to address the research aim and questions, entails a thematic analysis of purposive, non-probability Twitter data collected from six case studies of high-profile deaths selected between 2013 and 2020. These six case studies will be balanced in gender and varied in type of death in order to ensure generalizability of results and the data will be extracted based on standardized set of criteria for each case. The data will be anonymised to ensure confidentiality in line with the BSA (2017) guidelines, thus any identifying information will be removed. Using the methodology set out within this chapter, the next chapter will present the first set of thematic findings – ‘unnegotiable sympathy’ – and will discuss the emerging themes within this.

## **Chapter 4: Unnegotiable Sympathy and Difficult Death**

This analysis chapter seeks to answer the research question: what type of responses to high-profile deaths manifest in the social media environment of Twitter? This is achieved by establishing the theme of 'difficult death' within the data collected, and how socially difficult deaths and life histories may be an important influential factor on the grieving behaviours observed on Twitter. This chapter also reveals sympathy towards the dead as unnegotiable, despite news media narratives. This is conceptualised as 'unnegotiable sympathy' and explored via a number of sympathetic subthemes. Firstly, through 'deserving sympathy' due to gender, race, and age group; secondly, 'sympathetic reactions' which acknowledge society's relationship to the family as a tool to explore the influence of death anxiety; and finally 'compulsive sympathy' as a response to fear of 'bad death'. These subthemes interrogate society's perceptions of the value of life and the complexity surrounding socially 'difficult' death.

### **4.1 The difficult *dead* and difficult *death***

Responses to high-profile deaths on Twitter reveal that despite those whose deaths are 'deserving sympathy' or produce 'compulsive sympathy' and 'sympathetic reactions', the *difficult dead* (Spokes et al 2018) evoke certain reactions too. This term refers to those who's histories are symbolically problematic to memorialise (Spokes et al, 2018) or morally disruptive (Robins and Smith, 2020). These physical embodiments of social disruption contrast what this study presents as difficult *deaths*. These difficult deaths are the ones whose deaths themselves are socially challenging, for example they may be socially transgressive such as a drug overdose of an 'innocent' idol (Monteith), or socially feared, such as a terrorist attack (Rigby) or a murder contextually centred around sex and gendered violence (Millane).

This research shows that it is also essential to make a distinction between the difficult *dead* (Spokes et al, 2018), difficult *death*, and the well-known idea of '*bad death*'. Seale and Van Der Geest (2004) posit 'bad deaths' to be those which are particularly violent or premature, lonely, far from home, the result of suicide or where the body cannot be returned. Whilst

five of the six case studies (all with the exception of Thatcher) fall into this category, this research reveals that this categorisation is simply not enough to explain the extent of the reactions in the Twitter-sphere following these deaths. This study calls for the interrogation of the social contexts in which ‘bad deaths’ fall in order to fully grasp the social difficulty in processing the meaning behind them and the lasting effect they may have on society, and how this emerges within subsequent discussions. For example, whilst the murder of a young woman would always be a socially devastating occurrence, the case of Millane was enveloped in arguments around sex, gender, and the media’s hand in furthering problematic discourses around sexuality and victimisation – a bad death as well as a socially difficult one:

*Awfully shocking that Grace Millane was MURDERED and they are scrutinising her dating profile and ex partners about her sexual preferences and exposing them in the media, as a way of basically saying she asked for it. What a disgusting world this is. (@MillaneData1)*

An entirely different social argument exists around the Ibbotson case. Whilst Ibbotson’s death fits into the definition of ‘bad death’ as his body is yet to be found and returned home, the case sparked debates around media interest in ‘normal’ people and whether he would have been afforded the same attention had famous footballer Emiliano Sala’s body not been found first:

*#DavidIbbotson...The news channels don't care about the pilot...The search team were only funded by Footballers so they don't care about the pilot...All you hear are about the FOOTBALLER (sic). Makes you sick...If you are not known then [they] don't care about you. Shame on you all... (@IbbotsonData1).*

For the case of Monteith, whilst celebrity overdoses are often unsurprising, this example was particularly problematic as it was such a socially transgressive death for a young man who was essentially idolised by millions of teenage fans: “So Cory Monteith was mixing heroin with alcohol yet he's been hailed a hero and his death is being treated as tragic. He is NOT a role model” (@MonteithData1). Flack’s suicide was socially difficult because it was a result of society’s abusive online behaviour towards her and her treatment by the media, criticising her for a crime she had not yet been convicted of:

*Those preaching about mental health and sending condolences to Caroline Flack are the ones who were dragging her through Twitter last week. The world we live in is*



*nasty and toxic and we need to realise the impact of our onscreen words.*

(@FlackData1)

As well as debates around gender and domestic violence:

*If Caroline Flack had been a man you would all be celebrating now. But because she is a woman it's "everybody makes mistakes". Nobody should kill themselves, suicide is the most saddest (sic) & horrible thing. Wishing somebody dead is disgusting. But cut the sexism! Abuse knows no gender. (@FlackData2)*

And finally, the Rigby murder was inherently socially difficult due to it being a result of a terrorist attack whilst being the image of a working class hero – having fought for his country, with a young son at home: *“Rest in Peace Drummer Lee Rigby. Survived Afghanistan to be slain by terrorists on the streets of our capital. Steady the Drums”* (@RigbyData1).

One of the common factors within all of these cases of ‘difficult death’ was that the discourse was relatively consistent, in that there was little debate over what was the right way of thinking. The Flack case posed slight debate due to the accusations of domestic violence, but the five case studies were in agreement that the deaths were tragic. This may be due to the social agreement that the deaths were objectively horrific and thus deserving of unnegotiable sympathy - a result of social fear.

The only case study which cannot be defined a ‘bad’ death or a difficult death is Thatcher – who died of a stroke - a reasonably common death for the elderly - at the respectable age of 87. It is the life history of Thatcher which makes her death socially problematic, rather than the context around her death, resulting in the meaning attached to her physical being as what was considered ‘difficult’. This could lead Thatcher to, arguably, be considered an example of the ‘difficult dead’ (Spokes et al, 2018) and thus, the socially problematic life history could lend an explanation as to why patterns of unnegotiable sympathy observed in the other case studies are not observed here. This lack of sympathy can be observed within the Twitter data: *“Margaret Thatcher has died. We won't gloat but there will be no tears shed in west Belfast. The cuts are too deep and her legacy too sore”* (@ThatcherData1); *“Margaret Thatcher has died. Sadly her legacy lives on”* (@ThatcherData2).

Whilst we must be reluctant in labelling political figures under the category of the 'difficult dead' due to the polarising nature of politics, we must also highlight the importance of holding such figures to account. When holding these figures to account, their memorialisation and way in which their legacy is discussed often falls at the centre of this. For example, in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in London, the memorialisation of Winston Churchill has come under fire, due to his links to British Colonialism whilst in power (Stubley, 2020). Arguments around whether their rights to memorialisation are afforded simply by being a human being, or whether their actions in life negate this, are observed in both the cases of Churchill and Thatcher: "*Margaret Thatcher is dead but her ideas live on. I don't think it's the least bit inhumane to fervently wish it was the other way round*" (@ThatcherData3). Either way it is clearly observed that negative actions in life are one of the few variables that can negate whether an individual is worthy of the sympathy which, for the most part, remains unnegotiable and unshaken despite the context of the death.

#### 4.2 Deserving Sympathy

The first subtheme within the idea of unnegotiable sympathy is conceptualised as 'deserving sympathy'. These responses focus on discussions around the intersections of gender, race and age, all of which exist at the forefront of sociological research, death included. The data in this research suggests that these intersectional characteristics are used to both promote sympathy towards those deemed to have suffered a difficult death, as well as argue that their intersectional counterparts deserve more sympathy than that they are currently afforded. Furthermore, as demographic characteristics of the deceased individual elicit different sympathetic responses, this highlights the need to consider the news media's role in the selection of which demographics are selected to be covered in news stories about death. As posited by Hanusch (2008, p.2), existing "literature shows that the media appear to place different values on people according to their age, gender, status, as well as on the cause of death". With this in mind, the news media's choice to focus on certain deaths and not others is evidence of the news media's selectivity and bias. For example, the sensationalised case of Millane's death had people arguing that, had she been a native New Zealander who had gone missing in New Zealand, the story would not have been as emphasised as it was:

*I wonder if the next Māori or Sāmoan or Tongan woman who is murdered by a man here in New Zealand will be afforded the same mainstream media and widespread public support that got this white British girl #GraceMillane on the front page of our national newspaper (@MillaneData2)*

Others used rejection of these scornful condemnations of racial bias in the media, however, to bring light to the struggles of women of colour in a way that suggests the existence of the unnegotiable sympathy outlined in this chapter – highlighting that regardless of context, everyone should be afforded equal sympathy in death:

*You can be upset that Grace Millane was violently killed at the hands of a man in NZ. You can be upset that it took a white woman being killed for domestic violence to get so much widespread media coverage when WOC cases go largely unnoticed. One does not cancel out the other. (@MillaneData3)*

Whilst the case of Millane highlighted racial bias in sympathetic responses presented within the mainstream media, the case of Flack highlights this but in terms of social reaction to her death. The responses that drew on these racial biases tended to be used to reject sympathy for Flack, arguing that it is only her demographic characteristics which allowed for the outpourings of ‘deserving sympathy’ towards her that reflected over-arching unnegotiable sympathy:

*Everyone's rightly going to melt about Caroline Flack' suicide despite her being a domestic abuser, yet SJW twitter celebrated XXXTENTACIONs death because he did the same thing. Probs because she was a white woman (sic). (@FlackData3).*

And in terms of gender:

*If Caroline Flack had been a man you would all be celebrating now. But because she is a woman it's "everybody makes mistakes" [...] cut the sexism! Abuse knows no gender. (@FlackData2)*

On the other hand, in the case of Ibbotson, Madeline McCann is used to illustrate an opposite response, with people suggesting that if she was deserving of so much attention, Ibbotson should receive the same: “So the police will continually fund money to try and find Madeleine McCann who’s been missing for 12 years but wont fund a search for David Ibbotson who’s been missing for less than 6 weeks..... okay then” (@IbbotsonData2). Rigby’s death was also considered in this way, with the data revealing the use of the cases of Mark

Duggan and Stephen Lawrence to suggest that Rigby was more deserving of media outcry: *“Lee Rigby = a hero serving his country forgotten by media.... Steven (sic) Lawrence = a talentless yob who the media never let us forget”* (@RigbyData2); *“No media coverage or Lee Rigby murder trial this after 20 years of having Stephen Lawrence rammed down our throats #madnessoftheleft”* (@RigbyData3). The Twitter data also suggested Trayvon Martin, a black 17-year-old who was murdered by George Zimmerman in circumstances closely mirroring the murder of Rigby in 2012, and whose death was also heavily mourned online, should be no more deserving of sympathy than Rigby. However, it is important to highlight the racist undertones within the data extracted from the Rigby case, and acknowledge the emergence of racially fuelled animosity evoked by certain far-right groups who used Rigby’s death to further their agenda. This was not a common occurrence amongst any of the other case studies included within this study.

Age in particular is mentioned frequently across many of the case studies. For example, in the cases of Flack, Millane, Monteith and Rigby, there was considerable acknowledgement of the tragedy of dying young. Notably, to ‘die young’ in this research refers not to children, but to those who died before their average life expectancy. Cases where those who lost their lives at the hands of another individual (Millane and Rigby) stressed an unfairness at their premature death: *“Grace Millane was murdered at the age of 22”* (@MillaneData4); *“RIP Lee Rigby. Just 25 years old, so sad. No parent should have to bury their children.”* Whilst on the other hand, the cases of young death where the individual had a hand in their own death (Flack and Monteith) referenced the early death as a tragic ‘waste’: *“So devastated to hear the news of poor Caroline Flack. A terrible waste. She was a lovely funny beautiful girl with so much more to offer”* (@FlackData4), *“Cory Monteith is a good example why you shouldn't do drugs or get into alcohol. Such a great actor with great potential just wasted”* (@MonteithData2). This data falls inline with Batterham et al’s (2013)’s findings that self-inflicted deaths such as suicide are considered by Western culture to be irresponsible and unfair, less deserving of sympathy.

The cases studies also offer evidence for the extent of which age influences our perceptions of ‘bad death’ and how we react to this. Just as death at a young age was a sympathy-deserving factor for Millane and Rigby’s ‘bad death’, Thatcher’s death in old age was also

used as a call for increased sympathy despite aligning with what could be considered a 'good death'. This was presented with arguments that she was just an old lady who could not possibly be held accountable for her past: *"The Margaret Thatcher some of you hate died years ago, the person who died today was a frail old woman suffering with dementia. #respect"* (@ThatcherData4). Another common reaction was references to Thatcher with familial terms as if to make her death more relatable: *"Love her or loathe her, Mrs Margaret Thatcher was a someone's wife, loving mother and grandmother"* (@ThatcherData5). With others asking those who openly reacted to news of her death as positive news why her being dead just wasn't enough: *"To all those spewing bile and vitriol at Margaret Thatcher today - she's dead, what more do you want? Show some respect"* (@ThatcherData6). This evidence suggests that her old age somehow negates the polarizing and damaging actions she took in her life, almost allowing her to be exempt from criticism. This may be explained by Correia et al (2001), who found that being elderly was one of the few characteristics that prevented individuals from being subject to secondary victimisation by those who believe in a just world, due to their perceived innocence as demonstrated in @ThatcherData4. On the other hand, if we are to consider that sympathy for Thatcher was orchestrated by news media in a way that refuses to fully acknowledge her actions in life, we could explain this by applying Greer et al's (2005) conclusions that only the powerless are demonised by the popular media for their actions. Perhaps because of Thatcher's highly regarded political legacy, her actions were disregarded.

On the other hand, using Gekoski's (2012) theory of newsworthy victims considers Christie's construction of the 'perfect victim' (Christie, 1986 as cited in Gekowski, 2012) as innocent, vulnerable and, as seen in the case of Thatcher, elderly. Significantly, within the Thatcher case study these characteristics were often simultaneously acknowledged alongside the perceived wrong doings she orchestrated during her career and thus seemed to negate the blame. The data from Twitter regarding Thatcher revealed an acceptance of the socially negative actions Thatcher had taken during her time as Prime Minister. However, the sympathy for her death was unaffected by this due to her 'elderly woman' presentation. For example, as one piece of data expresses: *"Margaret Thatcher [was] responsible for so much wrong with this country, but I will not rejoice in the death of an old lady. Just mourn damage she did"* (@ThatcherData7). This Tweet refers to the reports of street parties that occurred

in the days following news of Thatcher's death (Neild, 2013) and serves as evidence of 'virtue signalling' – a concept to be explored in the next chapter.

Looking at why different demographics may be subject to different levels of sympathy, Gekoski et al's (2012) research into newsworthiness of homicide victims helps to explain the emerging themes within the high-profile death case studies, especially considering that all the case studies were major UK news stories. They reveal that there are a number of characteristics which comprise the 'perfect victim', including the "innocent, vulnerable, respectable and/or blameless", and more often this applies to women, children, and the upper class (Christie, 1986 as cited in Gekoski et al, 2012, p. 1217). This idea can be clearly observed in the cases of Flack and Millane. Other research into newsworthiness of homicide victims also suggested age as an important factor in the media's interest in the case: the younger the victim, the more coverage the death was afforded (Gruenewald et al, 2009). This may explain why the two cases of murder used within this study happen to be centred around young victims: Millane was 22, and Rigby was 26. In fact, a number of homicide victims were mentioned within the case studies, all of whom were below the age of thirty: Madeline McCann (assumed dead, three years old), Millie Dowler (13), Trayvon Martin (17), Stephen Lawrence (18), Tupac Shakur (25) and Mark Duggan (29). All of these notable cases of UK homicide were also heavily covered in the media which supports Gruenewald et al's (2009) suggestions. It could be that these deaths are simply more memorable to the public due to their age, and the propensity for their age to have these deaths considered 'bad deaths'. Ibbotson and Thatcher's deaths may perhaps be least likely to draw sympathy in this way, but Gekoski et al's (2012) findings may suggest that Thatcher's globally high-profile status (and Ibbotson's death having close links to another celebrity death – Emiliano Sala) makes up for this. The news media's choice to focus on younger deaths, paired with the coverage frequently being rejected by those who consume it, also allows us to conclude that it is not the way in which the media represents the cases which result in an influx of sympathy for the deceased, the media coverage simply exposes society to the deaths in question and society reacts on its own accord. This is revealed by the cases used within this study where the deceased was not known before their death (Millane and Rigby) as the media coverage was heavily criticised in these instances, and will be discussed in the next chapter.

### 4.3 Family Grief Displays and Sympathetic Reactions

All case studies shared aspects of Gekoski et al's (2012) ideas around newsworthiness of victims, however further sympathy seems to be drawn from Gekoski et al's (2012) consideration of the ideal co-victim too – the families who face the press and display their grief. The presence of the family was strong within all of the data collected from these cases and this theme seemed to increase in times of televised appearances. For example, the presence of Monteith's fiancé and 'Glee' co-star Lea Michelle provoked further sympathy in Monteith's tribute episode of Glee: *"Just realised that they're probably going to kill Finn off of Glee so Lea Michelle will basically have to experience Cory Monteith dying twice"* (@MonteithData3). Meanwhile Rigby's family, including his young son, attended a number of press conferences and television appearances, and were also met with outpourings of grief on behalf of them: *"Sad watching Lee Rigby's family talking outside court. We will never forget RIP Lee Rigby"* (@RigbyData4). Images of Thatcher's family, with heightened consideration of her grandchildren losing a grandmother, at her funeral sparked further sympathetic conversation: *"Don't care what Margaret Thatcher did when she was prime minister, people need to get some respect and leave her family to grieve"* (@ThatcherData8); and Ibbotson's wife and daughter made an appearance on Good Morning Britain to discuss his disappearance:

*So sad to see David Ibbotson's family on #GMB, they shouldn't have to be going through this interview, if the footballer wasn't found first they'd still be looking and this family deserve the same! (@IbbotsonData3)*

With this in mind, it is possible to consider the purposeful framing of the family in the wake of high-profile socially difficult deaths by news media. Knowing that family is a large provocateur of engagement, the news media may exploit this to boost viewing figures, ratings, and online clicks.

Consistent mentions of the family may be in part due to the social custom of sending sympathy to grieving families and acknowledging their loss. This is due to the 'social scripts' that society follows in times of loss, which, as argued by Brennan (2008, p. 328), allow for the "sharing of personal grief with others". This allows the mourner to "begin to work-through the tumultuous process of bereavement" (Brennan, 2008, p.328). Darwall's (1998)

theories of 'projective empathy' can help to explain this and why the media may focus on the family in times of bereavement. They argue that displays of sympathy reflect what the bereaved individuals themselves may be feeling, whilst acting as an agreement that they are responding in an expected way to the situation. In context of this research, because the bereaved families are exposed in the news media, the public express their sympathy through through social media platforms such as Twitter. Darwall (1998, p. 270) concludes: "empathy [is] central to the formation of normative communities – like-minded groups who can agree on norms of feeling". This took the form of frequent simple acknowledgements of the family in what could be considered general sympathy tweets, rather than the tweets which included contextual discussion of the death at hand. Condolence tweets that made reference to the family made it clear that this was a general death-related social norm that featured heavily even in the cases of socially-difficult deaths (eg Flack, Ibbotson, Monteith, Thatcher. For example, in the Flack case: *"I'm sad for her family that probably wanted nothing more for her to get the help she needed"* (@FlackData5); *"Caroline Flack, I'm so sad to hear this news...All my love goes out to her family and friends...oh man! Rest in peace Caroline!"* (@FlackData6). This Twitter data suggests that there is a certain social script that features in deaths, even when the death is socially divisive. Evoking sympathy through presentation of a family in distress also reflects the social importance of the family structure in our society, as this norm remains uninfluenced by the social difficulty represented by the chosen case studies

#### 4.4 Compulsive Sympathy

As mentioned in the literature review, 'bad death' is typically characterised as "a violent death, a suicide, an unexpected death in childbirth, a death away from home, or where a body cannot be returned home for burial", as well as premature and lonely deaths (Seale and Van Der Geest, 2004, p. 884. This bad death overlaps with the concept of difficult death, of which five out of the six case studies fit this definition: Millane, Rigby and, arguably, Monteith suffered what could be considered a violent end to life at a young age; Flack committed suicide and Ibbotson's death occurred away from his nation of birth and his body is yet to be returned or recovered. The only exception is Thatcher – who died what could be typically considered a 'good' death: at an old age, with minor suffering (Emanuel and Emanuel, 1998). It also happens to be that the data retrieved around Thatcher's 'good'



death contained a considerably higher rate of controversial reactions including dark jokes, for example: *"I enjoy a good swim. But if someone asked me what my favorite (sic) stroke was, I'd have to say Margaret Thatcher's..."* (@ThatcherData9); references to hell: *"Margaret Thatcher has passed away. My thoughts are with Satan and the denizens of Hell at this most difficult and trying time for them"* (@ThatcherData10), and celebration: *"Sorry Margaret Thatcher died. Or congratulations! Either way, there she is - dead"* (@ThatcherData11). Consequently, it can be suggested that it is the fear of experiencing the aforementioned 'bad' deaths which may prompt a social aversion of disrespecting these dead at any cost – even when the individual's death may be considered socially negative (eg. drug use, suicide). This may also help to explain why some parts of society were able to freely express celebration over Thatcher's death - because she suffered what could be considered a reasonably 'good' death, the social fear of the death does not exist here: *"Margaret Thatcher has died of a stroke...a stroke of good luck"* (@ThatcherData12). The dichotomy that exists within the Tweets collected for the Thatcher case can be perfectly summarized by one Tweet within the data: *"You should never say bad things about the dead, you should only say good. Margaret Thatcher is dead. Good"* (@ThatcherData13).

The other five case studies experienced far fewer anti-social online behaviours, perhaps reflecting the social fear of suffering a 'bad' death in part due to a biological tendency of survival, rejecting premature death, and preserving life (Soloman et al, 2000). In a social setting, this fear of bad death has been explored through Terror Management Theory. This is the idea that individuals control fear of death through culture, placing value and meaning within their lives so that they feel they have a valuable place within the universe (Soloman et al, 2000; Castano et al, 2011). This allows individuals to cope with mortality salience – the understanding that death is inevitable. Terror Management Theory also suggests that constructing rational thoughts about death is a coping response to death anxiety (Burke et al, 2009). Using certain death norms that exist within the culture such as respecting the dead, paired with comfort through rational thoughts, could result in respect for the dead becoming a rational response to fear. This may therefore explain why 'bad deaths' such as those in the case studies selected are confronted with an extreme, compulsive almost sacred, level of respect, whilst there was a lack of respect for Thatcher.

However, it is important to note that despite the frequent anti-social reactions to Thatcher's death captured in the data, many of these were confronted with rejection: "*I'm shocked over some of the tweets about Margaret Thatcher...she has left a family who must be devastated. This country lacks respect!*" (@ThatcherData14), "*I'm not gonna lie...she was never my favourite person, but anyone actually "celebrating" Margaret Thatcher's death...you disgust me! #RIP*" (@ThatcherData15). Rejection of anti-social reactions may reflect a social anxiety that comes as a result of a threatened world view. The threat of experiencing death and the acknowledgement of personal mortality may lie as the basis for how we as a society judge social transgressions (Florian and Mikulincer, 1997), such as the negative online behaviours observed in this study. These findings fall inline with existing research into mortality salience that has suggested society is more likely to negatively react to individuals who threaten their world view (Greenberg, 1992) – those threatening the world view in this study are those criticising the dead. This may also suggest why media criticisms of the dead and negative media portrayals of the deceased were also heavily condemned.

Notably, in regards to the specific political nature of the Thatcher case, the study conducted by Greenberg et al (1992) compared the reactions of liberals and conservatives when their world view was challenged by reminders of mortality. They found that those with a more conservative ideology reacted more negatively than the sample of those who identified themselves as liberals (Greenburg et al, 1992). Furthermore, negative reactions to a challenged world-view are often based on whether they come from an in-group or out-group, or positive based on "consensual validation" (Greenberg et al, 1990, p. 317). For example, a criticism of Thatcher's death may not have provoked such a reaction had it come from a supporter of Thatcher. This may therefore propose challenges in the generalisation of some aspects of the Thatcher case, as the specific political atmosphere may have had more of an influence on this high-profile case study in a way that does not exist in the others.

Much like fear of 'bad death' can result in unnegotiable, almost compulsive, sympathetic response on Twitter, there is also a range of religious terminology that appears to stem from this as another manifestation of death anxiety. This religious terminology was observed frequently within all case studies used within this study. For example: "*RIP Lee*

*Rigby. Your son has the best guardian angel he could wish for [...]* (@RigbyData5), *“My opinion and love for Cory Monteith will never change no matter how he died. A sweet, beautiful human is now an angel in the sky”* (@MonteithData4). Even in cases where the death was contextually negative in that the deceased’s actions directly (or indirectly in the case of Ibbotson) led to their own death (Flack, Monteith), are, too, treated with such language. This consistent expression of death in relation to religious beliefs appears to offer comfort and sheds an understanding of the death of the high-profile individual “outside the mundane concerns of everyday life” (Seale 1995, p.598). This allows an individual’s fate to be defined by engaging in “sacrifice, bravery and spiritual adventure in the service of a higher purpose”. (Seale, 1995, p. 598). Despite Western society becoming increasingly secular, both in terms of structure and authority (Chaves, 1994; Wilson, 1976), and participation in traditional theological religion (Smith et al, 2002; Twenge et al, 2015), death continues to be shrouded in religious terminology and practice, even in the Twittersphere. Lobar (2006) found that often individuals found it difficult to distinguish which death practices were due to religion and which were part of their culture, suggesting that the two have become heavily entwined. This stringent anchoring between death and religion also ties into ideas around death anxiety and mortality salience. Meanwhile Harding et al (2005) found that theological religiosity had a statistically positive effect on reducing death anxiety and increasing death acceptance, due to religious ideas around death and the afterlife. Tying in with this, Atran et al (2004) highlights the altruistic and social duty-based characteristics of the main theological religions. Religion may therefore be seen as a comfort in both physical daily lives as well as the realm of social media due to the combination of religious death beliefs and religious social compassion.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has conceptualised how high-profile deaths in Twitter cultivate ‘unnegotiable sympathy’ whether they are a difficult death or not. This ‘unnegotiable sympathy’ has been defined as a constant, almost compulsively respectful response to individuals dying, even when the context of their death causes social conflict (a difficult death) or their life history is socially conflictive (the difficult dead, (Spokes et al, 2018)). A number of thematic patterns within the data collected for the study allow for instances of unnegotiable sympathy to be

observed. These include: references to 'deservingness' of sympathy due to race, gender and age characteristics, prevalence of the family in media coverage, and social fear of death and 'bad' deaths.

Fear of death and suffering a 'bad' death is staple theme within unnegotiable sympathy displayed in these cases of high-profile death. Fear of a 'bad' death at a young age was clearly expressed within discussions around deserving demographic characteristics, including race and social status. The Thatcher case was the only instance where the context of the death could be considered a 'good' death (lack of suffering, non-violent and at an old age) – was the only case in which unnegotiable sympathy was not as prevalent, suggesting that fear of 'bad' deaths may result in people reacting to these with compulsively sympathetic responses. Within all six case studies, this fear of death displayed a distinct tendency for religious terminology in what is usually a secular environment, reflecting society's willingness to turn to religion to process death anxieties (Harding et al, 2005). This research highlights the tendency to turn to religion even in contexts and places that are not inherently religious in nature. In order to understand any emerging themes and online behaviours further, the social media environment and influence of news media coverage will be considered in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5: The Twittersphere and News Coverage of High-Profile Death**

Whilst the previous chapter aimed to address the first research question and explored types of responses observed in the social media environment, this chapter seeks address the second research question: in the age of social media, what is the current relationship between social media and mainstream news coverage? This chapter also explores the Twittersphere as a separate social environment, a unique social space with its own set of norms, characteristic behaviours and culture. This separate online environment displays frequent anti-social polarizing behaviours, observed and acknowledged by Twitter users themselves. These online anti-social behaviours will be considered in relation to how certain characteristics of social media allow for them to occur. This chapter also seeks to acknowledge how these social media characteristics may act as a tool for positive social change, and allow us to question the emergence of Twitter as a democratic space where ideas are free to be debated and criticised without consequence. Finally, chapter will also highlight reactions within the data that explicitly consider social media in relation to news media. The data's reference to news coverage of high-profile death will allow for a reflection of the characteristics of social media which make it desirable as a news source over traditional forms of news media.

### **5.1 Twitter as a Unique Social Space**

With the exception of the Ibbotson case, the remaining five case studies of high-profile death had a considerable amount of Tweet responses. This revealed online-specific behaviours to be observed regarding these high-profile deaths which would not be observed in other environments. These behaviours included the use of the specific deaths as what I refer to as 'Retweet bait' – the use of certain phrases or hashtags posted purely to boost engagement from other users, often with numerous accounts posting the exact same Tweet. These instances of 'Retweet bait' could perhaps represent the desire of many social media users to garner attention in any means possible, even by subverting social norms in a negative way by exploiting death in order to create the image of popularity for their online user account. Kurzman et al (2007) highlights how criminality is often an effective route for the ordinary person to obtain celebrity status. Used in the context of this research, it may

suggest why Twitter users appear to purposely exhibit negative attention-seeking behaviours to boost their online attention from others.

Similar patterns of desire for attention by any means have been observed in highly obsessive fans of celebrities too, a finding which has been observed within studies of problematic internet use (Zsila et al, 2018). This finding helps explain the extreme responses to the high-profile death case studies, particularly the Monteith case. One individual stated: *"I wish I can replace Cory Monteith's death with my death. Cause nobody needs me and Lea really need him (sic)"* (@MonteithData5). Furthermore, in the high-profile celebrity death case studies, the aforementioned 'Retweet bait' often entailed an emotionless replication of messages which would simply not occur outside of the online space, at least not on the same scale. For instance, in the Monteith case users were repeating popular 'Glee' quotes along with the hashtag #RIPCoryMonteith or posting Tweets including, *"Retweet to show your support for Cory Monteith...Lea Michele (his girlfriend) and his family"* (@MonteithData6) and *"guyz I swear mom is getting a black t-shirt that says R.I.P Cory Monteith if this gets 50 RTS (sic)"* (@MonteithData7). This evidences the social media norm of self-serving behaviours, namely garnering attention for oneself by any means possible. Interestingly, however, there was insight into these self-serving behaviours on Twitter, suggesting a level of self-awareness amongst users: *"The amount of respect I lose/hatred I feel when I see someone tweet "RT if you miss Cory Monteith" is insane. Stop using my hero to get RT's"* (@MonteithData8).

In their book 'Death, Memorialization and Deviant Spaces', Spokes et al (2018) pose the question: "What does infamous death, and its highly contested memorialization, have on everyday spatial experiences?" (Spokes et al, 2018, p.6). This question is pertinent to this research as it provides a lens with which to consider the social media space of Twitter and how Twitter users engage with high-profile death. Although Spokes et al (2018) consider 'deviant spaces' to mean actual physical locations, this research goes further and argues the emergence of a unique online social spatial environment. This is an environment with areas of memorialisation (in the use of hashtags, memorial pages, and news sections), social interactions, and specific cultures and norms (including norms of online grief), upon which Spokes et al's (2018) ideas can be applied. Whilst Spokes et al (2018) draw upon Elias'

(1978) ideas to suggest that “the physicality of the environment and the people in it, shapes, remoulds and facilitates different types of action and interaction, which we subsequently reify through language” (Spokes et al, 2018, p.22), there is nothing to suggest that this cannot be applied to social media such as Twitter, too. After all, social media is simply an accumulation of social discourses, in which online cultures are reified through the masses of information and interactions which occur.

Social media is not physically spatial but still exists as a space separate from society. As one piece of data collected within this study for the Flack case suggested: *“the underlying economic drivers of social media have turned the social media space into a cesspool”* (@FlackData7). This finding is significant because it highlights the observation by Twitter users themselves of external factors such as economics influencing social media in the same way that external factors would influence any other physical space. It is also an explicit reference to social media as a separate ‘space’. Evidence for the separate social media space can be found most prominently within the Flack case, due to the large involvement of the internet in the lead up to her death. Within the data collected for this research there was an emphasis on anti-social behaviour that exists within this separate social space, and acknowledgment that these interactions were typical with online social media users. For example: *“Online behaviour has broken morality: piling on celebs/politicians, often on the side of righteousness”* (@FlackData8); *“I’m actually in disbelief at the death of Caroline flack, this online culture is just getting too much for us to cope with”* (@FlackData9). This condemnation of online culture that cropped up repeatedly within the data set seems somewhat contradictory, however, as it is users who are actively participating in the online environment who are criticising it for its toxicity. This evidences online virtue signalling, in which individuals post certain opinions in order to portray a positive more morally desirable self-image to others, and boost their self-esteem (Wallace et al, 2020).

However, Wallace et al (2020) highlight virtue signalling behaviours as not necessarily a reflection of an individual’s genuine feelings or intentions. This is another indication of the toxic nature of constantly evolving online social media cultures, where construction of ideal self-image is a key feature, submitted for others to view and interact with as if an “exhibition”, a “presentation of self” (Hogan, 2010, p. 377). This virtue signalling when

paired with Spokes et al's (2018) argument that "the physicality of the environment and the people in it, shapes, remoulds and facilitates different types of action and interaction" (Spokes et al, 2018, p. 22) leads to the conclusion that conscious actions by individuals are what consolidates the social media world as it's own unique social space. Focusing on these actions carried out by the 'self' in the online world gives opportunity for an exploration of the individual's personal relationship and perception of this unique online social space.

Goffman's (1978) 'dramaturgical model' helps shed light on the performance of the self in the unique social space of Twitter and other social media forms. His work suggests that individuals will essentially 'perform' depending on who is in their perceived audience and thus create differing forms of 'self' (Goffman, 1978; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). Whilst Goffman's (1978) ideas were created with the real physical world in mind, Mazali (2011) applies the theory to the online world, suggesting that social networks are "constructed social and relational spaces where identity is created, and where, above all, 'we act'" (Mazali, 2011, p. 290). In regards to the instances of virtue signalling behaviours observed within the data (for example: "*So sad to hear the news about Caroline flack! I hope everyone that had bad things to say about her online sees the effects it can have on someone, we need to be kinder to each other*" (@FlackData10)), Miller (1995) states how often individuals construct their identities online to be "morally relatively unblemished" (Miller, 1995, p. 1). In the context of the Flack case, it can be argued that these instances of virtue signalling are a means of shifting guilt from their participation in the toxic online culture. For example, much of the data blames "*nasty cunts all over social media*" (@FlackData11) for Flack's suicide, with many claiming a morally superior position and setting themselves apart, despite actively participating as an actor within the very online environment in which the negative behaviours evolved and occur.

## 5.2 Twitter as a Facilitator of Anti-Social Online Behaviours

Twitter as a social media form reveals a common occurrence of anti-social behaviours. Within the six case studies, there was consistent repetition of Twitter users suggesting that certain anti-social behaviours were typical of social media users. As stated by one individual within the data: "*Fuck this trolling, intrusive, cyber bullying social media culture*" (@FlackData12). These behaviours included unnecessary criticism, for example, "*there is no*



*reason Cory Monteith should be idolized or praised at all. He overdosed on drugs. Just because he was on Glee makes it okay? No.*" (@MonteithData9). Dark vindictive humour was also evident including jokes such as: *"just seen the plans for Margret Thatcher's grave [...] they should have made the dance floor bigger"* (@ThatcherData16); whilst the context of the death was also used to wish hurt or death on another, for example: the men who killed Lee Rigby *"should be tortured [and] don't deserve to breathe the same air as us"* (@RigbyData6).

Considering the influence of social interaction and its influence on the onset of anti-social behaviour, Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) posit that protection of collective self-esteem acts as a major influence over in-group biases and personal identity. This may lead to negative actions acted out, often against other groups. This 'in group' and 'out group' mentality can be considered key feature of social media, as it depends on these social connections to thrive, often feeding of political groups, fan bases and shared interests. As Norlock (2017) suggests: "in all the social recognition that online shamers provide each other, unfortunately, the wellbeing of the target is overlooked or reduced" and thus there is often no consideration of the effects of their words. Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) suggest that protecting one's own self-esteem through these behaviours can result in the distinguishing of out-groups, and thus leads to their subsequent discrimination. This could be considered alongside Wallace et al's (2020) suggestions that retaining positive self-esteem online may result in online virtue signalling. These ideas in tandem may offer an explanation for the harsh demonization of individuals online within the data set who did not meet the expected expressions of 'unnegotiable sympathy' as outlined in the previous chapter. A stark example of this can be observed frequently within the Thatcher case, with many individuals making statements such as *"News of Margaret Thatcher dying breaks and the idiots who can't keep their gobs shut come out. Someone's mother has died. Have some respect!"* (@ThatcherData17); and *"Margaret Thatcher has died, already my twitter feed is sickening - refusal to show compassion because of her politics is bitterly ironic"* (@ThatcherData18). Twitter users within the data set actively demonised others in order to improve their own online status or sense of self-worth.

This vicious cycle of hatred and shaming that exists in the social media space of Twitter reflects the contemporary concept of 'cancel culture', also referred to as 'call-out culture'. Characterised by Roos (2020 p. 2) as "petty and polarizing", 'cancel culture' is a modern online phenomenon, defined as the mass boycott and highlighting of social wrong-doings of an individual, group, or corporation on social media (Ng, 2020; Nguyen, 2020; Roos, 2020; Tucker, 2018). Whilst this term perfectly describes what was found within the high-profile death case studies, it is a particular focal point of the Flack case. Much of the data within this case study seemed to blame cancel culture for the onset of Flack's death, whilst simultaneously using the death as a warning against future instances of cancel culture:

*Caroline Flack's death is horrific & a timely reminder of the perils of cancel culture. But I'm sick of the 'a lesson for the trolls' takes from woke politicians & journalists. These people will feed you to the wolves with allegations of sexism, racism, xenophobia when it suits (@FlackData13).*

Cancel culture in this research followed three main stages: identification by the public of a socially condemned action, execution of cancelling behaviours acted towards those being targeted, and finally potential outcomes of cancel culture. The Monteith case study effectively demonstrates identification of socially condemned behaviours: "*Cory Monteith is a good example why you shouldn't do drugs or get into alcohol. Such a great actor with great potential just wasted. #RIP*" (@MonteithData2). Cancelling behaviours were also illustrated within the Rigby case: "*Lee Rigby's murderers should be hung drawn and quartered, and heads spiked on traitor's gate! [...]*" (@RigbyData7). And the Flack case serves as an example of the worst-case potential results of cancel culture, and serves as a warning for future instances:

*So Caroline Flack kills herself because of media/social media hounding, how do people respond? Drag David Walliams/Ant McPartlin into it for no good reason and hound them instead, the problem is the media as a whole, not individuals...and so the cycle continues. #CarolineFlack (@FlackData14).*

Cancel culture thrives in the Twittersphere and may thrive in other social media platforms as well. This can be explained by the 'online disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2004). Suler (2004) cites 'dissociative anonymity' as one of the primary contributors to these negative online behaviours as a result of online disinhibition. This idea suggests that individuals may feel

that their real identity cannot be linked to their online persona, and thus do not fear repercussions of their words and the threat to their personal self-image. Users can make facetious comments that they would not in the outside world such as: *“Won’t be using my bedside lamp tonight in tribute to Caroline flack. RIP.”* (@FlackData15). These users remain reassured that the anonymous nature of the online space protects them. This perceived lack of repercussions online is also reflected in Norlock’s (2017) suggestions that this characteristic of social media gives the “comforting notion that a joke or tweet or comment in cyberspace is no big deal, harmless,” but can actually lead to “bad consequences for others” (Norlock, 2017, p. 4). Twitter thrives on connections to people not necessarily known to the individual. This makes it easy to create a persona through which the expression of views and opinions is incredibly easy to do, compared to other social media sites such as Facebook or Instagram which focus primarily around the presentation of real identities and connections with people known in real life. This idea of construction of a unique profile separate from the real life personality is a common factor within ‘Fandom’ Twitter groups, and other groups which may use Twitter to communicate about one specific topic (eg football, politics, activism, a celebrity).

### 5.3 Twitter as a Tool for Social Change

The unique online social space in which the Twittersphere exists, whilst allowing for potentially anti-social behaviours to occur, is arguably a highly democratic environment. The cases of high-profile death in this research offer an insight into how Twitter users are afforded the opportunity to voice opinions and offer critiques of media coverage and the views of others. Thus, as well as offering a potentially democratic space for discussion, Twitter as a social media platform has the potential to be instrumental in provoking social change.

This function as a tool for debate and calls for change is evidenced in the data where perceived injustice is highlighted. For example, Twitter responses to Millane’s death highlighted the unfair sexualisation of women and subsequent demonization within the media:

*Those bringing up Grace Millane’s sex life are reinforcing the fact that women will always be at fault, even for their own death. The poor girl was murdered and the*

*news is filled with graphic discussions of what she liked in bed? Are you fucking kidding? (@MillaneData5)*

In contrast, Thatcher's death was frequently used to highlight perceived unfairness of UK tax expenditure with sarcastic comments such as: *"Considering Margaret Thatcher's love of privatisation, it makes complete sense her lavish, expensive funeral will be paid for by taxpayers"* (@ThatcherData19), or anger: *"£8 million for Margaret Thatcher's funeral? That a joke? We're struggling as a country anyway, what about the NHS?"* (@ThatcherData20). Meanwhile the Rigby and Millane cases frequently referenced dissatisfaction at the news media's coverage of the cases: *"Apparently the Lee Rigby murder trial started this week. Who knew? Not us. Because the mainstream media won't talk about it"* (@RigbyData8); *"Awfully shocking that Grace Millane was MURDERED and they are scrutinising her dating profile and ex partners about her sexual preferences and exposing them in the media"* (@MillaneData1).

As found by Gil de Zúñiga et al (2012, p. 329), "informational use of SNS (social network sites) exerted a significant and positive impact on individuals' activities aimed at engaging in civic and political action". The emphasis on 'informational' use of social media is significant here as it suggests that political utilization of social media is not necessarily typical usage of the platform. This does, however, align with the idea that use of social media as a news source may encourage certain politically fuelled discourses. For example:

*I'm happy that there is some sort of justice for Grace Millane but rough sex defence and salacious reporting were a final insult to her and her family. This must change. And that means women's lives need to be valued equally (@MillaneData6).*

This piece of data is significant as, due to Millane's non-celebrity status, the only reason this Twitter user will have been made aware of her is through news reporting of her case. Additionally, it explicitly presents calls for social change through the vehicle of the news story. The same can be observed in the Rigby case: *"Watching the news and the Lee Rigby story makes me angry, trying to justify his murder as being an act of war. War is fought by real men"* (@RigbyData9). The idea of informational use of social media facilitating social change (Gil de Zúñiga et al, 2012) is also supported by the Monteith case: *"Another death from using drugs (Cory Monteith) – isn't it time we stopped glamorizing them and spent more time and money helping addicts quit?"* (@MonteithData10).

#### 5.4 The Twittersphere and Criticism of News Media Coverage

Whilst the previous section offered evidence for Twitter being used as a vessel for social change, the Twittersphere was also shown to offer criticism of the injustices displayed by news media coverage and news media as an institution. Despite common findings within research into the influence of media on public attitudes and behaviours showing a positive relationship (Kitzinger, 1999) this was not found to be the case in this research. In every case study except for the Monteith and Thatcher cases, the data overwhelmingly demonstrated a widespread negative social perception and criticism of news media. For example, within the Flack case, the news media was repeatedly blamed for the resulting death:

*Absolutely devastating news about Caroline Flack. This isn't suicide this is manslaughter from the media. Absolutely blown her life upside down. Things happen behind closed doors. (@FlackData16)*

Within this case, the news media was a central factor in both the lead up and aftermath of Flack's death. Retrospective consideration of the news media's handling of Flack's accusations may have highlighted to the public the apparent dark side of news media's power and influence it has over people's lives and mental health. However, in this case, it could be argued that the condemnation of news media behaviour only being identified after the death may suggest that the news media is essentially scapegoated. This perhaps shifts the blame away from the public and the Twittersphere, who openly criticised Flack due to the accusations made against her. However, the case studies highlight an open acknowledgment that the public also participate in the same toxic behaviours, but through the medium of social media:

*Absolutely horrendous to hear about Caroline Flack [...] Tabloids making money off the turmoil of famous people alongside the most vicious, nasty trolls that social media give[s] a platform to are a DEADLY combination. (@FlackData17)*

Furthermore, although it is arguable that the media was scapegoated in this case to shift blame from the Twitter users, the purposeful deletion of defamatory articles posted before Flack's death may highlight a level of self-awareness within the media of its toxic and dangerous power:

*“So @TheSun – as reported by @guardian – has already deleted past posts about Caroline Flack off it’s website. [This] tells you absolutely everything you need to know about the state of our media” (@FlackData18).*

The high-profile death case studies highlighted public dissatisfaction at the way in which news information was selected and subsequently reported. In the Millane case, the media was heavily condemned for revealing private information to the public:

*“Awfully shocking that Grace Millane was MURDERED and they are scrutinising her dating profile and ex partners about her sexual preferences and exposing them in the media, as a way of basically saying she asked for it. What a disgusting world this is” (@MillaneData1).*

And, *“The Daily Mirror describes Grace Millane’s murder as “kinky”. I am so disgusted and pissed off that the media thinks this is acceptable and is even allowed to get away with it” (@MillaneData7).* This was also observed within the Ibbotson case, where the media was seen to be heartlessly tainting Ibbotson’s image before his family were even afforded any closure:

*Professional football, agents and the media, let’s have some dignity and show some respect. Emilia[no] Sala and David Ibbotson lost their lives only 6 weeks ago! Can you imagine what their families are going through[?] (@IbbotsonData4)*

The Rigby case, on the other hand, highlighted emerging distrust in the media’s ability to report information deemed valuable by the public. *“Apparently the Lee Rigby murder trial started this week. Who knew? Not us. Because the mainstream media won’t talk about it” (@RigbyData8), “Lee Rigby, a serving soldier is murdered in broad daylight and the cowards who murdered him are on trial without media coverage, #sinister” (@RigbyData10).*

Finally, the Ibbotson case also highlighted public dissatisfaction for the fact ‘normal’ people are not afforded the same level of media interest as celebrities:

*#DavidIbbotson. Why is it that the news channels keep on talking [about] how sad it is for the footballer but don’t give a monkeys about the pilot who also died and not even speaking to any family of the pilot [sic]. It is disgraceful (@IbbotsonData5).*

Although all very different criticisms of the media, these negative reactions to media coverage featured heavily within their respective case studies. This suggests that socially

sensitive topics such as these difficult high-profile deaths allow the public to identify faults within what is usually considered a respected social institution

Notably the only case study in which written news media coverage overwhelmingly swayed public opinion was the Thatcher case, in which newspapers overtly demonised those who celebrated her death (Neild, 2013). This particular article directly illustrated those who celebrated Thatcher's death as "not [...] old enough to remember Thatcher's time in power", "clutching cider" and "unemployed" (Neild, 2013). These descriptions attempt to undermine the legitimacy of their rejection of Thatcher in the wake of her death. This is not an unexpected finding due to the inherent political roots of the case study. This political demonization of those who rejoiced at the news of Thatcher's death could perhaps be the catalyst for the mass emergence of social media virtue signalling observed within the online space as discussed in the previous chapter: *"I'm not gunna lie...she was never my favourite person, but anyone actually "celebrating" Margaret Thatcher's death...you disgust me! #RIP"* (@ThatcherData21). Although written news media had little to no influence over public feelings for the other five case studies, the Thatcher case remains a stark example of how the traditional news media still has a firm grasp in political news, even if it's past powers in other areas of news are beginning to diminish.

As the public seeks alternative sources for news, publicly stated distrust and dismissal of news media coverage in the Twittersphere may help influence the takeover of social media as primary trusted news source. There has been an exponential increase in the number of individuals turning to social media as a means of receiving news information: 62% of adults reported receiving their news from social media in 2016 compared to only 49% who reported seeing any news on social media online in 2012 (The Pew Research Centre, as cited in Shu et al, 2018). The overtly stated distrust in news media coverage as emphasised by the Flack, Millane and Rigby cases may have occurred as a result of utilization of social media as a news source over traditional news media. This could also be accounted for by the fact social media is more easily accessible, with opinions and views from regular individuals rather than journalists who may appear out of touch from regular people. An example of news media being considered out of touch was highlighted in the Millane case where the

news media received backlash for the way it described Millane's murder as "kinky" (@MillaneData7).

Whilst distrust in the mainstream news media in favour of social media may account for this to a large extent, it may be the unique characteristics of social media itself which contribute to the rising use of social media as a means of keeping up with current affairs. These characteristics include the snowballing effect of Retweets which result in the instant spreading of information and the algorithmically constructed personal 'trending' topics which select certain topics to display to individuals based on their interactions on the website (Kwak et al, 2010). An example of social media aiding the spread of news faster than the news media was the initial Tweets suggesting "rumours" around Flack's death before it had even been confirmed or officially reported by the news media: "*Caroline flack killed herself? Rumours.*" (@FlackData19), "*If these rumours about Caroline Flack are true [...]*" (@FlackData20). This snowballing of information along with chronological, real-time construction of the timeline influences the speed at which news can be shared (Sakaki et al, 2010). This has distinctive appeal to individuals living in a fast-paced globalised world, where the information collection, editing and distribution process of traditional news media may no longer be able to keep up with the demand for instant information.

On the other hand, social media such as Twitter may actually function as an aid for the traditional forms of news media. The instant, fast paced characteristics of social media allows for the fast distribution of information, promotion of the news organisation, feedback from consumers and even helps to generate news story ideas (Stassen, 2010) as shown in the emergence of rumours above (@FlackData19, @FlackData20). For example, as the news of Flacks death broke on social media before official confirmation by the press, the news media may use these rumours to generate their own content. This suggests that perhaps in the current media world, social media and news media are interlinked, embedded within one another through news organisations' use of hyperlinks and ease of sharing content to large, far-reaching audiences (Fu and Shumate, 2017). This idea is shared by Newman (2009) who describes this as the 'click and link economy' (Newman, 2009, p. 40). However, they argue that this is actually a negative force against traditional journalism as profits are distributed elsewhere due to cost of utilising search engines and advertising.



This also goes hand-in-hand with criticisms of sensational, over emphasised headlines and click-bait designed to generate traffic to news media sites. This was another criticism of news media which heavily featured in the data set: *“honestly the lengths the press and media go to just to get headlines honestly disgusts me”* (@FlackData21), *“they feed off character assassination for clicks and have no moral compass in covering any story”* (@FlackData22), *“don’t click on The Sun’s articles RE: Caroline Flack or anything for that matter. don’t let them profit off a death they contributed towards”* (@FlackData23).

Another emerging issue within the high-profile death case studies was concern over the spread of ‘fake news’ on both Twitter and within news media coverage. This subsequently results in the circulation of false information within the platforms which is believed as truth (Buntain and Golbeck, 2017). The Flack case was regarded within the data as a warning against the spread of such false information: *“[...] Too often on social media anonymous accounts spread lies and rumours without a second thought about the potential consequences”* (@FlackData24). This may serve as a warning against the utilization of social media as a news source, due to the ease and speed of which misinformation can spread without being fact checked by those sharing. Geeng et al (2020) found that reasons for users not fact-checking the information they share include: lack of interest, the process being too time-consuming, difficulties in fact checking, and over-confidence in the information they are sharing. Arguably due to these factors, the fault for allowing such ‘fake news’ to spread therefore lies between those producing the false content online, those carelessly sharing, and social media sites themselves for not having the means to filter ‘fake news’ from their platforms. These are factors which may all be attributed to online social media culture. As one piece of data states:

*I’m in tears reading about Caroline Flack. [...] Fuck this trolling, intrusive, cyber bullying social media culture. [...] Newspapers printing false stories. Victimising someone until they feel they have no choice. It can’t go on* (@FlackData12).

Shu et al (2018) argue that the existence of ‘fake news’ online is harmful because “the trustworthiness of entire news ecosystem is broken due to fake news” and as a result “it’s critical to detect fake news on social media to mitigate these negative effects and to benefit the public and the news ecosystem” (Shu et al, 2018, p. 430). This may therefore argue a case against the desirability of social media as a growing form of news information media

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the online environment and the Twittersphere specifically could be regarded as its own unique social space with its own unique social norms, values, behaviours and communities. Because of the superficiality of this online environment, Goffman's (1978) ideas around construction and presentation of the 'self' may help to explain how some of the observed behaviours are merely constructed in order to fit in with the expected norms of the environment, even if this means acting in an anti-social way or presenting socially challenging opinions. On the other hand, these anti-social or challenging opinions demonstrate how this online environment can be considered highly democratic. It is this democratic nature of social media which allows for the free sharing of ideas, and allows social media to be used as a tool for calling for social change or addressing social injustices such as tax expenditure, gendered violence, and problematic qualities within the news media. In highlighting these problematic qualities within news media, this chapter has also demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between news media and social media. News media relies on the characteristics of social media to help spread news and encourage online engagement. Other qualities of social media such as ease of sharing misinformation and difficulty in identifying 'fake news' may lead to the challenged integrity of news media shared online and thus news media may lose its influence as a dominant distributor of breaking news stories.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Stemming from the experience of witnessing hostile media coverage and subsequent online abuse directed at the death of a close family member, this thesis aimed to examine reactions to high-profile media-centred deaths on social media, and why these reactions occur. In this conclusion chapter, we will reflect on the data findings and how they have addressed the aim and the research questions:

- What type of responses to high-profile deaths manifest in the social media environment of Twitter?
- In the age of social media, what is the current relationship between social media and mainstream news coverage?

### 6.1 High-Profile Deaths and Twitter

In response to the first research question, sympathetic responses were identified within every case study– a finding which led to development of the concept ‘unnegotiable sympathy’. This variety of sympathetic responses manifested as the primary and most explicit display of behaviour found as a response to high-profile death within this research. Whilst the different strands of sympathy may display considerably different behaviours, they can all be linked by one key theme – unnegotiable sympathy.

These subthemes of sympathy were clearly defined. Firstly, ‘deserving sympathy’. This suggested that different demographic characteristics of the deceased influenced the levels of sympathy an individual was afforded, such as age, race or gender. For example, whilst Flack and Millane’s deaths evoked high levels of sympathy due to dying young, others questioned whether they would have received the same level of sympathy or media coverage had they been male or a woman of colour. The next sub-theme was family grief displays and sympathetic responses. This emerged as a result of media spotlight using the family as a provocateur of sympathy, presenting them as the perfect co-victim (Gekoski et al, 2012). The use of family within the media coverage is also seen to reinforce shared empathetic ‘social scripts’ around grieving (Brennan, 2008, p. 328), supported by Darwall (1998, p. 270) who argues that “empathy [is] central to the formation of normative

communities". Finally, compulsive sympathy emerged as the final sympathetic response. This took the form of refusal to speak ill of the dead out of fear of experiencing a 'bad' death. This research shows that 'bad' deaths illicit higher sympathetic responses than those deaths that could be considered 'good'. This compulsive sympathy also took the form of religious terminology when referencing the dead, as religion is often used to help individuals deal with death anxiety and mortality salience (Harding et al, 2005). This was a theme found more prominently in the cases of high-profile death within this study that could be defined as 'bad' death, again showing how 'bad' death is socially feared.

Underpinning these sympathetic responses was the need to distinguish between the difficult *dead* (Spokes et al, 2018) difficult *death*, and 'bad' death as these respective classifications for the case studies displayed different types of sympathy and to different extents. Deaths that were socially difficult (eg. murder, suicide, terrorist attack) were referenced as difficult deaths, as opposed to the deceased individual's socially difficult life history (eg a divisive political figure) who fall under the definition of the difficult *dead* (Spokes et al, 2018). This research showed that those whose deaths were socially difficult, who suffered a difficult death, were more likely to be met with sympathetic responses. This again reflects how social fear of personally suffering a 'bad' socially difficult death may lead to a manifestation of compulsive sympathetic responses.

## 6.2 The Social Media Space and Media Coverage

In addressing the second research question, the characteristics of social media and its relationship with news media revealed that social media could be considered its own unique social environment. With high-profile death at the core of the study, the question posed by Spokes et al (2018, p.6): "what impact does infamous death, and its highly contested memorialization, have on everyday spatial experiences?" was kept in mind to observe that the data collected from Twitter in regards to the high-profile deaths presented unique norms, values, behaviours and communities that interacted much like a physical environment would. The behaviours observed were often centred around construction of a desirable presentation of the self – a characteristic behaviour of social media (Hogan, 2010). These behaviours geared towards construction of self-image often used what could be considered anti-social online behaviours such as abuse towards the dead and abuse towards

others. However, these behaviours were frequently used as a way of virtue signalling, in order to maintain a social image that fits the dominant narrative of the online community, whether or not the individual really held the opinions they were presenting (Wallace et al, 2020). These attempts and creating a positive self image online are also seen as a crucial element of online communities, with online group mentalities a significant influence over anti-social behaviours that occur in the online space (Crocker and Luhtanen, 1990).

On the other hand, the contrasting opinions within the findings from this research also demonstrated that this unique online social space is also highly democratic. This democratic nature may give way for potentially negative or anti-social opinions to be expressed publicly. The data demonstrated that the online environment of Twitter thrived on the freedom of discussion and the ability to share, debate and challenge each other's beliefs – particularly in cases of high-profile death that were socially divisive. This democratic online environment can also be used to provoke positive social change. For example, the Millane case led to discussions around social issues of sex and gendered violence, the Thatcher case highlighted problematic spending of public money, and the majority of the cases emphasised systemic problems with news media and the way it operates and presents information.

This research also allowed an insight into the relationship that exists between social media and news media. The characteristics of Twitter such as the Retweet function benefit news media by spreading news to vast audiences and very quickly. This study also demonstrated an example of how the news media is able to generate news based on information that spreads over social media first, as seen in the Flack case and the online rumours that preceded the official announcement of her death. These links between social media and news media are also challenged by the speedy spread of fake news across the platform. Fake news featured heavily within the Flack case with Twitter users highlighting how the death was a warning against news that was often spread on social media. This presence of fake news damages the integrity of news media, with Shu et al (2018) concluding: "the trustworthiness of entire news ecosystem is broken due to fake news" (Shu et al, 2018, p. 430). This is concerning as there has been a move towards social media as a primary news source, despite rife fake news that exists within it. Recent studies have shown that 62% of

adults reported obtaining their news updates from social media in 2016, an increase from 49% who reported seeing news on social media in 2012 (The Pew Research Centre, as cited in Shu et al, 2018).

### 6.3 Concluding Thoughts

This research has explored the ways in which high-profile deaths are discussed on Twitter and the influence of news coverage, offering a better understanding of how high-profile death is interacted with in the online space. Notably, further research into how high-profile death is consumed and discussed on other social media sites, such as Facebook, Youtube and Tiktok would offer enrichment to the ideas presented within this research. By looking at different social media sites, different demographics could be explored. It would be interesting to see whether these demographic characteristics would play a role in the way in which high-profile deaths are considered and discussed as well as how issues around the spread of fake news are addressed.

These conversations around death may also be influenced by the ways the social media site itself is structured. Whilst Twitter is valuable for observing individual written opinions that can be easily shared and perpetuated across online communities by the Retweet feature, it would be interesting to observe how less interpersonally interactive sites, such as Youtube, Tiktok or Instagram, spark memorial conversations, or conversations about death. These social media sites are more geared towards content creation rather than direct interaction between the poster and their followers, thus less directly personal opinions may surface. The creative nature of Youtube, Tiktok and Instagram may also reveal different themes and patterns around how death is presented that cannot be observed on sites that are centred around written posts such as Twitter. There may be different patterns of behaviours that emerge and these different sites may also rely on direct news coverage to differing extents, presenting it and tackling it in different ways. Therefore, considering public responses to high-profile death in these other forms of social media would add another dimension to challenging respect and social norms for the dead through reactions to high-profile deaths on social media.

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