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Social Media and the Journalist–Source Relationship: How Digital Death Knocks Might Exacerbate Moral Injury

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Abstract: Social media use is commonplace for journalists in newsgathering, including reporting newsworthy deaths. Journalists have revised their death knock practice of physically doorknocking bereaved families to a preference for digital methods to solicit comment and context for stories about fatal incidents. This is gleaned from social media. A 2021–2022 Australian mixed-methods study, including a survey and semi-structured interviews, found that journalists use social media as a tool to find, contact, and interview people, and as a source of facts, photographs, and comments for stories. Journalists are at risk of moral injury, which occurs when they breach their own moral code, including through institutional betrayal. This article argues the digital death knock increases the risk of moral injury because unfettered access to, and sanctioned use of, social media material creates new ethical complexities. It proposes that fundamental to the journalist's risk of moral injury is their view of the journalist–source relationship, which might in turn reflect their underlying ethical framework. The journalist who preferences utilitarian ethics—the greatest good for the greatest number—may see a source as means to an end; however, the journalist who preferences deontological ethics—respect for persons as an end in themselves—may owe the source a greater duty of care, which, if breached, may make them vulnerable to moral injury.

Keywords: journalism practice; journalism ethics; trauma reporting; death knock; social media; digital journalism

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1. Introduction

Social media use is now commonplace for journalists in their newsgathering, including reportage of newsworthy deaths (Duncan, 2023). Journalists have adapted the practice of the death knock—which was traditionally the doorknocking of bereaved families following newsworthy deaths and was later performed by phone and email or via an intermediary—for the internet era. Now with increasing use of social media in all aspects of journalistic practice, the death knock can be defined as 'all efforts to elicit comment and context from grieving relatives and friends to produce news reports about fatal incidents' (Knowlton & Fox, 2023, p. 110). Comment and context are gleaned from social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and LinkedIn, which journalists use as both a tool to identify, contact, and interview people and as a source of facts, photographs, and comments for stories.

Journalists are at risk of physical, emotional, and psychological injury from death knock practice. Physical injury is rare but can occur when bereaved family members lash out at a journalist they perceive is intruding; however, most harm is emotional and psychological (Barnes, 2016; McMahon, 2016). The researcher's 2021–2022 Australian study found

that 80% of participants were impacted psychologically by performing death knocks and 10% believed they had sustained a health condition as a result, citing depression, anxiety, vicarious trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and complex PTSD (Watson, 2022). Some of the harm sustained to journalists can be conceived of as moral injury—which occurs when a journalist experiences harm to themselves because they feel they have breached their own moral code (Osmann et al., 2021). While there is a risk of moral injury from death knock practice in general, this article will show that the risk of moral injury is exacerbated by digital practices, and, in particular, the practice of sourcing material from social media for use in stories without consent. It will also touch on the concept of institutional betrayal, when a person feels let down or unsupported by their workplace, as a contributor to moral injury (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014). Institutional betrayal encompasses failures to care for individual journalists who experience trauma and systemic failures to recognise harmful practices that can lead journalists to distrust their organisations, be less likely to seek help, make them hypervigilant, and prone to risky substance use, mental health disorders and PTSD (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2017).

Although the use of social media material is sanctioned by law and professional bodies and encouraged by newsrooms—with some caveats—it does engender in some journalists a feeling that they have invaded someone's privacy, which could result in moral injury if they believe they have an ethical responsibility (duty) to that person. It is argued here that their perception of that responsibility relates to their perception of the journalist–source relationship, which in turn is related to their underlying ethical framework. A distinction will be theorised between journalists who preference a consequentialist or utilitarian approach—who prioritise the greatest good for the greatest number (Mill 1861 cited in Gauthier (2002))—and a deontological ethical framework—who prioritise the duty to respect persons (Kant 1785 in Gauthier (2002)). It is proposed that the journalist who adheres to a deontological stance is more likely to sustain moral injury as a result of social media use in death knock practice because of the duty they have to their source.

The research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows:

1. How do journalists use social media in their death knock practice?
2. How does the journalist–source relationship impact the journalist's use of social media in their death knock practice?
3. How does the journalist's use of social media in death knock practice impact their risk of moral injury?

To answer the questions, the researchers accessed data from their mixed-methods study, which included an online analytical survey of 66 questions (answered by 100 journalists) and semi-structured interviews with 10 journalists, nine of whom were also survey participants. Quantitative and qualitative data from both methods were analysed thematically, and the analysis identified patterns of social media use, exposed issues of ethical uncertainty that could be construed as moral injury and institutional betrayal and revealed the journalist–source relationship as a possible predictor of moral injury risk.

The article begins with a literature review outlining journalists' social media use in death knock practice, legal and ethical considerations about privacy, and the journalist–source relationship. The methodology is explained, and the findings follow, elucidating four digital death knock practices, with one—journalists' use of social media as a *source*—highlighted as the most likely to exacerbate moral injury. The discussion explains how the journalist–source relationship—that is the way journalists think and feel about their sources—could be integral to how they use social media in their death knock practice and to their risk of moral injury. A conclusion highlights this as a problem for the wider journalism field.

2. Journalists' Use of Social Media in Death Knock Practice

Ordinary people have always been of interest to journalists, and social media has become a common way of incorporating them into stories (Wold, 2022), with usage of amateur material increasing (Degen et al., 2024). Journalists 'pull' information from social media by searching for keywords and hashtags related to stories they are covering (Molyneux, 2019), and this is particularly useful to crime reporters (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2018). Social media supplements professional journalistic work by adding a social or personal aspect to stories (Heinonen, 2011) and offers a wealth of first-person information, including after death (Whitehouse, 2010), which is a valuable resource for journalists performing death knocks. Platforms allow family and friends to set up memorial pages, which have become integral to mourning (Moore et al., 2019; Sheldon et al., 2019), but a consequence is that private information is made public. Wold (2022) cites Goffman's (1956) term *performance* to refer to how a person in a given context chooses which part of their identity to display to others. Buckingham (2008) and Turkle (1996) find this relevant in an online context, as social media users may represent themselves to an audience of friends, relatives, and acquaintances in a particular way, but if content is picked up by a journalist, the individual loses control over their self-presentation.

In addition to relying on memorial pages, journalists routinely access individual users' personal profiles and group pages (Watson, 2022). Duncan (2023) observes that entire articles can be written about incidents in which people have been seriously injured or died without a reporter ever approaching a family member, and the family might not even know that a story has been published. This is driven by expediency and efficiency: 'reduced staff in the newsroom, tighter deadlines, and more platforms requiring content all curtail reporters' opportunities to leave the office or even make a phone or Zoom call' (Duncan, 2023, p. 135).

There are cautions that easy access to social media is not a licence for irresponsible reporting (Duncan, 2023), but it is recognised that journalism codes do not cover the 'all-too-common practice of simply taking material from poorly protected Facebook pages and using it in a news story about a tragic death' (Patching & Hirst, 2021, p. 93). Duncan points to guidelines in the UK (Independent Press Standards Organisation, 2020) cautioning news outlets to consider to what extent content was in the public domain and who placed it there, how many people could view it, their relationship to the deceased, and whether the poster had a reasonable expectation it would not be circulated further. Whether the deceased or their family court celebrity or exhibit notoriety—or whether they are just 'ordinary people'—will be a factor in that decision making. Guidance is also given in Australia; however, there is a clause in the journalists' professional code of ethics (MEAA, n.d.) that allows the personal privacy of an individual to be overridden if publication of what might be considered private information can be justified in the public interest. As will be discussed, this introduces into deontological or duty-base codes an element of consequentialism, which justifies actions as the greatest good for the greatest number (Mill 1861, in Gauthier (2002)).

3. Legal and Ethical Considerations About Privacy

Citizens have a right to be informed about events, and death and trauma are no exceptions, but those who are experiencing grief have a right to privacy (Duncan, 2023), understood as control over access to oneself and to certain kinds of information about oneself (Gauthier, 2010). In tension with the moral demand of privacy is the vital interest in obtaining information about the world, which facilitates connectedness and citizenship. Journalists want to meet professional standards, maintain public trust, produce appealing stories, and sustain a profitable business. It therefore falls to the journalist to balance the personal privacy of individuals who are included in their stories and the public interest in

invading that privacy to provide information to the public at large, and these values can conflict. While minimising harm is a pillar of journalism codes (Patching & Hirst, 2021), the balancing of personal privacy and public interest is open to interpretation.

Journalists in Australia are legally able to download publicly available content from social networking sites for use in their stories, subject to the Copyright Act provision of 'fair dealing for reporting news' (Australian Government, 1986). The use of public social media material is sanctioned by professional bodies, such as the Australian Press Council (n.d.), the Australian Communications and Media Authority (2016), and the MEAA (n.d.), with general warnings about balancing personal privacy with public interest. The public broadcaster has standards about the use of social media images that ask the reporter to consider, in addition to verification and legal issues, the intent of the poster, their expectation of privacy, whether consent can be gained, and if the image would be likely to humiliate or cause harm disproportionate to the public interest in its use (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.). The balancing of personal privacy with public interest under a utilitarian ethical framework (the greatest good for the greatest number) has its foundations in the role of the media as champion of free speech and prioritises the public's right to know over an individual person's right to privacy. However, social media—as a public space where people share private information –confounds the public–private divide.

Almost from the inception of social media, there have been concerns that journalism codes should be updated to consider the ease with which information can be gathered from social sites and disseminated widely (Whitehouse, 2010). Whitehouse found that journalists using information from social media without verification or consent gave rise to ethical concerns 'even if no legal sanction against such a practice is involved' (Whitehouse, 2010, p. 9). While ethics codes serve as a crucial accountability tool for journalists (a duty-based approach), they largely address privacy under the umbrella of minimising harm and fairness and permit individual privacy to be overridden in the public interest, reflecting a utilitarian approach. Journalists are asked to respect personal privacy, but there are not clear provisions about how they should use information that is easily obtainable online (Patching & Hirst, 2021). Such information has given rise to what Sheldon et al. (2019) term the 'privacy paradox' that happens when people express concerns about their privacy being invaded yet do not engage in privacy protections afforded to them by platforms. Yeoman (2023) says journalists should respect privacy settings, but 'whether the individual's privacy settings offer you access or not . . . it would be judicious to consider the impacts of using their social media on surviving friends and family' (in Duncan, 2023, p. 58). Yeoman argues that the media owe a duty of care to 'civilian' social media users they use as sources, as they might be unprepared for the implications of a post becoming the centre of a news story, and journalists should at the very least alert people to their intention to use material. Others argue that usage of this material requires consent, as families feel 'invaded by the press' when photos are taken from social media and used in stories without approval (Healey, 2020, p. 31).

In the absence of specific guidance about ethical use of social media material (such as whether content is accurate and appropriate, and whether consent should be sought to use it), most journalists will reproduce any material that is in the public domain, irrespective of consent (Duncan, 2023). Some journalists will self-censor even their use of public material, while others will also use private material that has been shared with them or that they have been able to access (Patching & Hirst, 2021). Journalists' attitudes to using social media material, it might be argued, are in line with their view of the journalist–source relationship.

4. Journalists' Mental Health

Journalism is an occupation with high rates of exposure to potentially traumatic events (see, e.g., McMahon, 2016; S. Smith, 2023) and the effects of reporting on trauma are

significant and compound (Barnes, 2016). Journalists are at risk of physical, emotional and psychological injury from death knock practice (McMahon, 2016; S. Smith, 2023), including through primary exposure as a witness to death and secondary (vicarious) exposure through interviewing victims, survivors and bereaved people. A recent Australian study found 80% of participant journalists were impacted psychologically by performing death knocks and 10% believed they had sustained a health condition as a result, citing depression, anxiety, vicarious trauma, PTSD, and complex PTSD (Watson, 2022).

Journalists are susceptible to moral injury, which is defined as a harm that is sustained when a person breaches their own moral code (Drescher et al., 2011; Litz & Kerig, 2019). Moral injury in journalists leads to disorientation (Cohen & McClymond, 2024), shame, guilt, and anger that can profoundly alter the way they think about themselves and their profession (Osmann et al., 2021). Moral injury can occur through an individual's inaction as much as through their action, and in conceiving of journalists as the 'fourth emergency response', Heywood and Bradley (2024) draw a distinction between journalists and other first responders (police, fire, and ambulance personnel) whose job it is to provide immediate help, whereas the journalist's job is to observe and report.

A concept related to moral injury is institutional betrayal, which is the failure of an institution to take appropriate steps to respond to, or prevent, interpersonal trauma (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014). This can occur at an individual level, where a person who has experienced trauma is insufficiently supported, or at a systemic level, where an organisation fails to identify and rectify harmful practices (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2017). Journalists are susceptible to moral injury through institutional betrayal when they lack agency in death knock practice; they may engage in practices that breach their own moral code at the behest of others.

Trauma-exposed journalists work in a field that motivates a culture of stark stoicism and are discouraged from discussing difficult job experiences and their effects (Dadouch & Lilly, 2020). Suffering in silence, workaholism, alcohol and substance abuse, and other maladaptive coping strategies are 'consistently romanticized through industry lore as much as in the personal narratives of practitioners' (Deuze, 2024, p. 511). Trauma-exposed journalists who continue to work in the same environment face unavoidable reminders of moral injury and institutional betrayal that can lead to constant arousal and hypervigilance, which are critical components of PTSD (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2017). For journalists performing death knocks, these harms can result from their dealings with bereaved people, who can be conceived of as sources in the same way that other people who interact with journalists are party to the journalist–source relationship.

5. The Journalist–Source Relationship and Its Ethical Foundation

Seeking information from sources is at the heart of what journalists do, and source selection is influenced by time pressure, accessibility, and quality (van der Meer et al., 2017), with a preference for eyewitness status (Allgaier, 2011). In Palmer's (2017) research, sources were seen by journalists to have agency and power, but sources perceived journalists to have the power. Some interviewees said journalists should take more responsibility for the outcome of their stories and not seek quotes to fit stories that had largely been written. They expressed alarm at the journalists' freedom to decide how to tell citizens' stories and how they, as interviewees, had very little control over how they would be represented. Some said journalists should be held accountable if stories were unjustly damaging. Levine (2011) says journalists know the risks to sources but do not share those risks with them. Awad maintains that, in journalism, 'maltreatment of sources seems to be part and parcel of the job' (Awad, 2006, p. 922) and that the assumption that mistreating sources is an inevitable cost of news making—based on the media's watchdog role and free

press ideology—precludes debate about journalists' moral responsibilities to sources or a cost–benefit analysis of their work.

Journalists' attitudes to the journalist–source relationship must be considered in light of the ethical requirements of journalism ethical codes as much as individual journalists' ethical frameworks. Universally, journalism codes require adherence to four key pillars, described by Duncan (2020) as truth telling and accuracy; minimising harm; independence, fairness, and impartiality; and accountability. These pillars relate to journalists' dealings with sources as much as audiences and might be described as deontological (or duty-based) ethics (Gauthier, 2010; Sheridan Burns, 2013). They set what appear to be fixed moral obligations that practitioners must follow of the kind described by Kant (in Gauthier, 2010), a categorical imperative that requires practitioners to follow moral principles that are more important than outcomes.

However, journalism codes also introduce consequentialist ethics that do address outcomes, through utilitarian thinking, which prioritises the greatest good for the greatest number (Gauthier, 2010; Sheridan Burns, 2013). This is because it is recognised that deontology's fixed moral obligations do come into conflict, and a decision must be made about what takes priority. On face value, professional journalism codes do justify intrusion on individual privacy in the public interest, and this is true even if the action might cause an individual harm (Gauthier, 2010). The death knock is one situation where the journalist is required to balance what can be competing demands of 'the public interest in the freedom of expression' and 'people's legitimate expectation of privacy' (Duncan, 2020, p. 187). It is this balancing act—whether the harm that might be inflicted on an individual who has their privacy invaded can be justified because a community has the right to know details about a newsworthy death—that can be the site of moral injury. Codes assume that the comparisons of harms and benefits can be 'impartial' (Gauthier, 2010, p. 221). However, journalists who lack agency also face commercial pressures to deliver compelling stories for their news organisations (Patching & Hirst, 2021). In circumstances where the ethical journalist following their professional code can reasonably intrude on personal privacy for reasons of public interest, then the ethical quality of the relationship with their source becomes one that is couched as a matter of getting it right (accuracy) rather than treating sources in the right way (Awad, 2006). According to Awad (2006), this is a utilitarian approach constrained by the commonsense ideology of objectivity. However, it should be noted that objectivity is a journalism paradigm that is on the wane for many scholars, including Ward (2020), who argues the need to reconfigure old paradigms for the digital age.

A clash of ethical frameworks—deontological (duty-based) versus consequentialism or utilitarianism (outcome-based)—is said to be at the heart of moral injury in military and healthcare communities (Cohen & McClymond, 2024). Bayerle says the experiences of young American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, including greater responsibility in a rapidly changing and uncertain environment, made 'impossible choices even more common and more stressful' (Bayerle, 2024, p. 120). For health workers, Bayerle says moral injury has resulted from their 'being forced to choose between utilitarian guidelines [of healthcare systems, which strive for the greatest good for the greatest number] and the caregiving-based values [that lead to duties] that define their understanding of their professional identity' (Bayerle, 2024, p. 122). Likening the experiences of journalists to health workers, Losowsky (2024) identifies the source of moral injury as the 'gap between our values and our actions'.

It is argued here that the underlying ethical frameworks of journalists will likely reflect their perception of the journalist–source relationship and may also impact their decision to use social media in their death knock practice, to the extent that they have agency. A distinction will be drawn between journalists who preference deontological

(duty-based) ethical frameworks, such as the Kantian categorical imperative, and those who preference consequential or utilitarian frameworks—the greatest good for the greatest number. Further, it is suggested that the journalist with deontological (duty-based) ethics could be more likely to sustain moral injury than the utilitarian because of their perceived duty to their source.

6. The Research Questions

The literature review has provided the foundation for an inquiry into a correlation between a journalist's use of social media in their death knock practice, their view of the journalist–source relationship, and their risk of moral injury.

The research questions guiding this inquiry were as follows:

1. How do journalists use social media in their death knock practice?
2. How does the journalist–source relationship impact the journalist's use of social media in their death knock practice?
3. How does the journalist's use of social media in death knock practice impact their risk of moral injury?

These were answered through thematic analysis of relevant quantitative and qualitative data from a broader mixed-methods study, as detailed in the next section.

7. Methodology

This inquiry draws on some of the findings of a broad investigation into Australian journalists' death knock practice. That mixed-methods study had two stages: a survey and interviews. In the first stage, the researcher created an online analytical survey that included 66 multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and short-answer questions; as one-third of the questions invited comment, the survey provided qualitative as well as quantitative data about the journalists' death knock practices, attitudes, impacts, and conceptualisations, what they considered to be ethical best practice and advice they would give to early-career colleagues.

The purposive sample of print and digital journalists to whom the survey was sent was selected from Margaret Gee's Australian Media Guide (2021), which is in the public domain. The survey was answered anonymously by 130 journalists within a month; however, 30 responses were discounted as incomplete, and therefore 100 were analysed. The sample was representative, with an even mix of genders (53 female, 46 male, 1 non-binary), a wide range of ages (<20 to >60) and periods of journalistic experience (<1 year to >40 years), and a proportionate mix of newsroom sizes and locations. Journalists had extensive death knock experience (88 had performed one death knock, 68 had performed more than one, most had performed between five and fifty, and eight had performed more than a hundred). Their death knock experience was also current; some had performed a death knock that week, and only five had performed their most recent death knock more than five years ago.

Surveyed journalists who expressed interest in taking part in a second stage of research were invited by the researcher to participate in a semi-structured interview via Zoom. Ten interviews were conducted; nine interviewees were survey respondents, and a tenth was approached separately by the researcher based on their death knock reportage. The interviewee sample was less representative; eight interviewees were male, and two were female; however, the age range was broad (21 to 71), and their journalistic experience was extensive (from five to 50 years). Nine were reporters, one was an editor, and most worked in large metropolitan newsrooms. As part of the broader research project, interviews provided the opportunity for the researcher to explore themes arising from the survey data analysis, including social media use, journalists' agency in death knock practice, the harms they experienced, and broader industry trends about ethical behaviour.

For this article, the researcher analysed survey and interview data related only to the three specific points of this inquiry: social media use, the journalist–source relationship, and harm as moral injury. To access survey data relating to social media use, the researcher analysed five questions about journalists' social media use in death knock practice; three questions where 'social media' was an option in answer choices (for example, how photographs are sourced); and 13 questions in which journalists raised social media in their responses (for example, what is ethical best practice).

To access survey data relating to the journalist–source relationship, the researcher analysed 10 questions relating to contact and interview methods, persuasion techniques, bereaved responses, and perceived benefits; five questions in which 'Sources' was an option in answer choices, pertaining to obtaining photographs, concerns, preparations, challenges, and justifications; and 11 questions in which journalists made comments relevant to sources, pertaining to their preparations, circumstances, justifications, and ethical best practices.

To access survey data relating to the journalists' harm as moral injury, the researcher analysed seven questions relating to the mental health of journalists; four questions in which 'mental health concern' was an answer option (relating to journalists' challenges, impacts and satisfaction with their work); and 12questions in which respondents made comments relevant to moral injury, relating to their individual experiences of death knocks, challenges, advice, ethical best practice, and justifications.

In addition to the survey data, the researcher analysed interview transcripts for comments that related to the three points of inquiry. These included interview comments about whether journalists should seek consent to use social media material, their decision making around the appropriateness of that material, their agency, their concern for bereaved people, and connections between a journalist's behaviour and their feelings.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from both methods simultaneously, allowing the researcher to draw out themes and patterns that emerged in both stages of research (Aronson, 1995). Data were coded for key social media practices, evidence of journalists' attitudes to the journalist–source relationship, and evidence of harm as moral injury. In the final analysis, connections were theorised between these three aspects of the inquiry to attempt to answer the research questions.

8. Findings

The analysis identified four digital death knock practices associated with journalists' use of social media:

1. identify and locate people to interview
2. contact people to interview
3. interview people
4. source material (facts, photos, and comments) for use in their stories.

These were then divided into two types: ones that uses social media as a *tool* (1–3) and the other that uses social media as a *source* (4), and it is social media use as a source that creates the greatest risk of moral injury for journalists. Therefore, the *sourcing* practice will be the focus of discussion, noting that other practices also have relevance for the journalist–source relationship and the risk of moral injury.

8.1. Identifying and Locating People to Interview via Social Media

Identifying and locating people to interview and contacting people to interview are commonplace, with 80% of journalists in the study indicating they do both. The first practice is routine and uncontroversial, and journalists do not express concerns about their relationship with sources or harm to themselves as a result of using social media to find people to interview.

8.2. Contacting People via Social Media

Contacting people via social media is also routine but more controversial; journalists raise concerns about the risk of miscommunication with sources, the lack of certainty around consent if people do not reply, and their own feelings of disrespecting the bereaved because they did not approach them personally or because they proceeded without consent. Therefore, this practice has ethical implications for the journalist–source relationship and for moral injury in journalists. Further, delayed responses are problematic, with the risk that by the time people got around to checking their phones or felt up to responding, the death of their loved one might no longer be newsworthy, and the journalist would 'feel bad if they had to say sorry, actually, we're no longer interested'. Also, some said a direct message could constitute 'an implied threat . . . you're saying, look we know who you are, which denies the family the respect they deserve'. And there is the complication of messaging minors, as journalists do not generally seek comment from children without parental permission.

8.3. Interviewing People via Social Media

Interviewing via social media is less common—performed by one-third of participants—with the majority preferring to interview in person or on the phone for reasons of quality and accuracy. However, speed is also a consideration. Journalists highlight the 'loss of human connection' in interviewing via messaging (the journalist–source relationship) that can lead to feelings of guilt over disrespecting families and writing an inferior story (potential moral injury to the journalist). Also, to the extent that journalists are acting under the directions of supervisors or the expectations of newsrooms to interview via messaging, the practice could exacerbate the risk of moral injury through institutional betrayal. One journalist commented, 'In the world of churnalism, that sort of thing [personal contact] becomes difficult. We need to pump out more and more stories, faster and with less staff. We never get a break from it'. This comment illustrates institutional betrayal at both the individual level (how the journalist is personally affected) and the systemic level (how the practice is routinised and accepted).

8.4. Sourcing Material via Social Media

Sourcing material such as facts, comments, and photographs from social media for use in stories is also common and the most contentious. Described by interviewees in negative terms such as 'social media mining' and 'scouring for content', it is nevertheless recognised as 'part and parcel' of death knock practice, and this is in keeping with observations that social media platforms have become a primary news source for journalists (Weaver & Willnat, 2016), allowing them to look outside their usual source networks (Molyneux, 2019), to incorporate ordinary people in their stories (Wold, 2022). While journalists recognise that social media pages offer a wealth of first-person information (Whitehouse, 2010), they also recognise that taking this material raises issues of accuracy, suitability, and consent to use material, and that its use disrupts the journalist–source relationship and puts journalists at risk of moral injury. Further, comments highlight the tension between what journalists say they want to do and what they feel compelled to do, pointing to the possibility of moral injury through institutional betrayal at both individual and systemic levels.

Two-thirds of journalists in the study use social media to discover or confirm the identity of a deceased person and obtain photographs of them and their families, and more than one-third use it to find details of an incident, accident, or crime; this is in keeping with observations about the value of social media to crime reporters (Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2018) and of incorporating ordinary people (Wold, 2022) and amateur content into stories (Degen et al., 2024). It is not clear to what extent journalists verify this information, but there

have long been concerns that technology and competition lead to speed and time pressures that raise concerns over journalists' capacity for fact-checking and accuracy (Hermans et al., 2009) and their commitment to objectivity and balance (Barnes, 2016). While one Australian journalist said information from social media 'always needs to be fact-checked', another said, 'As an editor, I find reporters rely way too heavily on social media for information and can put the publication at risk'. This reliance can be the result of time and competition pressure, typified by the comment, 'I'd prefer not to use photos without the family knowing, but sometimes time is against you'. This pressure leads journalists who traditionally seek out credible sources to instead rely on unreliable sources without verification, such as a 'so-called friend who might not actually know the deceased', and this poor judgement and increased risk of error can compound the trauma of bereaved people (disrupting the journalist–source relationship) and result in moral injury in journalists.

The use of photographs is particularly contentious, and while two-thirds of journalists (66%) say they download images from social media with the consent of families, most (90%) prefer families to supply photos directly, primarily for reasons of accuracy, but also out of respect for the bereaved (the journalist–source relationship). However, 19% use photographs without asking permission, 26% use photographs if their request to use them goes unanswered, and 3% use photographs if permission is denied, and these decisions show the journalist disrupting the journalist–source relationship and potentially risking moral injury. Journalists feel more comfortable taking photos from tribute pages, especially 'Go Fund Me' pages that are set up to raise money for bereaved families, in keeping with social media's value in mourning (Moore et al., 2019; Sheldon et al., 2019); however, they will still access images from individual profiles if they are public. Most journalists said they try to use 'appropriate' images, but several said they were not concerned about that if the deceased person was 'a criminal'. Here, journalists are reflecting concerns highlighted in the literature that in sharing someone's content more widely than their social media contacts, the journalist is taking away control of how that person presents themselves to the world (see, e.g., Wold, 2022). One journalist said a tribute post was seen as 'consent to look through their social media to obtain a better idea of who they were as a person so then you can write something more truthful'. But that journalist also said they 'felt less comfortable the further you scroll down', expressing concern about reproducing photographs from an earlier stage of the person's life, in other contexts or including other people. Taking control of someone's story is a diminution of the journalist–source relationship and a potential source of moral injury in journalists.

That some journalists said they lacked agency in photographic selection may put them at risk of moral injury through institutional betrayal. Several noted that finding images can be 'taken out of your hands, it's someone else's job', and can happen quickly. A desk editor or picture editor will 'raid all the images [on social media], even if they are not great', and permission will not be sought, nor owners notified. Even a journalist who is tasked with finding images will feel indirect pressure to 'mine social media', with one journalist saying, 'So much of how I view it is . . . through the lens of my editor or chief of staff . . . who isn't just going to accept the fact that I haven't been able to contact someone'. That journalist said a reporter might have to 'write to' pictures a desk editor has downloaded, even if they know they are not 'public'. They said the following:

> I tend to think, if they've come to you via screenshots and you know these aren't public photos and there hasn't been a public post memorialising them, I'd probably feel pretty uncomfortable writing about it or writing to the images. But ultimately, I'd find it difficult to say no if my editor knew that it existed. (i1)

This comment typifies a routine dilemma facing the ethical journalist in the digital age.

9. The Journalist–Source Relationship: An Emerging Tendency

These findings build on the overall project's findings that 90% of journalists rely on social media in their death knock practice, and that this reliance has increased and continues to increase (Watson, 2022). Many journalists echo advantages to this change identified in the literature—that social media is a cheap and accessible source of information (Ferreira, 2021) that creates a sense of immediacy that is highly sought-after in news (Wold, 2022). Many also recognise disadvantages, which include feelings of guilt associated with disrespecting bereaved families and professional practice concerns about writing an inferior story through a lack of personal interaction with the bereaved, potentially the result of the financial motive of downsized newsrooms (Duncan, 2023). The absence of personal interaction was a loss of 'human connection' for journalists, who were 'unable to understand a person's mental state' or 'read the cues'. Several journalists made comments such as 'you should look them in the eye' or 'you should always speak directly to build sincere trust and rapport' and observed that this not only shows them respect but 'will lead to a better story'. In addition to professional practice concerns, these sentiments reflect attitudes towards the journalist–source relationship and are relevant to moral injury risk, as journalists generally want to act, and be seen as acting, with compassion in their death knock practice (Duncan, 2023).

It is important to note that these findings reflect the views of this cohort and do not reflect the views of all journalists in Australia. However, the analysis lends weight to the argument that the journalist's use of social media in death knock practice has ramifications for the journalist–source relationship and their own risk of moral injury. The pertinent factor is the journalist's attitude (or perceived duty) towards their source. This article argues that this attitude is indicative of the journalist's underlying ethical framework, and a distinction is drawn between journalists who can be described as consequentialist/utilitarian (prioritising the greatest good for the greatest number) and journalists who can be described as deontological or Kantian (with duty-base ethics that prioritise respect for persons).

While a link cannot be demonstrated in this inquiry, analysis of data through the lens of moral injury theory raises the question of whether the journalist's personal standpoint—their view of the journalist–source relationship and their underlying ethical framework—is a predictor of moral injury. While a pattern cannot be established, a tendency does emerge. Journalists who are hesitant to indiscriminately 'mine' social media have as their primary concern the impact of this behaviour on bereaved people. Many used the expression that it makes them 'feel bad'. They are worried about the material's accuracy and suitability, and whether they should obtain consent. However, it must be noted that only half (50%) of journalists in this study said it was an ethical best practice to ask for consent to use social media material in death knock stories and not use the material if consent is not given. Of the other half, 16% said journalists should at least alert relevant parties to their intended use of the material, 26% said it is their right to use material that is publicly available regardless of consent, and 8% said journalists can use public material even if permission is denied. Journalists' responses, it might be argued, reflect their conception of the journalist–source relationship and demonstrate a manifestation of their underlying ethical framework: is the source a *means to an end* or an *end in themselves*?

Journalists indicate respect for the journalist–source relationship in their self-censorship of material, particularly if it belongs to, or relates to, children. The risk is particularly great, one journalist said, if a young person's post was 'embedded in a story with their username, which could result in them being trolled'. While this journalist is emphatic that 'we should as a profession be more careful about how we use the social media posts of people who are under 18', they also observe that 'for the most part, if it's

a public post, then it is kind of fair game'. Another journalist described how they had chosen not to publish a newsworthy fact that had been revealed in an Instagram post by the teenage girlfriend of a youth who had been stabbed to death—that she was pregnant, and her child would never know their father. The journalist said any disclosure of the pregnancy was a 'bridge too far':

> Another media organisation ran it, I think it might have even been on their front page, and they had a double page spread on it using photos of this girl. These are all underage. They are children. (i8)

This journalist had attempted to contact the girlfriend and others who were posting, via private message, but they did not reply. While the journalist did not reveal the pregnancy in their story, they did 'use some social media images, uncontroversial things, where it's just like friends leaving tribute messages'. Here, we see this journalist reflecting on Goffman's (1956) notion of performance, that is, of how this young woman might view the announcement of her pregnancy, and we also see the journalist reflecting a deontological ethical framework—the duty to respect persons as *an end in themselves*. This contrasts with those journalists who are steadfast in their right to use publicly available material, with one saying:

> Don't put anything up on social media unless you want the world to know. It's the simple edict. You can't really say your privacy has been invaded because someone takes something from the public sphere. (i7)

This journalist is reflecting a utilitarian ethical framework, under which they are justified to forego the privacy of the individual for the 'greater good' of publishing in the public interest. In this case, the source is a *means to an end*.

In some instances, journalists point to 'herd mentality' in defence of their behaviour, especially as 'time constraints are even worse now because everything is instant', reflecting the profit motive (Duncan, 2023). One journalist who believes permission should be sought to use photos 'even if they are public, for the sake of decency and respect' also notes that 'once a number of media outlets use a photo, then other media outlets would follow without asking'. Journalists feel pressure to 'match what the others are doing', and, even if they had intended to do a death knock in person, they might no longer bother. Rivalry is fierce among tabloid publications and cadet journalists who would 'go to any length to get a story', as Patching and Hirst (2021) point out. One journalist said they did not see how 'you'd stop that cycle'; if there was a tabloid 'racing to it and mining the social media', then others would do the same. This collision of commercial interest and public interest is aptly described by Patching and Hirst as the 'biggest fault line in journalism today' (Patching & Hirst, 2021, p. 195).

10. Conclusions

Through a review of relevant literature and a discussion of relevant data from the researcher's study, this paper has attempted to answer three research questions.

1. How do journalists use social media in their death knock practice?

Journalists use social media in their death knock practice in four ways; in three, social media is a journalistic *tool* and, in a fourth, social media is a *source* of material that journalists use in their stories. The use of social media to identify and locate people to interview is routine and uncontroversial. The use of social media to contact people to interview is also routine but somewhat controversial because of the risk of miscommunication between journalist and bereaved. Uncertainty about consent especially with unclear or delayed responses and feelings of disrespecting bereaved people disrupt the journalist–source relationship and pose moral injury risks to journalists. The use of social media to interview

people is less common (used by one-third) as most journalists prefer personal contact, but is also controversial, particularly if journalists are acting under the direction of supervisors or the expectation of newsrooms, in which case feelings of disrespecting the bereaved can lead to moral injury through institutional betrayal.

The sourcing of material via social media is common and the most controversial practice, posing the greatest potential for disruption of the journalist–source relationship and moral injury in journalists. Contentious aspects are the question of consent to take readily available material, the potential inaccuracy of content and unreliability of sources, and the appropriateness of material, especially photographs. The risk of institutional betrayal is high with this practice, as the 'mining' of social media may occur under direction or expectation or be taken out of the journalist's hand entirely.

2. How does the journalist–source relationship impact the journalist's use of social media in their death knock practice?

This inquiry has raised the possibility of a correlation between the journalist's use of social media in their death knock practice and their view of the journalist–source relationship. Journalists who are hesitant to indiscriminately mine social media have as their primary concern the impact of their actions on bereaved people. Journalists who value the source as *an end in themselves* (a deontological or duty-based view), not just *a means to an end* (a utilitarian view—the greatest good for the greatest number), are less willing to disrupt the journalist–source relationship; they are more willing to try to interview in person and to seek consent to use material, and they conceive of these actions as acting respectfully towards bereaved people. In contrast, the journalist who views the source as a means to an end is more willing to disrupt the journalist–source relationship and use social media in their death knock practice in ways that prioritise the public interest over personal privacy.

3. How does the journalist's use of social media in death knock practice impact their risk of moral injury?

By analysing data through the frame of moral injury theory, this inquiry has also theorised that there is potentially a relationship between the journalist's use of social media in their death knock practice and their risk of moral injury. The impact is not the same for all journalists and depends on their practices, and also likely depends on their view of the journalist–source relationship and their underlying ethical framework. It is argued that the journalist who engages in social media practices that have a high risk of moral injury (such as sourcing material without considering consent or appropriateness) have the highest risk of moral injury but *only if those actions breach their own moral code*. Even journalists who engage in practices with relatively low risk of moral injury (such as contacting and interviewing people via social media) may risk moral injury if those actions breach their own moral code. The impact on the journalist will likely be in accord with their underlying ethical framework, that is, whether their focus is on duty to an individual (deontology) or the greatest good for the greatest number (utilitarian).

While it is important to note that not all harm from digital death knock practice (or death knock practice overall) is the result of moral injury, it is proposed that moral injury poses the greatest risk to the journalist who subscribes to deontological ethics, that is, the journalist who perceives the people they interact with *as an end in themselves*, not *as a means to an end*, which is how a journalist who subscribes to utilitarian ethics might perceive them. The reason for this greater risk for the journalist who subscribes to duty-based ethics is likely because of their view of the journalist–source relationship. The important consideration is how the journalist feels about their interaction (or lack of) and the quality of that interaction.

If a journalist feels an ethical responsibility (duty) towards a source (as they would under a deontological framework) and they do not uphold that responsibility, they are at

risk of moral injury. If their action is the result of a supervisor's directive or a newsroom expectation, moral injury may result from institutional betrayal. However, if the journalist is more inclined to utilitarian ethics—the greatest good for the greatest number—they may be able to prioritise the public interest in publishing private information over protecting that individual's privacy. In this case, they would be less at risk of moral injury, because they can justify their decision using utilitarian ethics. In the words of one interviewee: 'I think the more ethical you are the more likely you are to be affected. If you don't care, you don't care'. In this comment, the interviewee's use of the word 'care' refers to the journalist's duty to their source and whether it is prioritised or deprioritised in relation to the public interest.

As scholars and journalists shift their thinking away from the paradigm of objectivity to recognise the emotional turn in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti, 2021), it is timely to question the impact of digital death knock practices on journalists as well as sources. Some journalists recognise that digital death knock practices remove the capacity for consent and control of the story from bereaved people and risk retraumatising them. These journalists exhibit feelings of moral injury in their reluctant commission of practices about which they have ethical uncertainties. They are grappling with the paradox of the death knock as *intrusion* and *inclusion* (Watson, 2022), and the unfettered access to social media that tips them towards intrusion.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limited agency some journalists express in their death knock practice, and that their actions are the result of supervisors' directives or newsroom expectations. The moral injury these journalists may feel is the result of institutional betrayal, at both the individual and the systemic level. Therefore, while it is important for journalists to recognise the impact of their ethical framework on their wellbeing, minimising moral injury in journalists 'mining social media' for death knocks stories will not be the responsibility of those journalists alone but of the newsrooms that encourage or insist on the practice and professional bodies that sanction it. As Duncan notes, the unfettered access journalists have to social networking sites makes the downloading of material for use in stories 'irresistible to those toiling in pressured newsrooms' (Duncan, 2020, p. 206). And, according to Patching and Hirst, these digital death knock practices exemplify a 'techno-ethical problem' that the industry needs to address (Patching & Hirst, 2021, p. 93). Safer death knocks for journalists will not be achieved by simply banning the most egregious practices (such as taking material from social media without permission) although this could be beneficial to all parties. Rather, a broader understanding of the impacts of practices on journalists and bereaved people may trigger an industry-wide recalibration of journalism ethics away from utilitarian thinking and more towards a deontological view.

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