

“Praying for your loved one wearing masks and gloves is what nightmares feels like.” What do newspapers tell us about experiences of grief, bereavement and death from COVID-19?

Ryann Sowden¹, Lucy E. Selman¹, Erica Borgstrom²

@RyannSowden

¹University of Bristol, ²The Open University.

ryann.sowden@bristol.ac.uk

Background: COVID-19 is an unparalleled modern pandemic which has resulted in over 41,000 deaths in the UK (GOV.UK, 2020), leaving behind many more bereaved.

Deaths from COVID-19 have unique challenges for clinicians and bereaved families, which may mean families are unable to ‘say goodbye’ to a dying or dead loved one in culturally expected ways.

The media play an important role in creating a sense-making narrative, reflecting and enforcing cultural ideas about death, grief and bereavement (Kott and Limaye, 2016). There has been increased coverage of grief and bereavement from COVID-19, and almost unavoidable reportage since the first deaths in the UK. Uncertainty and widespread reporting of death may cause confusion and fear.

Objective: To explore media representations of the end of life, grief and bereavement during COVID-19, and discuss implications and recommendations for palliative and end of life care and bereavement support during the pandemic.

Methods: Longitudinal document analysis of UK online newspaper articles about grief and bereavement from death of COVID-19.

Top 7 most read online newspapers (The Guardian, The Daily Mail, The Telegraph, The Mirror, The Sun, The Times and The Metro) were searched over two, week long periods representing the beginning of the UK lockdown, and 3 weeks after: Week A: 18/03/2020, Week B: 08/04/2020.

Relevant articles were analysed using content analysis informed by emergent/ethnographic document analysis (Altheide, 2000). Newspaper writing techniques were described using a Terror Management Theory lens.

Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986) suggests a fundamental psychological conflict results from the need to self-preserve when realising that our own death is inevitable and largely unpredictable. However, how the media portrays deaths from COVID-19 and what effects have not yet been examined.



Results: 55 articles were analysed:

	The Guardian	The Daily Mail	The Telegraph	The Mirror	The Sun	The Times	The Metro	Total
Week A 18/03/2020	3	8	1	2	1	2	2	19
Week B 08/04/2020	1	20	2	2	5	3	3	36
Total by publication	4	28	3	4	6	5	5	55

Two main themes related to when goodbyes could be said: before and at the moment of death (such as visiting in person), and after death (such as funeral services).

UK online newspaper articles present the need to ‘say goodbye’ to dying or dead ones as important such as being at their bedside, or attending their funeral. Newspapers portrayed being unable to do so, or doing so in an altered way (e.g. by videolink), as leading to a lack of closure for the bereaved, which was assumed to complicate the grieving process. Dying alone and grieving alone was presented negatively as ‘lonely.’

Three themes related to descriptions of fear, uncertainty, mourning and loss.

Articles stoked and minimised fears of COVID-19 and death as a ‘push and pull’ of emotions. They gave an overview of typical/expected and atypical/unexpected deaths, focusing on particularly tragic deaths. Articles were mainly negative, and described absences of normal routines: being unable to attend hospitals, care homes or funerals. Restrictions were referred to sensationally and inaccurately as ‘bans’ when they were recommendations.

Discussion: Newspapers tell us COVID-19 disrupts culturally held views of ‘good deaths.’ Deaths from COVID-19 are unexpected and ‘bad deaths’, and the resulting grief from not saying goodbye causes ‘bad grief.’ However, Burrell and Selman (2020) found that the value of a funeral depended on it being personally meaningful and supportive; with the right support, this could still be possible in times of funeral restrictions.

Newspapers focused on negatives and uncertainty: ‘bad deaths’ and ‘bad grief,’ deaths that were particularly tragic, fears of death, and the inability to prepare for death in the usual ways. Although fear and sensationalism may sell newspapers, continued sensationalism may also desensitize readers (Hendriks Vettehen and Kleemans, 2018) and reduce engagement in public health issues.

Recommendations:

- 1) The media could rebalance the narrative on ‘bad’ deaths, with stories of ‘good’ deaths, and the possibility of more positive experiences despite the restrictions.
- 2) The media could have a role in informing the public about how they can say goodbye more positively and meaningfully
- 3) The media could provide information signposting bereaved readers to support and advise readers how to support bereaved friends and family.

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