

# The media and missing people : an analysis

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## The media and missing people

Images of missing people tell us that someone is missing as well as establishing a bond between those who search and the missing person.

The role of the media and the way in which the community see missing relates primarily to the practicalities of searching.

What is the benefit of sharing the emotional narratives? Of sharing the images, the pages on social media platforms that profile the grief of those left behind – does it create an understanding of ambiguous loss in the wider community?

What are the gaps in our understanding?

## The study

The analysis focuses on a snapshot period of Australian mainstream print media in 2012 as well as a review of the relevant bereavement and ambiguous loss around missing and the media.

124 articles were identified during a 3 month period (that included National missing persons week) via a media alert system that included the keywords Missing AND Persons AND Australia.

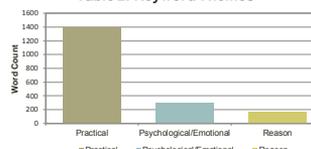
11 articles were excluded that fell outside the Australian definition of a missing person (such as stories on missing limbs and people missing outside of Australian borders).

The articles were converted to text file and analysed using a peer reviewed corpus analysis tool (antConc 3.2.4w) to identify the keyword frequency within the articles. From there the context of the focus on missing people was thematically reviewed to look at how missing people were discussed across various mainstream media platforms.

## The results

- As predicted the most common words used within the articles were 'missing', 'police' and 'family'.
- The use of the word 'family' sat within a narrative that prioritised the experience of the missing person rather than an exploration of the grief of those left behind (or purely to indicate who reported the person missing)
- The key themes identified were

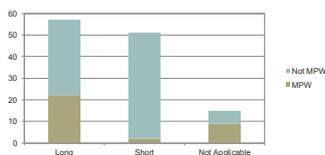
Table 2: Keyword Themes



## The results

- The longer the person remained missing the less attention was placed on the details of their disappearance and more on the narrative of those left behind.
- During missing persons week the media attention focused less on the short term cases and more on the long term matters providing more opportunity for families to explore the impact of their loss.

Table 3: Length of time missing as identified in Articles with relationship to Missing Persons Week (MPW)

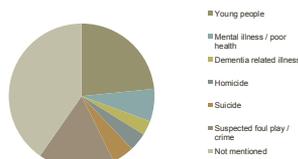


## The results

Only 2 of the 124 articles focused on the return of the missing person (one being a positive outcome the other reported the location of human remains) despite the research suggesting that over 95% of missing people are located within one month.

The majority of stories did not profile clear statements as to why the person may have been missing.

Table 4: Reasons for disappearing



## So what is the role of media?

- Using the media as a way of demonstrating public mourning is not a new concept (Panti and Sumiala 2009) yet the action of promoting a loved ones disappearance is not focused on the experience of being left behind it is on the goal of affecting their return.
- There is a gap that exists between the known risk factors of going missing (mental health concerns, young people and people living with dementia) and the way in which missing is reported in Australian media.
- The primary function appears to focus on the practical aspects of the geography of the missing persons investigation
- There may be space for the media to be used as a platform to share details as to the impact of living with an ambiguous loss by placing the narratives of the details of the disappearance into a framework of sharing what it really means to be left behind.

## Future research explorations

- The inclusion of a missing persons story is not necessarily from an altruistic standpoint – it relies on the newsworthiness of the disappearance (Moore 2012). The ritual for acknowledging loss by speaking out to the media is not available for all families.
- The media can have a role to play in shaping community perceptions. Kaplan (2005) explores the fact that in profiling traumatic events the media can shape community ideology about how that event was perceived
- The gaps in the literature raise the question as to whether or not media is an appropriate platform for sharing insights into the ambiguity of this type of loss – it raises concerns about how we support those who speak up about what has happened, that we collect data about the effectiveness of using media to bring people home and about how we include key community messages about the missing and those left behind to further shape the communities understanding of ambiguous loss.

## For more information:

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### References:

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