



# TECHNOLOGY & EMERGING MEDIA TECHNOLOGIE & MÉDIAS ÉMERGENTS

Une section de / An interest group of



ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DE  
COMMUNICATION  
CANADIAN COMMUNICATION  
ASSOCIATION

Mylynn Felt

## Framing “Cyberbullying”: Competing Frame Coverage of Rehtaeh Parsons’ Death

In A. Buckland & C. Caron (Eds.), *TEM 2014 : Proceedings of the Technology & Emerging Media Track*

---

### Citation

Felt, M. (2014). Framing “Cyberbullying”: Competing Frame Coverage of Rehtaeh Parsons’ Death. In A. Buckland & C. Caron (Eds.), *TEM 2014 : Proceedings of the Technology & Emerging Media Track – Annual Conference of the Canadian Communication Association (Saint Catharines, May 28 – 30, 2014)*, URL : <http://www.tem.fl.ulaval.ca/fr/saint-catharines-2014/>

---

 Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

# Framing “Cyberbullying”: Competing Frame Coverage of Rehtaeh Parsons’ Death

**Author** Mylynn Felt  
University of Calgary  
[jmfelt@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jmfelt@ucalgary.ca)

**Abstract** Cyberbullying is an emerging social problem. The present study is a qualitative content analysis using framing theory to examine the claims made in national print news coverage of Rehtaeh Parsons’ suicide. Analysis reveals competing frames between those written for the news section and those in editorial and feature sections. Reporters treat Parsons’ death as evidence of cyberbullying as a current social problem needing an updated legislative response. Opinion and feature articles were less likely to attribute blame for Parsons’ death on technology. These articles place blame more on individuals than on cyberbullying. They call for an examination of teen culture or rape culture. In contrast, articles appearing in the news section of the paper succinctly represent Parsons’ death as part of the cyberbullying social reform movement.

**Keywords** Cyberbullying; Frame Analysis; Social Problems; Rape; Victimization; Suicide.

**Acknowledgments** I wish to share my appreciation to the two reviewers who provided such constructive feedback in this publication process.

## 1. Introduction

Rehtaeh Parson's April 7, 2013 death received international news coverage. Much of it focused on contributing factors that purportedly led to her suicide. If the news coverage is accurate, Parsons was raped by a group of four male peers two years prior to her death. Days after this incident, photos of the rape made their way through her school group. This led to online peer harassment, often termed cyberbullying by the press. Parsons' mother cites the lack of judicial response to her daughter's rape and the persistent bullying as precursors to her daughter's suicide.

By examining the national representations of Parsons' death, I investigated the mediated construction of cyberbullying through the public discourse of print news. I found that mainstream news frames differ from those present in editorial and feature writing. News articles depict cyberbullying as the villain deserving blame for Parsons' death. Feature articles in the Life section of the paper and editorials written in the Opinion section discuss Parsons' death in broader terms, questioning societal conditions and the nature of sexual assault. In contrast, journalists writing for the News sections act as agenda setters framing cyberbullying as a social problem requiring updated legislation. This contrast between the frames present in editorial and feature writing and those in news writing demonstrates how journalists act as social agents in the construction of cyberbullying as an emerging social problem worthy of public attention.

## 2. Literature Review

There are two relevant fields of literature to inform an understanding of this issue. The first is literature examining how actors construct and promote social problems. The second is specific to cyberbullying.

One way of researching social problems is to see them as already existing in the world. In contrast, Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse (1977) define social problems as "the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (p. 74). It is a way of looking at social problems as issues defined and presented to the public. This constructionist approach calls for an examination of the politics of claims making. Joel Best identifies six stages in the process of social problems. This begins with claims making, followed by media coverage. The third stage is public reaction and then policy making. The fifth stage is social problems work followed by policy outcomes. Advocates of social problems move their causes through these stages.

Political scientists describe claims that create a general sense of agreement as valence issues. According to Best, these "claims face little resistance, quickly gaining widespread acceptance among those who hear them" (2013, p. 41). He cites claims about child abuse, child pornography, and other threats to children as examples. Because no politician would ever claim to support cyberbullying, it qualifies as a valence issue as well. Yet even valence issues must compete in what Best calls the social problems marketplace. The general public has a limited attention span and can only devote a certain amount of emotional investment to competing, worthy causes.

There is a vast amount of research on cyberbullying; this is evidence of Best's second and fifth stages of social problems development: media coverage and social problems work, in which commentators establish the existence of

problems worthy of public attention. Researchers examine the nature of cyberbullying (Cheung, 2012) and the effects on victims (Kowalski, Limber & Agatson, 2012; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; and Thornberg et al., 2013). Broll and Huey (2014) examine police perspectives enforcing Canadian cyberbullying laws. Many discuss the relationship between cyberbullying and schools as well as potential methods for prevention (Strom & Strom, 2005; Shaheen & Hoff, 2007; Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012; and Cheung, 2012). Other researchers review and examine laws and legal ramifications (Shaheen & Huff, 2007; Butler, Kift, & Campbell, 2009; Cheung, 2012; and Benzmilller, 2013). Some consider different theoretical frameworks to understand the nature of cyberbullying (Cesaroni, Downing, & Alvi, 2012; Thornberg, 2013; and Kowalski et al., 2014). Many examine the similarities and differences between cyberbullying and bullying (Strom & Strom, 2005; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Law et al., 2011; Benzmilller, 2013; and Kowalski et al., 2014). Finally, researchers focus on the prevalence of the problem as well as the prevalence differences between gender, race, and age groups (Li, 2006; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Cheung, 2012; and Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). These efforts seek to reify complex behaviors as something succinct and quantifiable, something a single term can capture.

None of the research above examines the social construction of cyberbullying. One exception is a recent study in New Zealand that took a similar approach to the one I use by examining the news media frames of computer-mediated harassment. Researchers examined three high-profile stories of teen suicides related to media use, concluding that media gatekeepers only covered the stories due to the technological aspect of the harassment. They also concluded that the media framing sensationalized the influence technology had in each case and focused minimally on psychological factors (Thom et.al. 2011). While this study serves as an example, it does not represent North American instances. My analysis examines the Canadian public discourse of cyberbullying.

### 3. Theory

Extant literature on cyberbullying seeks to define the nature of the problem or to consider potential causes and/or solutions to the problem. Recognizing the socially constructive elements in the creation of social problems allows for analysis of the way social actors frame the nature of the problem. Framing theory provides a lens for examining news representation of this young concept of cyberbullying—one that is rapidly leading to political action.

I apply framing theory to position my analysis of news media treatment of cyberbullying. Frame analysis is important because it reveals the subtle beliefs that affect message delivery and prime an audience to endorse the ideology promoted by claims-makers of social problems. Applications of framing theory vary in their definition of the terms frame and framing. However, many researchers rely on Robert Entman's definition:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (1993, p. 52).

Framing is an interpretation and presentation of reality. For Goffman, to frame is to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" (1974, p. 21). Jenny Kitzinger compares framing to photography. To reconstruct a scene, a photographer makes choices about what details remain in focus, which are out of view, and which are left in the background, as well as how fuzzy those background details look. In this manner, a photographer "frames a particular view" (Kitzinger, 2007,

p. 134). In the photography metaphor, an analyst might describe the subject of the photo as the topic while the choices about focus, detail, and angle of the shot would all be worth exploring as aspects of the frame. As Kitzinger observes, the mere act of explaining framing theory involves crafting and applying a frame. It is about choices. Frame analysis, then, involves identifying the choices of claims-makers as well as the effects of those choices. Entman describes framing as “the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (2010, p. 336 and 2007, p. 164). Applying frame theory to the analysis of news text, then, requires a close examination of the assembled narrative. Referring back to Entman’s earlier definition of framing, such analysis would consider how claims-makers define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (1993).

#### 4. Methodology

I conducted a qualitative content analysis to describe the frames applied to media representations of Rehtaeh Parsons’ suicide. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic and flexible method for coding and unitizing textual material in a manner that enables the interpretation of latent as well as manifest meaning.

Using Factiva, I identified all news articles with both the terms “Rehtaeh” and “Parsons” from *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* between April 7, 2013 when Parsons died and April 25, 2013, when Nova Scotia proposed the Cyber-safety Act. I selected this time frame because media framing of the social problem may have influenced the legislative response. This choice coincides with Best’s description of the stages of social problem construction as well as with Entman’s characterization of what frames do. Claimsmakers rely on media coverage applying certain frames in order to effect social change, usually through political action. I selected *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* for having the top and second-highest national readership, respectively. Implied with a larger reader base is the greater degree of influence for social change.

In order to identify the categories for my content analysis, I followed what Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) call the directed approach. In this method, coding starts with a theory and evolves into more categories during data analysis. Because Entman defines a frame as something that defines problems, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgments, and suggests remedies (1993), the first four categories for this content analysis apply to the four aspects of his definition. The broad categories I used to begin my analysis are the following: definitions of cyberbullying, causes of cyberbullying, moral judgments of cyberbullying, and remedies for cyberbullying. Further categories developed throughout the analysis, including the following: effects of cyberbullying, blaming cyberbullying for Parsons’ death, blaming someone or something else, defense for inaction before her death, and defending the alleged perpetrators. In all, I included nine categories in my content analysis<sup>1</sup>.

#### 5. Results

##### 5.1. News Genre

Editors categorize the articles of their paper into certain news genres. Typical

---

<sup>1</sup> I coded a total of 42 articles : 28 *Globe and Mail* articles and 14 *Toronto Star* articles. A total of 1,161 individually coded units have been classified according to the nine categories.

categories include opinion, news, feature, and sports. None of the Parsons data set included sports writing; however, the Factiva search returned news, opinion, and feature articles. Editors might have labelled the articles I term “feature” as “life” or “other.” Since the writing style for each of these sections does not differ, I collapsed all such articles into the category of “feature.” These distinctions matter because the expectation is that feature writing maintains many of the typical news standards for balance and professionalism but allow for more presentation of detail and background, allowing more of the reporter voice. The greatest freedom for sharing opinions appears in the editorial section, in articles I categorize as “opinion.” The contrasting frames appearing in feature and editorial writing as opposed to news writing reveal the construction of cyberbullying as a social problem. *The Globe and Mail* produced more feature articles on Parsons’ death. Most of *The Toronto Star’s* coverage appeared in the main news section of the paper.



Figure 1 — Ratio depicting how many of the 28 *Globe and Mail* and how many of the 14 *Toronto Star* Rehtaeh Parsons news articles from 7 April 2013 to 25 April 2013 fall under the journalistic genres of news, feature, and opinion writing.

While several of the frame categories, such as definition, causes, effects, and blaming cyberbullying often appeared together in several genres, categories such as moral judgment appear more often in feature (24.7% of the identified frame units) and opinion (49.4%) articles. Writing depicting remedies appears most frequently across the genres (28.8% in news stories, 40.7% in opinion articles, and 30.5% in feature articles). Defense of perpetrators only appears in news articles. The identified frame units with the greatest frequency appear in Figure 2. The most common category is for remedies of cyberbullying. This is not surprising since, according to Best, the establishment of social problems leads along a path toward policy making, social problems work (remedies pursued by experts), and policy outcomes.

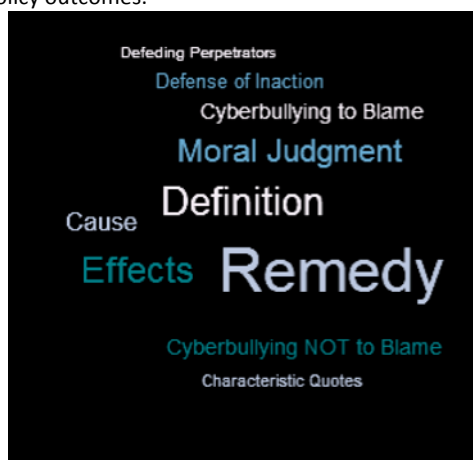


Figure 2 — Word cloud depicting prevalence of identified units of analysis according to the nine framing categories identified in the data set.

## 5.2. Blame Frames

One necessary ingredient in a developing social problem is outrage. Blame is the natural product of outrage. The data set revealed two dominant frames, each focusing blame. Most of the articles blaming cyberbullying for Parsons' death are news (43.1%) and feature articles (46.6%). Only 10.3 percent of the writing blaming cyberbullying appear in opinion articles. The blame of cyberbullying reflects a fairly consistent pattern. In most articles after the first few days, attention focuses on remedies and moral judgments. Whether the article focuses on rape, pornography, teen culture, parenting, or any number of offshoot discussions, the paragraph containing Rehtaeh Parsons includes three chunks: the alleged sexual assault, the cyberbullying focused on photo sharing, and the suicide. This typical grouping is indicative of the oversimplification of details expressed in news articles. Many also seek to establish a pattern, which is a step common to the construction of social problems. Writers often group Parsons' death with similar cases such as Amanda Todd's and the gang rape in Stuebenville, Ohio. Some associate Parsons' case further with incidents in London, California, and Wisconsin. The implication is that this is not one isolated case but a characteristic instance of an emerging social problem.

Reporters may inadvertently reinforce the frame that blames cyberbullying for Parsons' death. Because journalists seek to avoid libel by printing an unfounded, false accusation, they identify all potential perpetrators with the adjectives alleged or accused. Reporters only attribute crimes to those already convicted. Consequently, most instances that suggest someone took or deliberately sent the photo of Parsons' sexual encounter come from quotes in articles or opinion articles rather than reporter writing in news or feature articles. Likewise, reporters often write sentences about cyberbullying in passive voice to avoid identifying a perpetrator. Sentences such as "a photo had been captured" and "it got everywhere" remove blame from individuals. All that remains is the technology through which the photo passed. This implies cyberbullying caused Parsons' death, not the violent, aggressive actions of individuals.

In contrast to the writing blaming cyberbullying, most of the pieces blaming something or someone else appear in opinion articles (45.8%). If reporters blame something other than cyberbullying, they largely do it with feature writing (37.5%), where they are given more license to assert an informed opinion. Only 16.7 percent of the writing blaming something other than cyberbullying appear in news articles. Results for this category of analysis reveal a frame that blames society rather than cyberbullying for Parsons' death.

Writing that focuses blame on something other than cyberbullying appears primarily in the first days of coverage. Parsons' parents initially lashed out at the legal system that failed to prosecute their daughter's rapists. They blamed inaction, saying their daughter was "silenced to death." Claims for these categories derive largely from quotes of the Facebook posts Parsons' parents wrote. These statements reflect intense grief and frustration for a lack of legal redress. After Parsons' mother and stepfather met with a series of politicians, articles using their quotes reflect a sentiment blaming technology and the viral photo. If they convey a frustration for inaction, the frustration aims to produce new laws meant to empower law enforcement to address cyberbullying. They transitioned into advocates claiming cyberbullying as a contemporary social problem.

Contrasting with reporter frames, most of the general population whose voice adds to the media coverage in this data set craft frames that blame societal factors for Parsons' death. Either opinion or feature articles examine many other

possible culprits than cyberbullying in the incidents leading to Parsons’ suicide. Some consider the prevalence of pornography and its intensifying portrayals of violence. Others discuss problems with a society that trivializes rape. Most of these frames indirectly imply that what led to Parsons’ death started with decisions made by individuals. These individuals exist within a culture that influenced their choices. The frames blaming society suggest that remedies to prevent future teen suicides have less to do with technology and more to do with teen culture.

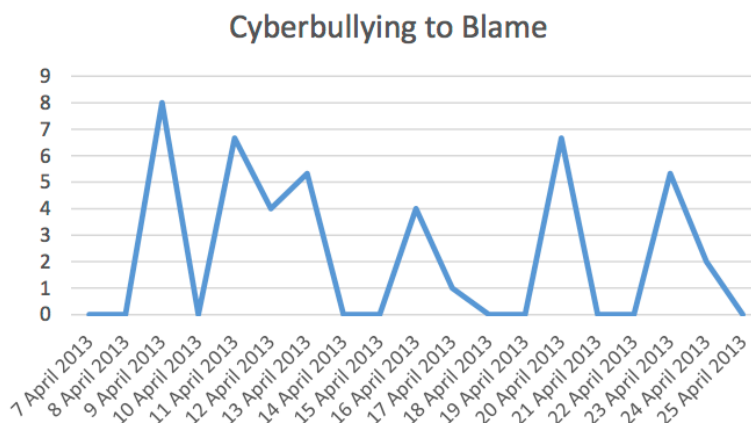


Figure 3 — Chart depicting how many of the identified units of analysis for the category of “frames blaming cyberbullying for the death of the victim” appear by each day in the window of analysis.

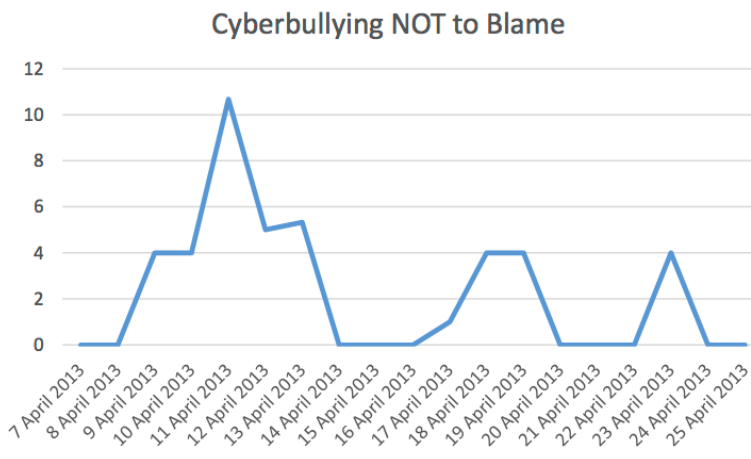


Figure 4 — Chart depicting how many of the identified units of analysis for the category of “frames placing the blame on something/someone other than cyberbullying” appear by each day in the window of analysis.

## 6. Discussion

Analysis of this news coverage reveals several interesting trends. Many of the articles published shortly after Parsons’ death focus on the details of the rape, the photo that circulated, bullying behaviors, their persistence, and many of the effects these behaviors had on her. These early articles also reveal palpable anger through quotes of Parsons’ parents about the lack of judicial action against the boys who they claim raped their daughter.

As media coverage cascades to create more news articles through public



response and calls for legal redress, more articles appear in the form of feature and opinion pieces. News articles during this middle period of coverage largely focus on the reaction of politicians as well as the vigilante group Anonymous.

The next stage of news coverage highlights a contrast between competing frames. After Parsons' parents met with RCMP officials and with leading politicians, their blame shifted from officials who did not act in defense of their daughter to cyberbullying and a faulty legal system that would not allow officials to protect her. While earlier frames indicated that it was not the photos or the rape, it was the silence and inaction that killed her, all frames after these meetings reflect quotes from the parents that argue it was the photo and the cyberbullying that pushed Parsons to suicide.

In contrast, many of the feature and opinion articles in the second half of this data set convey blame on societal norms and acceptance of criminal behavior. Some claim that new laws are unnecessary and that laws already exist to protect children from such crimes but that school officials, parents, and law enforcement officers must enforce the laws and policies in place. Others suggest teens need better education about gaining enthusiastic consent rather than programs that teach rape prevention focused on not becoming a victim. Few of the opinion or feature articles focus blame on technology. Those that see cyberbullying as a problem focus more on changing a culture that allows such behavior rather than adding new laws to restrict it.

Overall, news coverage in Canada's two largest national newspapers of Rehtaeh Parsons' suicide from the time of her death to the time Nova Scotia introduced cyberbullying legislation reflects competing frames. One prominent frame blames technology for Parsons' death and calls for cyberbullying legislative action on this valence issue. Frames that blame societal factors for her death come not from reporters, politicians, or her parents, once they met with politicians. These frames appear mostly in opinion articles and do not portray the details of Parsons' death as succinctly as news reporters do. In general, these frames seek societal reform rather than legislative change. In contrast, news writing frames connect Parsons' death with cyberbullying due to the viral nature of the photo portraying her alleged sexual assault. These details are grouped together frequently to convey the need for new laws addressing a gap in the existing criminal code and the need for the cyberbullying legislation proposed on April 25, 2013 and subsequently passed.

## References

- Benzmiller, H. (2013). The cyber-Samaritans: Exploring criminal liability for the “innocent” bystanders of cyberbullying. *Northwestern University Law Review* 107(2), 927-962.
- Best, J. (2013). *Social problems* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 978-0-393-91863-2.
- Broll, R. & Huey, L. (2014). “Just being mean to somebody isn't a police matter”: Police perspectives on policing cyberbullying. *Journal of School Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/15388220.2013.879367
- Butler, D. Kift, S. & Campbell, M. (2009). Cyber Bullying In Schools and the Law: Is There an Effective Means of Addressing the Power Imbalance? *Murdoch University Electronic Journal of Law* 16(1).
- Cassidy, W., Brown, K., & Jackson, M. (2012). ‘Under the radar’: Educators and cyberbullying in schools. *School Psychology International* 33(5) 520–532. DOI: 10.1177/0143034312445245.
- Cesaroni, C., Downing, S. & Alvi, S. (2012). Bullying enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Turning a critical eye to cyberbullying research. *Youth Justice* 12(3), 199-211. DOI: 10.1177/1473225412459837.
- Cheung, A. S. Y. (2012). Tackling Cyber-Bullying from a Children's Rights Perspective. *Law and Childhood Studies: Current legal issues* 14. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199652501.003.0018.
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4), 51- 58.
- Entman, R. (2010). Framing media power. In P. D’Angelo & J. A. Kuypers (Eds.), *Doing news frame analysis* (pp. 331-355). New York, NY: Routledge. ISBN 0-415-99236-2.
- Erdur-Baker, O. (2010). Cyberbullying and its correlation to traditional bullying, gender and frequent and risky usage of internet-mediated communication tools. *New Media Society* 12, 109-125. DOI: 10.1177/1461444809341260.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. ISBN 0-674-31656-8.
- Kitzinger, J. (2007). Framing and frame analysis. In E. Devereux (Ed.), *Media Studies* (pp. 134-161). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. ISBN 978-1-4129-2982-0.
- Kowalski, R. M., Guimetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N., & Lattanner, M. R. (2014). Bullying in the digital age: A critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin*. Advance online publication. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0035618>
- Kowalski, R. M., Limber, S. P., & Agatson, P. W. (2012). Current research in cyberbullying. In R. M. Kowalski, (ed.) *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the digital age* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), (pp. 89-117). Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing.
- Law, D. M., Shapka, J. D., Hymel, S., Olson, B. F., & Waterhouse, T. (2012). The changing face of bullying: An empirical comparison between traditional and internet bullying and victimization. *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, 226–232. DOI:10.1016/j.chb.2011.09.004.
- Li, Q. (2006). Cyberbullying in schools: A research of gender differences. *School Psychology International* 27(2), 157-170. DOI: 10.1177/0143034306064547.
- Shaheen, S. & Hoff, D. L. (2007). Cyber bullying: Clarifying legal boundaries for school supervision in cyberspace. *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 1(1), 76-118.
- Schenk, A. M. & Fremouw, W. J. (2012) Prevalence, psychological impact, and coping of cyberbully victims among college students. *Journal of School Violence* 11(1), 21-37. DOI: 10.1080/15388220.2011.630310.
- Spector, M. & Kitsuse, J. I. (1977). *Constructing social problems*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Strom, P. S. & Strom, R. D. (2005). Cyberbullying by adolescents: A preliminary assessment. *The Educational Forum* 70(1), 21-36. Retrieved from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131720508984869>.
- Thom, K., Edwards, G., Nakarada-Kordic, I., McKenna, B., O’Brien, A., and Nairn, R. (2011). Suicide online: Portrayal of website-related suicide by the New Zealand media. *New Media and Society* 13(8), 1355-1372, doi: 10.1177/1461444811406521.
- Thornberg, R. Halldin, K., Bolmsjö, N. & Petersson, A. (2013). Victimising of school bullying: A grounded theory. *Research Papers in Education* (28)3, 309-329, DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2011.641999.
- Zhang, Y., & Wildemuth, B. M. (2009). Qualitative analysis of content. *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science*, 308-31.