

## **Audience responses to representations of family-assisted suicide on British television**

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### **Abstract:**

Reflecting on different generic conventions, this study highlights the strengths and weaknesses of documentaries and soap operas in addressing the societal and the personal dimensions of family-assisted suicide. Based on an analysis of YouTube user comments, this study compares how audience members respond to representations of family-assisted suicide in British documentaries and soap operas broadcast between 2010 and 2016. The thematic analysis of comments shows key differences between audience engagement with factual and fictional representations. Markers of a political engagement with this sensitive social issue occur more frequently in comments on documentaries than in comments on soap operas. Comments on soap operas are frequently expressions of emotion, or displays of specialist soap opera knowledge.

**Keywords:** soap opera, documentary, political engagement, family-assisted suicide

Representations of assisted suicide on television have been described as a 'highly precarious matter' (Neuner et al. 2009: 359). Researchers in Psychology and Psychiatry have raised concern about the possible effects of representations of suicidal behaviour on serious self-harm, including suicide (Pirkis et al. 2006). Television, so the fear goes, may tempt vulnerable people to choose suicide as 'both an adequate and acceptable way to solve their problem' (Neuner et al. 2009: 359), by inadvertently romanticizing it as heroic and a way to avoid becoming a burden to others. Another concern is detailed descriptions of suicide methods and the possibility of them being imitated (ibid.). Several empirical studies have analysed the possible effects of media reporting on aggregated suicide rates (Cheng et al. 2007; Jeong et al. 2012; Niederkrotenthaler et al. 2012, Philips 1982, Stack 1990). Until recently, research has largely focused on television and print media, but empirical studies investigating the relationship between online social media and suicide have started to emerge (e.g. Quijin et al. 2016; Won et al. 2013). The question of whether media content has a direct impact on suicidal behaviour also dominates this field. Only a small number of

studies are interested in the qualitative aspects of how people talk online about suicide (Scourfield et al. 2016). This study investigates the latter and reflects on the role of television as a resource for public debate about family-assisted suicide on a social media platform, specifically YouTube. It provides an overview of what audience members say in response to representations of family-assisted suicide and it critically reflects on the extent to which these responses constitute a political engagement with this sensitive social issue.

Whether audiences engage politically with the issue of assisted suicide and how they think society ought to address it very much matters in the British context and perhaps especially so in the first two decades of the 2000s. To date, the act of deliberately assisting or encouraging another person to kill themselves remains a criminal offence, yet there have been several attempts to liberalise the law. Two milestones were the High Court case brought by right-to-die campaigner Debbie Purdy and the Assisted Dying Bill (2014-15) introduced by Lord Falconer of Thornton (cp. Cleary 2010). In 2009, multiple sclerosis sufferer Debbie Purdy won a ruling to get clarification on whether her husband would be prosecuted should he help her end her life by taking her abroad to a so-called suicide clinic. A year later, the Director of Public Prosecutions published guidelines to state officially the conditions under which prosecution would not take place. Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill would have enabled competent adults who are terminally ill to request assistance with ending their lives. The Bill did not progress beyond Committee stage in the Lords. In 2015, the proposal was taken to the Commons and MPs overwhelmingly voted against changing the law, a vote which did not reflect the findings of public opinion polls at the time.

These polls consistently show a majority of British adults supporting the legalisation of physician assisted suicide (IPSOS 2015; Gardiner 2012) and agreeing that family or friends should not fear prosecution if they help a loved one to die (BBC 2010). Individual members of the public continue to challenge British law on assisted dying. At the time of writing, the High Court has heard the case of terminally ill Noel Bowcott who claimed the 1961 Suicide Act breached 'his human right to a "dignified death"' (Bowcott 2017). The influence of public opinion on policy is difficult to measure, but there is agreement that it tends to have some influence (Burstein 2003: 29). However, when it comes to making changes to British law on assisted dying, public opinion so far seems to have carried little weight. One reason for this is a concern about the appropriateness of opinion poll data being used to inform public policy. Another is scepticism about the quality of public opinion itself. As noted in the UK's House of Lords Select Committee on Assisted Suicide for the Terminally Ill Bill (2005), the British government does refer to such polls as an indicator of public opinion. However, opinion polls are often no more than a simple measure of how many respondents agree or disagree with a specific proposition put to them in a survey question. Unlike qualitative research methods, they do not give members of the public the space to express and think through policy proposals or to explain what has informed their opinions (UK Parliament 2005). There is, however, also concern over the quality of the public's reasoning. In the UK, legal and medical expert views dominate public consultation on proposed changes to the law on assisted dying and there are concerns over the extent to which lay people

understand the legal, political and ethical complexities that a legalisation of assisted suicide would raise. This concern is not unique to the UK. It has also informed policy debate in the US and is shared by some academic commentators (Johnstone 2013: 183). Their argument is not that all lay persons are unable to comprehend what is at stake, but that they are ill informed due to their reliance on mass media for knowledge. Media coverage of assisted suicide has been described as lacking balance and nuance (Johnstone 2013; Birenbaum et al., 2006; Banerjee and Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2007). British press coverage of family-assisted suicide has been said to emphasise idyllic family relationships, ignoring frightening and uncontrollable aspects of dying, smoothing over botched attempts, and commending the actions of the dying person and those assisting them as autonomous. Press coverage has been criticised for paying only fleeting attention to opposing views and for describing assisted suicides as a decision which implicates only the person wishing to die and those helping them (Birenbaum et al., 2006; Banerjee and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2007).

A prominent example of public criticism of a fictional representation was the response to the storyline of Hayley Cropper's suicide on *Coronation Street*. 10.2 million people watched Hayley's final moments (BBC 2014). For her portrayal of Hayley, Julie Hesmondhalgh won Best Serial Drama Performance at the 2014 National Television Awards and Best Actress at the 2014 British Soap Awards. Despite such popular acclaim, public commentators raised doubts as to whether soap operas are a suitable forum to discuss this complex and socially sensitive issue. Some assisted suicide campaigners praised *Coronation Street* and its actors for their representation of assisted suicide (Press Association 2014), yet media watchdogs criticised the storyline for turning assisted suicide 'into a highly-charged, emotional issue' and failing 'to engage with the important details.' (Westbrook 2014).

Such criticism ignores the potential of the media, including media designed primarily for the purposes of entertainment, to connect people with sensitive social issues and to engage them in conversations about how society ought to address these. Empirical studies in media studies, political science and education have demonstrated this potential (Street et al. 2013; Georgiou 2012; Buckingham 1999; Barnhurst 1998). These studies provide the conceptual starting point for this paper which is that the media play a key role in shaping public understandings of what constitutes an issue of public concern. By this I mean an issue that requires a collective, public solution (Couldry et al. 2007). The media also play a key role in shaping public understanding of how this issue ought to be addressed (Street et al. 2013). Evidence of the media's socio-political function can be found in audience talk. As they discuss how the media represents the world around them, audiences position themselves in relationship to sources of power such as government and the law. They reflect on the interests of social groups and explore the social values that govern their society (Street et al. 2013; Georgiou 2012; Buckingham 1999; Barnhurst 1998). Some of this talk may be meandering and playful (Street et al. 2013), but because of its orientation to the wider public sphere it nevertheless constitutes a form of political engagement.

To date Scourfield et al.'s (2016) is the only study to empirically investigate how people talk online about representations of assisted suicide. Their analysis of Twitter

content shows six recurring categories of Tweets during the week when ITV broadcast the storyline of Hayley Cropper's suicide. After information or support, raising moral issues in relation to suicide occurred most frequently, followed by reporting of someone's suicide, flippant references to suicide, evidence of suicidal intent and memorial or condolence. These findings suggest that when they take to social media to discuss representations of assisted suicide on television, audiences may use social media 'more as a civic reactive forum than as a site for personal disclosure' and that the overall tone of their suicide-related communication is supportive (Scourfield et al. 2016: 394). Their case-study is an important indicator of the potential representations of assisted suicide have to stimulate political engagement with the issue of assisted suicide. Scourfield et al. suggest that this potential needs to be investigated further. In this study I take this step and make three contributions to the debate:

Firstly, with the help of television genre theory, I take a focused look at the role of genre in shaping audience talk about assisted suicide. Existing research on audiences and fictional representations of assisted suicide, Scourfield et al.'s (2016) work included, does not consider whether audience responses are informed by generic conventions. Yet research on soap opera fans for example tells us that audiences come to the television text with pre-existing knowledge of characters, narrative and generic conventions of storytelling (Geraghty 1992; Brown 1994). It seems therefore likely that when audiences talk about storylines about assisted suicide in soap operas, their responses are shaped by the conventions of that genre. To draw out the specificities of audience talk about soap operas, I compare it with audience talk about another genre, television documentary. Both fictional and factual genres have been criticized for their representation of suicide. However, research on political engagement and the media traditionally has been underpinned by the assumption that factual genres, with their realist mode of presentation and mission to educate and inform are more ideally suited to provide citizens with the resources they need for a meaningful engagement with the politics of the public sphere (Street et al 2013). A comparison of fictional and factual representations of assisted suicide therefore allows the identification of genre specific characteristics of audience talk, as well as critical reflection on the role of different television genres in engaging audiences politically with the issues of assisted suicide.

Secondly, I reflect on the type of assisted suicide that is being represented and what this means for audience responses. In this study I focus on representations of family-assisted suicide, which occurs when a family member or close friend assists with an individual's wish to die (Frey and Hans 2016: 1382). Family-assisted suicide has been a recurring topic for British television, but also public debate. Storylines of assisted suicide on soap operas in the early to mid-2000s focused on family-assisted suicide and several documentaries gave portraits of terminally ill persons wishing to die. These were broadcast against the context of court cases in which members of the public, such as Debbie Purdy, sought clarification on whether their loved ones would be prosecuted should they assist with their wish to die. An analysis of YouTube comments allows for the tracing of the ways

in which audiences pick up on that context and bring it to their interpretation of television texts. More generally, family-assisted suicide is of interest for an analysis that aims to reflect on the role of genre in shaping audience responses. It is an issue where audiences might find it particularly challenging to negotiate the moral questions that assisted suicide raises. The person wishing to die and the person assisting them have close personal ties. Dedicated soap opera audiences are likely to know the backstory of these ties in depth and draw on this knowledge when making judgements about the morality of family-assisted suicide.

Thirdly, I analyse comments on YouTube. Unlike Twitter, YouTube does not place a tight limit on the number of characters per comment. More in-depth and detailed conversations than on Twitter are possible. Given the nature of this social media platform, users also tend to comment on videos, in this case clips or almost complete episodes of programmes. A video, especially a fanvid created by a member of the audience selects and highlights specific scenes. A sample of user comments therefore can potentially show how audiences respond to specific elements of a television text, such as acting or music.

The three soap opera storylines focused on here are the suicides of Ethel Skinner (*EastEnders* 2000), Jackson Walsh (*Emmerdale* 2011) and Hayley Cropper (*Coronation Street* 2013). On *EastEnders*, 85 year old Ethel who is terminally ill with cancer, asks her best friend and carer Dot Cotton to help her die. After struggling with her friend's wish, Dot, a strict Catholic, helps Ethel take an overdose of morphine tablets. On *Emmerdale*, paraplegic Jackson Walsh is helped to die by his partner Aaron and his mother Hazel. Finally, *Coronation Street* featured the story of Hayley Cropper. Hayley is diagnosed with liver cancer in December 2013 and in January the following year she drinks a lethal cocktail of drugs. Her husband Roy is at her side. While strictly speaking not an example of assisted suicide, public commentary, including publicity materials published by the broadcaster ITV, framed this story in this way (e.g. ITV 2014). The three documentaries are *How to Die: Simon's Choice* (BBC2, 18 March 2016), *Terry Pratchett: Choosing to Die* (BBC2, 13 Juni 2011) and *Panorama: I Helped My Daughter Die* (BBC1, 7 February 2010). *How to Die*, tells the story of business man Simon Binner. Diagnosed with motor neuron disease and facing rapid physical decline, Simon expresses his wish to end his life in a suicide clinic. The documentary accompanies Simon up until his last moments and features interviews with his family and friends who emotionally and morally struggle with his wish. *Terry Pratchett: Choosing to Die* is presented by the late Sir Terry Pratchett, an author and outspoken right-to-die campaigner who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2007. In this documentary Pratchett reflects on how he might choose to end his life. He talks to and witnesses the death of Peter Smedley, a motor-neuron disease sufferer who dies by suicide at a Swiss assisted dying clinic. *Panorama: I Helped My Daughter Die* tells the story of Kay Gilderdale, who in 2010 was charged with attempted murder after helping her daughter Lynn die. She assisted her daughter, who suffered from myalgic encephalopathy after Lynn had tried but failed to die by suicide. The documentary explores whether the law on assisted dying should be changed and features arguments from both side of the debate, including the views of right-to-die

campaigner Debbie Purdy and Baroness Campbell Surbiton, a critic of attempts to legalise assisted dying.

## **Method**

I collated a sample of audience talk using the YouTube search engine. To collect my corpus of data, I started with a keyword search combining 'assisted suicide' with the name of the soap opera or documentary (e.g. 'Emmerdale AND assisted suicide'). I then included in my sample all user comments under every video which either had clear references to assisted suicide or death in its title or which showed scenes from the three documentaries or soap opera storylines. The links of videos I had identified through my initial keyword search often led me to other relevant videos and comments, which I also included in my sample. The collection of my sample therefore was driven by YouTube's 'logic of feed' (Gibson 2016: 633), a combination of YouTube's search algorithm that directs data feeds based on previous keyword searches and the work of YouTube users who title, describe and tag their videos (ibid.). In total, I identified 38 relevant videos. The majority of videos were uploaded by members of the public, but the sample also included videos from the BBC, including BBC News and the *EastEnders* YouTube channel, as well as a video from Entertainmentnewsabc, a commercial provider of entertainment news. There were different types of fan videos, or 'fanvids', ranging from mostly unedited clips from a soap opera or documentary to a video which used the popular 'Hitler's Downfall' meme to announce the storyline of assisted suicide on *Emmerdale*. The videos I identified had between 385 and 674,948 views and between 1 and 971 comments. The talk that emerged across the different sites did not constitute a group conversation with all members being present at the same time. In some cases there was a gap of several days, weeks and even years between postings, but several users responded to the comments of others. For my analysis, I included a total of 2200 comments in my sample: 1324 comments on documentaries and 876 comments on soap operas.

## **Political engagement with family-assisted suicide**

Across the sample, there is clear evidence of audience members commenting on family-assisted suicide as an issue of public concern. Such instances of political engagement are more frequent in comments on documentaries than they are in comments on soap operas. Comments with a clear public orientation fell into seven thematic categories: autonomous choice; assisted suicide as relief; justice; protection of vulnerable persons; sanctity of life; religion; law and politics. Comments in these categories address assisted suicide as an issue of public concern in at least one of the following ways: They suggest whether assisted suicide should be socially and/or legally accepted and propose which values ought to carry weight in public debate.

**Table 1: Themes**

Themes	Responses to documentaries containing that theme	Responses to soap operas containing that themes
Autonomous choice	18.1%	0.3%
Religion	16.5%	0.0%
Protecting vulnerable persons	9.8%	0.5%
Relief	6.7%	0.2%
Law or politicians	5.9%	0.7%
Sanctity of life	5.9%	0.1%
Justice	4.5%	0.0%

***Autonomous choice***

The most frequently occurring theme across all comments on documentaries, but only a very small number of comments on soap operas, was that of assisted suicide as a matter of individual, autonomous choice. The theme alludes to a ‘right to die’, which has its ‘theoretical basis in the idea that an individual should be able to decide the time and manner of his or her own death, either by herself or with the aid of another if she so chooses’. This idea was central to legal challenges to the 1961 Suicide Act which occurred in or around the time period the documentaries in my sample were broadcast. For example, in 2008 Debbie Purdy challenged the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) to issue an offence-specific policy statement identifying how he would exercise discretion in deciding whether to prosecute under section 2 of the 1961 Suicide Act. Central to her challenge was the claim that to deny suffering individuals the assistance to end their life would interfere with Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights which protects the right to personal autonomy and self-determination. In 2009 the court affirmed the right to self-determination and ordered the DPP to issue an offence-specific policy, which was published in 2010 (Clearly 2010: 290). When they asserted the idea of assisted suicide as a right that must be respected, some audience members showed awareness of legal frameworks or the role of politicians for policy change. However, this awareness did not go further than statements about the legality of assisted suicide or complaints about politicians lacking the courage to vote on the issue (*How to Die*, comment 322). None mentioned specific court rulings or legal challenges, such as the one brought forward by Debbie Purdy. Audience members simply asserted the existence of a right to make autonomous decisions over one’s life, or referred to the law or government in the broadest of terms, as the following examples illustrate:

Euthanasia needs to be revisited everywhere. In this case I totally agreed with what they did. People should have the choice instead of suffering<sup>1</sup>. (*Panorama*, comment 215)

Yes I agree that it should be our choice but travelling to a strange country doesn’t appeal to me at all . Palliative care should be so good that people don’t

need to end their lives or assisted suicide should be legal in your own country.  
(*How to Die*, comment 61)

### **Relief**

When asserting the right to die several audience members suggested a moral imperative to relieve pain and people's entitlement not to suffer unnecessarily:

I agree also. I mean sshe was so poorly and as se said she was not gonna be able to move or speak. How can people live like that. Everyday would just be torture. If people feel they can't live that way, it's their choice if they want to die, with or without help. (*EastEnders*, comment 2077)

I do pet therapy for end of life patients. Life is precious untills it no longer is...worth living. Waiting can be torture for the patient and family. Simon's illness progressed over a period of 10 months. When there is time i.e. between diagnosis followed by unrelenting decline, the partner and family have time to adjust. Much of the grieving is done during that period as the come to accept death as better than waiting longer than needed or wanted. His life; his choice.  
(*How to Die*, comment 4)

By linking assisted suicide to a person's health status, these audience members stipulated qualifying circumstances to a person's right to personal autonomy. This tension was evident also in policy debates at the time. While the final DPP guidelines place emphasis on the motives of the assister, the draft guidelines, published in 2010 for public consultation, placed emphasis on the physical status of the individual who had been helped to die. Evidence of terminal illness or physical disabilities weighed against prosecution (Clearly 2010: 291).

### **Justice**

Audience members engaged politically with the issue of family-assisted suicide and evoked themes which were prominent in public debate at the time. However, as the previous example suggests their arguments were not always in themselves coherent and logical. This lack of coherence could be observed in arguments about individual autonomy, but it also showed in comments that suggested that assisted suicide is a question of justice. Central to this argument of justice, which was only put forward in comments on documentaries, is the notion that people are entitled not to carry a disproportionate burden of suffering that others do not have to endure or are not prepared to endure. An example, frequently used by right-to-die campaigners, is the so called 'Fido analogy' (Johnstone 2013: 106-107). It is illustrated in the following examples:

Until you can stand with her heart, having given up 16 years of her life, watching, waiting, knowing that your child is suffering and has chosen of her own freewill to end their torment and misery, then you know nothing. I find it appalling that we can end the suffering of a cat or a dog but not allow that same humane end to a human. How much pain and indignity are you willing to live with before you want the same option? Just pray you will never have to live a week in my wheels, and find out. (*Panorama*, comment 228)

As a species, we provide this blessing to our pets, to save them from suffering... And yet so many out there can't seem to comprehend that passing on in this way is what a lot of people want... If I had to choose a way to die, this is how I would want to go... Surrounded by those who love me, in peace, and with no pain... Bless you who help those who can't help themselves... (*Terry Pratchett*, comment 673)

The argument that is presented here relies on an improper analogy, which occurs when 'a property that applies to one category of things is applied without proper justification to a second category of things on the grounds that those two categories are similar in some way' (van Hoof et al. 1995, cited in Johnstone 2013: 103). The analogy that is being put forward in this case is that human beings are sufficiently similar to pets to justify assisted suicide or (in the case of the pet) euthanasia, in instances of intolerable and irremediable suffering (Johnstone 2013: 207). Underpinning this argument is the notion that euthanizing pets is in all cases morally just. This assumes that assisted suicide (or euthanasia) should be available for both humans and animals because their lives are sufficiently similar (ibid.). Animals, however, clearly do not enjoy all the privileges humans do (Singer 1976) and there is no evidence to suggest that animals in all cases experience euthanasia as positive, peaceful and pain free.

### ***Personal experience***

Improper analogies are a linguistic strategy to explain, but also to embellish and strengthen arguments. Another strategy, used to the same effect are references to personal experiences of death or illness. 4.4% of documentary audiences and 1.3% of soap opera audience disclosed their own personal health status or that of a close relative or friend. Some of these references to health or death helped to explain or strengthen arguments on assisted suicide, but also to assert the audience member's personal authority on the subject:

it's pathetic the way a regime ( US govt.) allows abortions , but denies a persons right to die "their way " ....i watched my father die of colon cancer he was on hospice at his home ...but my mother had a fall , broke her hip & we found then she had lukemia ,,,, and within 48 hrs . she was given an Over Dose of morphine

....le . myself & the hospital euthanized her .....this is co contradictory ....but they wouldnt allow my father that way of dying .. (*How to Die*, comment 65)

Other audience members drew on personal experience of love to make a political argument about assisted suicide. These comments were particularly frequent in responses to the story of Kay Gilderdale in *Panorama: I Helped My Daughter Die* where audience members asserted their authority by claiming personal expertise in the true meaning of parenthood:

As a parent I would never help my child commit suicide.. This is totally wrong whatever the circumstances.. Mothers just don'tdo this... (*Panorama*, comment 229)

### ***Protection of vulnerable persons***

Media coverage of suicide, including assisted suicide has been criticised. British press coverage of assisted suicide has been said to pay only fleeting attention to arguments against legalisation and for constructing a hegemonic view of family-assisted suicide as unproblematic and as a decision which implicates only the person wishing to die and those helping them (Birenbaum et al. 2006; Banerjee and Birenbaum-Carmeli 2007). Studies which highlight this lack of balance in media coverage tend to explain the significance of their findings with the suggestion that the media are key agents in shaping public opinion. While in my sample there were more comments in direct support of assisted suicide, there were also opposing views. Several audience members, including documentary audiences and soap opera audiences, suggested society's duty to protect its vulnerable members.

Some evoked the so-called 'slippery slope' theme, an argument which is firmly established in pro-life campaigns. Proponents of this argument suggest that allowing the few people who wish to have a legal assisted suicide to do so would lead to a situation where the categories of eligible people would be widened and pressure to opt for assisted suicide would mount on vulnerable groups, such as terminally ill or old and frail people (Yuill 2013: 32):

I not for it, but I wouldn't judge anyone who makes that choice. Once you've made that choice and carried it out there's no going back. You can't say; "Oops. Actually this was a bad choice.", it's final. I would be worried if it was made legal as it could be a slippery slope in to people being made to end their life. People are being made to believe they are just a product of evolution and therefore not worth anything if they can't be an active contributor to society. "I don't want to be a burden." Pain can not be used as an excuse for assisted suicide as there is sufficient pain relief available these days that can make your last few days comfortable. (*How to Die*, comment 347)

[username] I think to legalize it would have its benefits, but people may take it out of control. For example you could murder someone then say 'oh they wanted to die' or force them to think it. It has its good points and bad points, I think they should only legalize it if they assess someone's condition and dig deeper into each case x x x (*EastEnders*, comment 2051)

As the last examples show, some who argued against the legalisation of assisted suicide also indicated that the desire to die might be unnecessary, given the availability of effective symptoms management and palliative care. Others suggested that this desire might be irrational or 'silly':

this is WRONG !!!!! i can't believe that people actually agree with this !!! she just chose the easy way out !!! whatever the reason was it's definitely not enough to agree on suicide !! like the lady said it's really dangerous and it opens the doors to other people to die for the silliest reasons and no one would be able to stop them !! we should not interfere with nature's work !!! (*Panorama*, comment 245)

Arguments like this deny persons wishing to die their status as autonomous beings. As in the last example, some audience members strengthened their challenge to individual autonomy by referring to a higher power, in this case nature, which holds the sole right to give and take life.

### ***Sanctity of life***

The idea that life is sacred and that the protection of human life is a collective value society must uphold is central to pro-life campaigns around the world (Johnstone 2013: 70). Audience members evoked this idea with and without references to their religious beliefs:

what is wrong with you people?! Helping someone to commit suicide is MURDER! (*Terry Pratchett*, comment 687)

Dot ... MURDERER (*EastEnders*, comment 2148)

This story may sound right to people what this lady did ! But to the eyes of The Lord JESUS it is against his commands , no one has no right to take another one's life ! God is the one who has all authority to take anyone's life ? This lady needs to repent and ask for the forgiveness of her daughter's death, otherwise she will face future consequences when she dies. (*Panorama*, comment 219)

### ***Religion***

References to religion were a frequently occurring theme across the sample of comments on documentaries. Soap opera audiences did not evoke this theme, even though the

*EastEnders* storyline directly addressed the difficulties a religious person such as Dot might have with a loved one's wish to die. Documentary audiences used references to religion to support arguments against the assisted suicide, but they were also part of debates on whether religious beliefs should influence the values by which all members of society must abide. While some audience members were outspoken about their faith, others sought to undermine religion based arguments by questioning the existence or benevolence of God:

If God existed, this man would not have suffered from a disease to begin with. Fuck religion. (*Terry Pratchett*, comment 574)

[username] evolution takes years. And evolution is still happening. If you took a science course in your life you would probably start questioning your 'God's' existence. You don't know if God exists you just want to believe that. Everyone has their own beliefs and you should at least not force your religion in other people's lives. Maybe there is no God or maybe there is.. But what if he's not as good as you think he is? (*How to Die*: comment 19)

### **'Off topic' and offensive talk**

While I found clear evidence of political engagement with the issue of family-assisted suicide, many audience members did not address the issue at all. Examples include audience members asking for advice on where they might be able to download a complete soap opera episode, complaining about their difficulties uploading content onto YouTube, comments about the quality of fanvids and exchanges of specialist soap opera knowledge and comments aimed at shocking the online community, so -called trolling.

**Table 2: Responses**

	<b>Response to documentary</b>	<b>Response to soap opera</b>
<b>Personal attack</b>	14.8%	1.9%
<b>Personal emotion</b>	8.2%	29.1%
<b>Real love and friendship</b>	5.4%	5.4%
<b>YouTube, downloads, music</b>	5.1%	6.1%
<b>Trolling</b>	2.0%	4.6%
<b>Praise of fanvid</b>	0.6%	15.3%
<b>Criticism of fanvid</b>	0.3%	0.8%
<b>Realism of fictional narrative</b>	0.0%	23.9%

Comments like these needs to be interpreted against the context of the social media platform YouTube. YouTube is a platform designed for the sharing of videos. Talk about the quality and availability of videos was to be expected. Similarly, it was not surprising to find a large number of comments, in particular across the sample of documentary audiences, in



Good God, that wasn't sad at all! ..not in the slightest!? And the second Corrie's tacky theme tune ripped through the scene, any emotion was lost completely. The producers obviously didn't give a shit about the character of Hayley, or they would've cut the theme tune and played the credits in silence, like every other main character who died. Loada shit. (*Coronation Street*, comment 1374)

Guys-----people can have a very strong relationship and be deeply in love without all the kissing and cuddling. I know cause I've been there... (*Emmerdale*, comment 1849)

Comments like these were to be expected, given the genre of the television texts to which these audience members respond. Melodramatic excess, emotions and the amassing of information about the fictional world of soap operas are key pleasures this genre offers to its audience (Brown 1994). Dedicated soap opera fans actively engage in secondary sites, such as fanzines, fan gatherings, or electronic messaging boards to acquire and share knowledge about narratives, about production processes and actors (Bird 2003; Bielby et al. 1999). Historically television critics have undervalued the aesthetic qualities of soap operas, not least due to the association of soap operas with melodramatic excess and emotions. By making soap operas and their pleasures a topic worthy of public talk, soap fans assert their right to pleasure and challenge the culture that marginalises their tastes (Brown 1994: 116). Similarly, in fan studies we can find the argument that the sharing of alternative narratives may be understood as a political act as audiences challenge the relationship of power between audiences, producers and writers (Bielby et al. 1999). When the audience members in my sample told each other how much a video had made them cry, or when they shared spoilers about upcoming episodes, they engaged in a form of cultural politics. Yet many of these 'off-topic' conversations clearly did not constitute a political engagement with the issue of family-assisted suicide.

### ***Relevance of 'off-topic talk' for political engagement***

However, upon closer inspection it emerged that genre specific talk is nevertheless central to understanding those moments when fans *did* engage with family-assisted suicide as an issue of public concern. The generic conventions of the genre informed discussions of what constitutes an appropriate response to family-assisted suicide and judgements about the morality of family-assisted suicide.

29.1% of comments on soap operas described feelings of deep sadness. Yet there were a small number (4.6% of comments) of trolling attempts. For example, one soap opera fan jokingly asked who had eaten Ethel's birthday cake, others talked about masturbation, or made homophobic allusions to the story of Hayley Copper's transgender identity. Several of these attempts to disrupt the emotional tone of the community and its expressions of sadness, were directly challenged, however:

This is the saddest think I've ever watched! Do you really think its appropriate to ask who ate the cake? Don't you think it's a little disrespectful to people who were upset by this clip? It is also rather mean to call people that find this video cry babies because they pass no judgement on your for being heartless do they? No, thought not. (*EastEnders*, comment 2047)

It goes to show you really can wank over anything (*Coronation Street*, comment 1364)

You are fucked up (*Coronation Street*, comment 1365)

A key characteristic of fan communities engaged in collective mourning of a television character or a 'real life' actor, is affective alignment. The audience members in my sample affirmed emotional excess as a key marker of soap opera culture. Yet unlike the audiences in other studies (Brown 1994), they marginalised laughter and playfulness. As Seale observes, in all cultures, mourning rituals follow socially prescribed scripts of what is deemed appropriate behaviour for those who have been bereaved. These can be experienced as helpful but also as coercive (Seale 1998: 198). Some fans rebelled against the normalisation of sadness and were marginalised. Others disciplined themselves, like this fan who first declared that 'Dot is a piece of cheese' (*EastEnders*, comment 2128), but then in a follow-up posting apologised for having made a 'disrespectful' comment: 'A heck. Just realised what this video is about now.. I feel disrespectful..O...o.' (*EastEnders*, comment 2066). Challenging the thesis that modern society is death-denying, writers such as Walter et al. (2000) have argued that death is rarely ever absent from public discourse and social media have become a site where 'communities of mourning can be sourced and support for bereavement created' (Gibson 2016: 642). Yet the media also play a key role in negotiating what constitutes a good, unexpected, or extraordinary death. They also help normalise cultural norms of public mourning (Harju 2015). It was in those moments, when fans discussed appropriate and respectful mourning that they engaged with more than soap opera's culture of emotional excess. By exploring the social values that govern public understandings of death, they engaged with family-assisted suicide as an issue of public affairs.

The soap opera audiences in my sample judged each other's responses to family-assisted suicide, but also the morality of persons involved. They drew on their knowledge of the fictional world of the soap opera and its characters to support their judgements. For example, one fan criticised Hayley Cropper as 'selfish' for wanting to die in the presence of her husband Roy who, in the opinion of this fan, does not have the emotional constitution to go through such a traumatic experience:

Ahh poor Roy I don't think he will go with this he is goin to have a break down at some point I hate Hayley for doing that to Roy and fix and everyone she is a

selfish cunt / cow she took an over dose o drugs that she drank right in front of Roy who can't handle stuff like this selfish pig (*Coronation Street*, comment 1588)

Documentary audiences too passed judgement on persons involved in family-assisted suicide, including the persons wishing to die and those assisting them. As for soap opera audiences, a concern raised by documentary audiences was whether the wish to die was selfish, but also how family members responded emotionally to the death of their loved one.

those fuckig woman! even in a moment like that, and after all that what was said in between the smedleys, his wife has concerns to get into trouble for assisting suicide! a loving and supporting woman would sit down next to her husband automatically! this woman probably convinced him to do it rather sooner than later so she can enjoy his money! and check out the gesture of the old bitch with the poison! how pushy she acts so he drinks the poison and than denies him a sip of water at the end. her expression changes after he final drinks that stuff into relief! she is the angel of death this old cunt! she is a true serial killer and belongs in jail! (*Terry Pratchett*, comment 385)

Research investigating public attitudes to family-assisted suicides indicates that lay persons are more likely to support assisted suicide if family members or friends are supportive of their loved one's desire to die (Frey and Hans 2016). This suggests that they recognise how the desires and decisions of the person wishing to die are enmeshed with those of their loved one. Across my sample, audience members highlighted the importance of such emotional ties. They looked to the television text for evidence to support their judgement of whether family members and friends were truly in love, but also whether their desire to die or response to a request for assistance was an act of love. Evidence of love informed their judgements of the morality of the persons involved:

Very touching. It's a blessing we have this option. she seemed a bit distant but sometimes people act different when hurting..maybe She was distancing herself. (*How to Die*, comment 35)

Whoever thinks this woman deserves these murder charges is an ignorant and close-minded idiot, that bitch in the wheelchair pisses me off, life is ours, these people stick by their laws like some mighty powerful god made them, this woman wanted to keep her daughter but she was not selfish and thought about her daughters feelings before her own, who would want to live bed ridden for the rest of their lives after years of it already. Bless this lady she did the right thing. FUCK THE SYSTEM. (*Panorama*, comment 206)

Whether the persons involved in the assisted suicide truly love each other or not is a key concern for both documentary and soap opera audiences. Yet dedicated soap opera audiences follow a character's development over many episodes, and have detailed knowledge of their relationships. When debating the moral issues that family-assisted suicide raised, soap opera audiences, unlike documentary audiences, can draw on their specialist knowledge to inform their judgement about the true depth of characters' relationships:

Watched it for about the 50th time and still had to run and get the tissues! Aaron is just so ..\*sighs\* I don't know, can't even describe it but "there is only one thing worse than being here with you when you die, is not being here" just breaks my heart everytime. I don't care if they kiss or not, if you watch the whole storyline you do notice how deeply they are in love, the looks, the smiles and Aaron did kiss him in public in the hospital. (*Emmerdale*, comment 1850)

Soap opera audiences did not engage politically with the issue of family-assisted suicide as often as documentary audiences. However, they clearly had an advantage when it came to balancing the emotional and moral questions that family-assisted suicide raised. Soap opera audiences drew draw on their often substantial back-catalogue of knowledge of characters' personal relationships and feelings to decide the morality of family-assisted suicide.

## **Conclusion**

Across my sample there were clear differences in how soap opera audiences and documentary audiences responded to representations of family-assisted suicide. Documentary audiences engaged each other in political talk about family-assisted suicide more often than soap operas audiences. They addressed family-assisted suicide as an issue of morality and of justice. Yet these audiences often adopted an aggressive tone, attacking each other's intellect and character. Soap opera audiences, in contrast, primarily seemed to be concerned with maintaining a supportive fan community by exchanging soap opera knowledge and praising each other's fanvids. They rarely engaged with family-assisted suicide on a political level. When they did, they were concerned with defining socially acceptable ways of responding to death and stressing the importance of love and friendship for moral decision making.

These differences were perhaps to be expected. Documentaries historically have been associated with education and information. An authoritative tone and objective stance were considered key markers of the genre. In highly deregulated and commercialised television markets, documentaries compete against a range of other programmes and need to attract audiences (Kilborn and Izod 1997: 218) and it has been argued that in response to this pressure the genre had to adapt. Hybrid genres, such as reality television, docudramas and docusoaps have been identified as markers of a shift towards entertainment (Evans 2015; Kilborn 2003; Winston 2000). For public service broadcaster BBC, however,

documentaries remain central to its civic mission (BBC 2017; Sørensen 2014; Winston 2000) and for the BBC's television audience factual programming remains a key source of information. BBC television audiences associate the BBC with quality and objectivity and they look to the BBC to represent the nation and its diverse social groups (BBC 2014). It is therefore perhaps not surprising to find that when they comment on extracts of BBC documentaries online audiences engage with the main topic of these documentaries, in this case family-assisted suicide. Similarly, the aggressive tone many documentary audience members chose to adopt was perhaps to be expected. Audience responses to a particular genre cannot be explained with reference to one variable (Kilborn and Izod 1997: 229), however, there is evidence to suggest that gender plays a role in how audiences engage with the documentary genre. In reception studies, men have expressed a 'strong preference for 'realistic/factual' programmes' (Morley 1992: 162), which could be interpreted as an assertion of their gender identity by way of rejecting genres and modes associated with femininity, including fiction, fantasy and emotionality (ibid.). Moreover, empirical research suggests that for audiences the tone of BBC documentaries is personified by an older, middle class and often male persona (BBC 2014: 24). It can be argued then that BBC documentaries create a space for the assertion of heterosexual masculinity. This gendered culture then may be exacerbated online where, as feminist researchers have suggested, trolls tend to be white, middle-class males (Mantilla 2013: 563). The abusive language used by a few may then have a 'spillover effect' and trigger a chain of offensive language (Kwon et al. 2017). This was reflected in my sample. Many abusive comments posted by documentary audiences were gendered, such as when audience members accused each other of 'not getting enough pussy'.

In contrast, soap opera audiences worked hard to construct a community of equals. They praised each other's fanvids, shared specialist soap opera knowledge and their emotional responses. Historically, cultures of sharing, emotional excess and the celebration of seemingly 'trivial' (read 'non-political') knowledge were associated with femininity and patriarchal capitalist society undervalued the aesthetics of soap operas because of this. Yet to audiences, these supposedly feminine cultural practices are a key source of viewing pleasure (Bird 1993). The soap opera audiences in my sample protected and celebrated these pleasures. This did mean that they comparatively rarely engaged with family-assisted suicide as an issue of public affairs. However, their culture provided a safe space for political talk. They created a community of support and trust and it was from this community that a tentative exploring of family-assisted suicide emerged.

The quality of this talk is unlikely to satisfy those critics who wish to see the public engage in serious, well informed and rational debate about family-assisted suicide. They will, I expect, argue that there is too much talk about 'trivial' matters such as upcoming storylines. However, I expect, that they will not be satisfied with the quality of comments on documentaries either. Many comments were very short, many arguments were incoherent and seemed to be typed out and uploaded without much reflection. Many were offensive. The role of online responses to documentaries and soap operas for a public

debate about family-assisted suicide, however, should not be rejected straight out of hand. As the findings of this study have shown, television has potential as a resource audiences can use to engage politically with the issue of family-assisted suicide. Their political talk may be very tentative, but to audiences television offers a way into a political engagement and connects them with family-assisted suicide as an issue of public affairs. The findings of this study also show the benefits of looking at online talk as a way of gauging public attitudes towards public opinion. Online fora such as YouTube provide a platform for unsolicited public talk about this sensitive social issue. Documentaries and soap operas offer scenarios of family-assisted suicide. The findings of this study have shown that when they take to social media, audiences respond to these scenarios and judge the cases with which they are confronted. Their responses may be very immediate and not the result of long informed reflection. Some audience members may get tangled up in the logic of their own argument. Yet what online talk about documentaries and soap operas offers is an insight into the issues that matter to members of the public, but also the questions they struggle with when trying to make sense of a sensitive issue that they clearly recognise as socially important.

### **Biographical Note:**

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, punctuation, use of spaces and emoticons are as I found them in the original source. To protect YouTube user's identities, I removed all references to user names and URLs of YouTube sites from the sample. This project has been given ethical clearance by the University of East Anglia Research Ethics Committee.