

“I take too much time screaming at articles and just critiquing”: An Examination of the News
Landscape for Harm Reductionists in Newfoundland and Labrador

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Abstract

“I take too much time screaming at articles and just critiquing”: An Examination of the News Landscape for Harm Reductionists in Newfoundland and Labrador

Kaitlyn Woodley

This thesis research project examines the quality of news reporting on and about people who use drugs in Newfoundland and Labrador. This is done by examining news reporting and through interviews with those working in the harm reduction field. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is conducted on 55 news articles from the five major news outlets in Newfoundland and Labrador to illuminate how local journalists reported on the “Towards Recovery” reports, an initiative created by the government to assist in overhauling the province’s mental health and addictions services. The RTA of the news articles found that journalists consistently failed to source from people with lived experience of drug use, instead prioritizing government and healthcare officials, while failing to provide actionable information to the reader. Following the article RTA, this thesis research project also employed semi-structured interviews with five harm reductionists in Newfoundland and Labrador’s capital city of St. John’s, asking how they thought local journalism can better support people who use drugs and harm reductionists. The interviews revealed a desire for more collaboration between harm reductionists and journalists. This research’s combined results reveal a gap that a collaborative form of journalism, like solutions journalism, may be equipped to fill. This study has practical implications for local journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador since it shows a clear

need for a paradigm shift: Journalism must view people who use drugs as *part of* the audience, not as *extensions of* their audience.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to people who use drugs, especially those who have endured undue and pointless suffering amidst the toxic supply crisis, including imprisonment and death by accidental overdose. Thank you to those harm reductionists like my tenacious participants, drug user activists, and everyone else in the fight for the compassionate, inclusive care for people who use drugs and people dealing with addictions.

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Introduction

This project includes a reflexive thematic analysis of news articles about drugs and harm reduction in Newfoundland and interviewing harm reduction professionals. Phase one, the article analysis, will establish an understanding of the current local, journalistic information available about illicit substance use and prescription medication misuse in Newfoundland. Phase two, the interviews with harm reduction professionals and subsequent reflexive thematic analysis of them, will allow community members to voice their opinions on the news about them. This qualitative two-phase project will contribute to existing literature about Canadian news coverage of drugs and harm reduction while contributing to the minimal body of research that has been done in Newfoundland and Labrador on the subject. Ideally this research will be useful to individual journalists and journalism organizations as they have a role to play in education about drug use, especially now amid the toxic supply crisis.

As a former political science student from Newfoundland and Labrador, I am fascinated with politics, government and policy-making. Utilizing my politics-based foundation as a starting point for my work researching PWUD makes sense, given that a lot of the dangers of using drugs come from criminalization, an inherently political issue since it deals with policy and law.

In March 2017, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador's All-Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, led by Hon. John Haggie, then-Minister of Health for the province, created the first of the "Towards Recovery" Reports. The initial publication, entitled "Towards Recovery: A Vision for a Renewed Mental Health and Addictions System for Newfoundland and Labrador," detailed fifty-four recommendations to

improve upon mental health and addictions services in the province. The 2017 report provided statistics about mental health and addictions in the province, including information about stigmatization's impacts on service access: In Newfoundland and Labrador, "while between 67 and 79 per cent of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians would be very likely to discuss a physical illness, only between 44 to 54 per cent would be very likely to discuss a mental illness or addiction." It also discusses the "long wait lists" (Haggie et al., 2017, pp. 3) people wanting mental health and addictions treatments face, but the report does not state how long the average wait time is. These recommendations were separated into six major categories ("Promotion, Prevention, and Early Intervention", "Access to Services", "Quality of Care", "Policy and Programming", "Community Supports", and "Accountability and Performance Monitoring"), indicating areas of weakness in the province's mental health and addictions systems. The 2017 Report also details statistics about Newfoundland and Labrador's battle with the toxic supply crisis and mental health, including that "[o]nly about 40 per cent of people affected by mental illness and addiction seek help... largely due to the stigma surrounding mental illness and addiction" (Haggie et al., 2017, pp. 12). Some of the Report's recommendations are somewhat abstract (recommendation number six simply states, "Encourage community leaders to form coalitions to promote mental wellness" (Haggie et al., 2017, pp. 24)), and some are quite grand (recommendation twelve states that "The Waterford Hospital must be replaced" (Haggie et al., 2017, pp. 5). Some of the suggestions have contradictory language: For example, recommendation thirty-five says that the province must "[e]nsure psychiatrists provide regular visits to Labrador coastal communities, as needed" (Haggie et al., 2017, pp. 9), but "regular" and "as needed" have very different meanings. Overall, the first "Towards Recovery" report indicates a genuine

willingness on the Government's behalf to collaborate with community members about mental health and addictions issues. Opening that dialogue offered a positive- looking way forward during the toxic supply crisis currently plaguing Canada.

In 2022, five years after its initial publication, the All-Party Committee released its first update as mandated in the 2017 edition (recommendation 51 (Haggie et al., 2017, pp. 11)). The March 2022 report, entitled “Towards Recovery: The Mental Health and Addictions Action Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador: Evaluation Findings and Future Directions” detailed tremendous successes and challenges. One success included the construction of mental health and addictions facilities in St. John’s and Happy Valley-Goose Bay, the implementation of the “Provincial Stepped-Care Model to enhance access to the right services at the right time” (All- Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, 2022, pp. 27) the expansion of existing services and creation of new ones, and more. Challenges were found mainly in areas not wholly controlled by the Health department, possibly reflecting a lack of improvement against the social determinants of health overall in the province: Major hurdles included geographical barriers such as remoteness, a lack of safe and secure housing, inefficiency across different government organizations, and stigma (All- Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions, 2022, pp. 27).

A year later in 2023, the All-Party Committee for Mental Health and Addictions, now led by Health Minister Hon. Tom Osborne, alongside Health and Community Services, published a news release to serve as the final update in the “Towards Recovery” publications. The release came following a forum “where more than 100 people came together to share their personal stories with mental health and addictions... A highlight of this year’s forum was an update on the accomplishments of Towards Recovery... and completion of all 54 recommendations” (Health

and Community Services, 2023). The 2023 update ends with continuing dedication to the “Provincial Alcohol Resilience Plan” (2022) and “Our Path of Resilience: An Action Plan to Promote Life and Prevent Suicide” (2022), but considers the recommendations initially drawn by “Towards Recovery” in 2017 as completed.

The “Towards Recovery” reports offered a focus for examining the reporting on PWUD in Newfoundland and Labrador and ensured that the scope of the thematic analysis of the news was not overly cumbersome. In part, this view was chosen for this study due to my academic background in Political Science and my interest in the politics of Newfoundland and Labrador. Furthermore, this was an appropriate angle from which to study the journalism/news reporting in the province, since the “Towards Recovery” reports directly pertained to actions the government could take to improve the lives of PWUD who live with addictions. Therefore, it was reasonable to expect that the journalism about the reports would include critical information about addictions issues in the province, making this an appropriate focus for this research project.

Literature review

Stigmatization and newsworthiness

Stigmatization seems to overlap with newsworthiness, to the detriment of both stigmatized groups and journalistic audiences. A lot of the extant, in-depth research about journalism and stigmatization is based in the United States and/or deals with communities of colour (Gielan et al., Wenzel et al., 2017 & Curry and Hammonds, 2014), but these findings may be applicable to people who use drugs (PWUD) and harm reductionists due to similar experiences of stigmatization. For Wenzel et al.'s study of solutions journalism for Black Americans in Southern Los Angeles, the researchers define stigmatization as “the layering of a reputation for crime or disorder onto both place and the people who live there” (Wenzel et al., 2018, pp. 650). PWUD bear a “reputation for crime and disorder,” and so do places where drug use is more visible. Stigmatized places and people are fuel for the typical ‘bad news’ report. Using a “negative frame, that is the selection of story angles that emphasize negative aspects of an event or community life, has long been the default” since researchers have found evidence that audiences connect with negative news more (Wenzel et al., 2018, pp. 651). In this case, stories about drug use and crime, and communities dealing with more visible occurrences of these issues, are constantly newsworthy which has serious consequences for both those communities themselves *and* the news consumer. People living in stigmatized places often feel that their communities are seen in “a negative light” and that they, the residents, are “shown in ways that were disrespectful and reinforced stereotypes” (Wenzel, 2020, pp. 42).

Two Canadian scholars with lived experience of drug use, Scott Hannant and Gord Garner, created the “Stigma Primer for Journalists” (2020) to help combat stigmatization of PWUD in news media. The report, published by CCSA (The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and

Addiction) and CAPSA (The Community Addictions Peer Support Association), is an effective and straightforward guide to the ways in which journalism can be stigmatizing of PWUD. For example, it provides a list of things journalists should avoid including in their reporting and alternatives they can use instead, such as swapping the word “clean” out for alternatives such as “person in recovery” and reminds journalists to avoid making judgements and to “stick to the facts” (Hannant and Garner, 2020, p. 3-4). The “Primer” discusses the ways in which diction, blame, tone, and sourcing impact public perception of reporting about PWUD. Broken down, Hannant and Garner’s “Primer” addresses four key components of stigmatization in the news as examined below:

1. Diction: Were journalists using words known to cause harm like “addict,” “clean,” or “junkie?” Hannant and Garner note that “there isn’t another health condition where people who get better are described as ‘clean,’ which really is a dog whistle for ‘dirty’” (Hannant and Garner, 2020, p. 3), so these words should not be used in reporting.
2. Blame: Did the author outwardly or implicitly blame PWUD for addictions issues? Perhaps they placed blame on the healthcare or justice systems, or something else? To Hannant and Garner, blame may look like treating substance use disorders as “a moral failing or choice... Addiction is a health issue, like heart disease. But, like HIV and AIDS in the early 1980s, too often we blame the sick” (Hannant and Garner, 2020, p. 8).
3. Tone: Did the article frame substance use disorder and complications stemming from substance addictions sympathetically as a health issue? Or, did the article perpetuate the stigma surrounding substance use disorder as a choice or solely criminal issue?

Hannant and Garner challenge journalists to critique the tone they use to report on PWUD. They ask authors to “try replacing substance use disorder or addiction with another health condition. Would you write the story differently?” (Hannant and Garner, 2020, p. 3).

4. Sourcing: Who was represented in this story about drugs? What sorts of people did the journalist work with when looking for sources? Hannant and Garner note that one should not “take the easy way out. Because of stigma, finding a professional person to talk about their substance use disorder is tough... Using a homeless or street-involved person as your subject is a lot easier. Is it accurate?” (Hannant and Garner, 2020, p. 3).

The “Stigma Primer for Journalists” (2020) is an accessible way for journalists to learn ways to tactfully report on PWUD and substance-related issues more broadly.

What is harm reduction?

To begin, it is important to establish a working definition of harm reduction. The United Kingdom-based non-governmental organization Harm Reduction International defines harm reduction as

policies, programmes and practices that aim to minimise the negative health, social and legal impacts associated with drug use, drug policies and drug laws. Harm reduction is grounded in justice and human rights. It focuses on positive change and on working with people without judgement, coercion, discrimination, or requiring that they stop using drugs as a precondition of support (*Harm Reduction International Annual Report 2023*, p. 6).

Colloquially to me (a drug user currently in recovery from what I consider to be problematic use), harm reduction means providing PWUD opportunities to accomplish what they consider to

be safer use, recovery, or a path that otherwise suits their individual needs. In some cases, like my own, this can mean abstinence from certain substances. For others, it might not mean that they reduce their use, but it could mean having access to clean needles thus cutting down their chances to be exposed to HIV, Hepatitis B and C and other blood-borne diseases.

It is important to note that there is debate and contention about the term “harm reduction” and its principles. Some see it as encouraging drug use since it does not fit within the more commonplace, punitive and abstinence-only model of drug policy. Harm reduction is sometimes pitted against the “‘zero tolerance’ perspective on illegal drugs... as an approach that encourages drug use” (Bierness et al., 2008, p.3). Insofar as I identify with the term ‘harm reductionist’ and since it is a commonly used term, it is the label of choice for this project.

Canadian news coverage of drugs and harm reduction

Research on news reporting about drugs and harm reduction by Canadian journalists has found that, while flawed, coverage has become less overtly stigmatizing over the course of the opioid crisis (Hannant & Garner, 2020; Maté, 2009; Morris et al., 2024; Quan et al., 2020; Thibault-Lévesque & Roy, 2021; Wild et al., 2019). The term ‘opioid crisis’ - known also as the toxic supply crisis - refers to the global spike in opioid toxicity-related deaths since the 2000s.

Quan et al. analysed articles focusing on opioids published between 2000 and 2018 and found that, as time progressed, *The Globe and Mail* blamed different groups for the crisis and became less stigmatizing of PWUD. In 2001, *The Globe* blamed doctors and pharmacists for lax prescription guidelines, and patients for exploiting concepts like ‘double-doctoring’ to get extra medication (Quan et al., 2020, p. 5). As the opioid crisis progressed, however, *The Globe and Mail* shifted, placing blame on “large institutionalized groups like pharmaceutical corporations, foreign nations [such as China], professions, etc.” (Quan et al., 2020, p. 2) for pushing opioids

(like the infamous Oxycontin) onto consumers, sometimes resulting in opioid addiction. Other researchers found that shifting blame from individual PWUD to major groups did help to alleviate stigma. Thibault-Lévesque and Roy discovered a “change of status of the opioid consumers, who evolved from ‘criminals’ to ‘victim-citizens’” in Canadian media between 2015 and 2018 (Thibault-Lévesque & Roy, 2021, p. 4). By making such a tonal shift, journalists “legitimize the framing of this crisis as a ‘toxic drug supply issue’ and highlight... the harmful effects of prohibitionist policies” (Thibault-Lévesque & Roy, 2021, p. 4). Importantly, framing the crisis from a public health-perspective “[leads] to greater compassion, public understanding and improved public policy” (Hannant & Garner, 2020, p. 1).

Unfortunately, even though overt stigma has decreased over time, some scholars have found that Canadian journalism has failed to paint a complete picture of the toxic supply crisis (Quan et al., 2020, Morris et al., 2024). According to Quan et al. (2020), journalists neglected systemic causes of problematic drug use, even where such topics were overtly relevant to the stories (Quan et al., 2020). Addictions issues disproportionately impact marginalised individuals who may already be misrepresented by the news. Canadian addictions specialist Dr. Gabor Maté’s book, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, discusses the various factors influencing development of drug addictions.

Wielding his experience as a physician working in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, Maté writes: “In society, as in Nature, each microcosmic unit reflects something of the whole. In the case of drug addiction, the sins of entire societies are visited unevenly on minority populations” (Maté, 2009, p. 245). Amplifying Dr. Maté understanding, Collins et al.’s 2025 study notes that when treating people for addictions-related issues (especially those with further structural vulnerabilities, such as being racialized) it is crucial for

clinicians to look beyond the surface level of individual behavior and decision-making to investigate the often invisible (or overlooked) social forces that constrain a patient's personal choices and promote harmful health behaviors (Collins et al., 2025, p. 1).

By neglecting these greater systemic inequalities, journalists fail to present an accurate picture of PWUD. For instance, in their review of coverage in *The Globe and Mail* published regarding opioids, the opioid crisis and opiates between 2000-2018, Quan et al. noted that “[only 11.4%] of all articles discussed secondary causes of the opioid crisis, such as gaps in the healthcare system” and that “[e]ven fewer articles... mentioned the root causes of high-risk drug use - social inequity, socioeconomic disparities and unresolved trauma” (Quan et al., 2020, p.8).

Furthermore, in a review of the existing Canadian newspaper articles published between 2000- 2016 that used “mothers bereaved by substance use” as sources, it was apparent that “very few texts emphasized structural determinants of drug poisoning and substance-related harm” (Morris et al., 2024, p. 15). Even in cases where socioeconomic and/or race-based factors were directly relevant to the article’s subjects, Morris et al. found that there were few mentions of “structural factors”: “the sole article that we retrieved featuring an Indigenous mother... made no mention of the disproportionate harms faced by Indigenous people” (Morris et al., 2024, p. 16).

Researchers also raised concerns with the reporting’s framing of supervised, safer consumption sites over other pieces of harm reduction infrastructure. In what is likely the most comprehensive review of Canadian media about drug use to date, Wild et al. saw serious geographic- and theme-based priorities emerge in their review of 54 newspapers (yielding a total sample of 5681 texts) published across Canada. Most of the articles were published in Alberta and British Columbia (Wild et al., 2019, p. 6). The authors “found little evidence that Canadian newspaper coverage reflected conflicting values over the legitimacy of providing harm reduction

services to PWUD” (Wild et al., 2019, p. 8), indicating that newspaper coverage is not questioning the value of harm reduction services. However, “media coverage selectively prioritized a single politically and legally contentious harm reduction intervention (supervised consumption)” (Wild et al., 2019, p. 8): by reporting more on one (already controversial) method of harm reduction, news media “may have contributed to continuing problems in legitimizing and institutionalizing those evidence-based services for PWUD among decision makers and the Canadian public” (Wild et al., 2019, p. 8). This evidence suggests that Canadian journalism is not outwardly against harm reduction initiatives, but it reveals the ways in which framing and story selection can impact opinion and “public discourse” (Wild et al., pp. 1). By focusing more on safer consumption sites, journalists inadvertently frame that as the most important part of harm reduction. While this thesis is *not* delving into audience perception and opinions of PWUD, research revealing the ways that audience perception can be shifted through journalism is critical to a study focusing partly on stigmatization in the news media.

Another issue with Canadian news coverage of drug use comes from journalists’ sourcing practices. Morris et al. zeroed in on newspaper coverage that dealt with bereaved mothers. The researchers found that typically, “the dominant frame in news reporting on harm reduction that featured bereaved mothers focused on health perspectives... with a criminal perspective frame completely absent amongst the texts reviewed” (Morris et al., 2024, p. 14). This suggests that journalism is in support of harm reduction principles which prefer framing substance use as a medical or health issue over a criminal one. However, the choice to source bereaved mothers - while emotionally compelling - removes opportunities for PWUD to speak: “mothers ‘became the voice’ not only for families... but also for people who use drugs themselves in these texts” (Morris et al. 2024, p. 15). While PWUD can be a difficult community to gain access to, due in

large part to stigmatization (Morris et al., 2024, p. 15), reporting on communities without their involvement leads to misrepresentation and exclusion. Making others “[become] the voice” (Morris et al., 2024, p. 15) for groups they are not a part of disempowers the group being spoken for. As the researchers state:

one might have expected that more of the texts we examined would have included the perspective of both bereaved mothers and PWUD together given that the thoughts and opinions of people currently using drugs would be an important perspective to include given their expertise in understanding drug use and that their lives are most directly impacted by harm reduction initiatives (Morris et al., 2023, p. 15)

Marginalized people in the news

For marginalized people, accessing accurate information can be a challenge. Historically, marginalized people were left out of news production and thus fell to the wayside, or worse, were misrepresented in ways that perpetuate stigma and harmful stereotypes. Lots of research has been conducted on the ways that traditional journalism and legacy media outlets fail to represent marginalized communities. Put succinctly, “[w]ho pays for news has always influenced what news gets covered” (Usher, 2021, pp. 53). Therefore, marginalized communities who have less financial and social capital have been given little say about the news landscape. While journalism has, in some cases, attempted to reduce its inequitable coverage and increase diversity amongst those who actually make the news, it is apparent that folks who are marginalized in any way still have a harder time being properly represented. For PWUD, who can come from any number of identities (marginalized or otherwise), criminalization and stigmatization have unequal impacts. Morris et al. write that “there are some examples of high-profile professionals publicly disclosing current use of illegal drugs [but] the fear of personal and professional

repercussions prevent many PWUD from publicly disclosing... with members of the media” (2023, pp. 15). For racialized PWUD, such as Indigenous people who are dramatically overrepresented in Canada’s prison system (Government of Canada, “Overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the Canadian Criminal Justice System”, 2023), stigmatization is exceptionally harmful, too, especially given the country’s laws surrounding drug possession, intoxication and sale.

Against immense, systemic barriers, some communities excluded from journalism have found ways to address their own information needs and democratize the news landscape. For example, *L’Itinéraire*, a Montreal-based bimonthly publication, is dedicated to serving “des personnes... en situation de vulnérabilité sociale et économique... pour leur permettre de devenir des citoyens à part entière” (*L’Itinéraire*, “Mission”). Serving the homeless community in the city, *L’Itinéraire* not only alleviates information deficits in its community, but also offers employment opportunities to its community members as newsstand operators. Newspapers like *L’Itinéraire* address information gaps and inequities head-on and from the ground up.

Another example is the *Crackdown* podcast made by drug user activists in British Columbia. *Crackdown* focuses on issues facing people who use drugs. *Crackdown* describes their dedication to serving PWUD on their website: “It’s important to us that *Crackdown* is heard by the people most affected by the drug war: drug users” (“*Crackdown* tells the story of drug user activism in the face of hostility and neglect”). *Crackdown* is known for its investigative journalism. For example, in its first season, *Crackdown* did a series of episodes about British Columbia’s sudden switch from the opioid addiction treatment drug Methadone to one called Methadose which opiate users found had adverse impacts on their sobriety: in some cases, including a member of *Crackdown*’s original editorial board, the change led to a recurrence of

illicit substance use which contributed to deaths. Through their investigative reporting, the podcast uncovered a shady relationship between Mallinckrodt Pharmaceuticals, the company responsible for producing Methadose, and the Government of British Columbia (*Crackdown*, “Episode 2 Transcript” 23). Due to their dedicated work, there is now a class action lawsuit against Mallinckrodt led by Laura Shaver, an original member of *Crackdown*’s editorial board (*Crackdown*, “Episode 17”). Indeed, without drug user activist insight and care, it is possible that these deaths, as well as this unsavoury relationship, may have gone unaddressed. Where journalism has failed to serve marginalized communities for many reasons, including financial pressures and greater issues of systemic classism and racism, those communities - like those experiencing homelessness at *L’Itinéraire*, or the drug user activists at *Crackdown* - have found ways to serve their own information needs.

Even professional journalists who are entrenched in the norms of the field can struggle against marginalization in the newsroom. Some journalistic norms like objectivity can perpetuate unfair practices in the industry. Lewis Raven Wallace, trans journalist and author of *The View from Somewhere*, describes objectivity as something of a dinosaur or a relic that inhibits change. Wallace said in an interview: “There’s sort of an old school of mostly male, white, older journalists... clinging to jaded notions of objectivity that emerged when almost exclusively white men were in newsrooms” (Velazquez, “Journalism with a purpose”). Furthermore, in her critique of objectivity for The Walrus, Pacinthe Mattar explains that journalists of colour often have their “professionalism... questioned when we report on the communities we’re from, and the spectre of advocacy follows us in a way that it does not follow many of our white colleagues” (Mattar, “Objectivity is a Privilege”). As seen in these examples, norms like objectivity uphold problematic ideals even when efforts have been made to diversify the

newsroom itself.

Journalism research has found some ways to move forward and repair relationships between journalism and other marginalized communities that may be useful when interacting with PWUD, including solutions journalism which will be explored below.

Journalism research with PWUD and harm reductionists in Newfoundland and Labrador

The relationship between harm reductionists and journalism has not been well- researched, and neither has harm reduction in Newfoundland and Labrador. There are two major research gaps that my project aims to address. In previous academic inquiries about the representations of drugs in the media, researchers have stuck mainly to content analyses without conducting primary research with either PWUD or harm reductionists. Including the voices of those working in the field in this project establishes a precedent for including harm reductionists in journalistic research. Further, it will add valuable insight into the ways in which a sometimes difficult-to-reach community interprets and feels about journalism.

Centering this research on Newfoundland and Labrador was an obvious choice for me as a Newfoundlander, but there is scholarly merit, too: the easternmost and youngest province in Canada has rarely been the focus of either journalistic or harm reduction scholarship, let alone the intersection of the two. The only findable research on the subjects includes a needs-assessment of people injecting drugs in the capital city of St. John's (Gustafson et al., 2008). It does not focus on journalism, but it does identify some information gaps PWUD faced at that time, including "varying levels of awareness amongst participants about the extent of injection drug use... [and] about harm reduction", and a "discrepancy amongst people who inject drugs between awareness and use of safer practices" (Gustafson et al., 2008, pp. 191). While these information needs could still be relevant, the research by Gustafson et al. is over 17 years old

indicating that more research is needed to confirm or develop their findings. With more journalistic research, the community's information needs could be better understood.

In an isolated province like Newfoundland and Labrador, local news outlets are an important means of communication and community connection. Therefore, it is critical that journalism does an appropriate job of representing all groups. Instead, as demonstrated above, PWUD are often underserved by journalism. A story's framing can have a serious impact on the marginalization and stigmatization of drug users; in short, "accurate reporting that does not use stigmatizing words or images will contribute to a healthier society" (Hannant & Garner, 2020, pp. 1). This research project will analyze a set of news articles and interview a number of publicly identifiable harm reductionists to determine the ways in which coverage of drug use could be improved upon in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The goal of this research project is to discover whether news reporting in Newfoundland and Labrador contributes to stigmatization of people who use drugs (PWUD), as well as harm reduction tools and initiatives, by examining news reporting for stigmatizing content as examined by Hannant and Garner (2020), and conferring with harm reductionists to discover their perception of the news landscape around them. To do so, I will choose one specific area of news coverage: reporting on the provincial government's "Toward Recovery" Reports that established recommendations to revamp the province's mental health and addictions services. As such, my project will aim to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: How did journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador report on the "Towards Recovery" reports, specifically pertaining to addictions and substance use?

RQ2: What do harm reduction activists, scholars and workers (a group also known referred to as 'harm reductionists') in the province think about the journalistic coverage?

RQ3: Is there anything about the journalistic coverage that harm reductionists would change?

Methods

To answer this project's research questions (RQs), the research will consist of two phases. Phase one addresses RQ1 using the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as written about by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2021, 2022, & 2023) of news articles. Conducting a comprehensive analysis of the local news coverage of PWUD in Newfoundland and Labrador is a straightforward way to glimpse the ways that articles are or are not stigmatizing. Phase two addresses the second and third RQs using semi-structured interviews with harm reductionists.

These two phases and their corresponding primary research tools (reflexive thematic analysis of the news content and the semi-structured interviews) will be outlined below. It is important to note outright that this research project is iterative, so some of the methods evolved the further the research progressed. Each instance will be addressed below where applicable.

Phase one: Addressing RQ1

RQ1: How did journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador report on the "Towards Recovery" reports, specifically pertaining to addictions and substance use?

Why the chosen news outlets?

To address RQ1, I reviewed articles from *CBC NL*, *VOCM*, *The Telegram* and *SaltWire*, and *The Independent* because they are the dominant online, text-based news organisations in Newfoundland and Labrador.

CBC NL is the Newfoundland and Labrador bureau of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*. They operate from newsrooms in the province's capital city, St. John's, as well as in Gander (Central), Corner Brook (the West Coast), and Happy-Valley Goose-Bay (Labrador). *VOCM* is predominantly a radio broadcast but it has an online presence. While many of the

articles on *VOCM*'s website are simple news bulletins and do not offer much for analysis, any discussion of journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador must include *VOCM* for its strong community and cultural ties. SaltWire is a media conglomerate operating on Canada's East Coast which now owns *The Telegram* as well and has rebranded *The Telegram* as *SaltWire*. However, *The Telegram* was still operating as a printed daily paper under its own name for most of the time sampled here, which is why both it and *SaltWire* are included as separate entities. *SaltWire* has sub-divided its online presence into the different geographic locations in Newfoundland and Labrador, whereas *The Telegram* - during its operation - only served the St. John's and surrounding area. Finally, *The Independent* is a non-profit, independent journalism outlet that calls itself "Newfoundland and Labrador's premiere outlet for progressive news and analysis" ("About The Independent").

Sample gathering

The articles for phase one were sampled using searches on the journalism database Eureka and on *The Independent*'s website (because it is not included as part of Eureka's results). Both searches used the same keywords: ("towards recovery" and "all-party committee on mental health and addictions"). The search initially yielded 168 articles. After manually removing duplicate articles, the sample included 63 articles. This significant amount of duplicates is likely attributable to *The Telegram* having operated both in print and online in the earlier years of this project's time period. In cases where articles were published both in print and online, the article with the longer word count was kept in the sample to ensure no data was lost. The sample was corrected further to remove any accidental inclusions that were published prior to the first instance of "Towards Recovery," since the initial search yielded articles published between June 6 2014 and May 6 2024, and the first "Towards Recovery" report was published in March 2017.

Eight articles were published prior to March 2017 so they were removed from the sample, leaving the project with a final sample of 55 articles total.

This project did not analyse radio, television, or podcast transcripts, as a way to keep the scope manageable. By not examining *NTV*'s broadcasts and *VOCM*'s radio journalism, this study misses the majority of their content. However, these forms of journalism were not easily locatable in a text-based format, making analysing them a particular challenge beyond the scope of this project. This project focused solely on the text published by the news organizations mentioned above to ensure that each article was analysed according to the same criteria as explored below. This represents a limitation of the study, and future research could examine these materials.

The research tool: Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis

Honed by researchers Braun and Clarke, the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is “an accessible and robust method for those new to qualitative analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 47). At its core, RTA “emphasises the multiple and contextual nature of meaning and knowledge and research subjectivity as a resource for research” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 289). Braun and Clarke have written and collaborated on multiple texts to refine the meaning of their reflexive thematic approach (2006, 2013, 2021, 2022, & 2023), but since researcher identity is a critical component of RTA, it is impossible to provide a strict guide for doing RTA. Even still, it offers “robust process guidelines” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 54) on using one's personal experience wisely in research. As a researcher with lived experience as a drug user from Newfoundland and Labrador, my positionality is the main reason this research project was conducted. Braun and Clarke write that

you, the researcher, are a situated, insight-bringing, integral component of the analysis...

Analysis happens at the intersection of the dataset, the context of the research, and researcher skill and locatedness (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 54).

What sets reflexive thematic analysis apart from other forms of thematic analysis is its emphasis on interrogating your position as the researcher. The “reflexive” part of RTA means “routinely reflecting on your assumptions, expectations, choices and actions throughout your research process” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 57). This was important to this project as a reminder that *my* experience as a drug user is *mine alone*. Having reflection built into the guidelines of my methods pushed me to examine the social and personal privileges that set me apart from other PWUD. Braun and Clarke’s RTA offered a solid set of guidelines for analysis while reminding me to reflect on my positionality and the various assumptions that come with it.

Based on findings from previous studies of journalism relating to PWUD and/or harm reduction (Lévesque and Roy, 2021; Morris et al., 2023; & Quan et al., 2020) as well as my lived experiences as a drug user, articles were analysed to ascertain the ways that they do or do not contribute to stigmatization. This project used Braun and Clarke’s RTA with an inductive orientation in which “the dataset provides the foundation for coding and theme development, but the research questions asked... reflect theoretical or conceptual ideas the researcher seeks to understand through the dataset” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 56). Therefore, many of the methodological decisions made came from the research’s results and vice-versa.

Coding the articles for analysis

I began the sample analysis by aggregating the basic descriptive data about the sample, like the number of articles published per news outlet and per individual journalist, word counts per individual journalist, and the number and category of sources used. This information provided a basic understanding of the news landscape in Newfoundland and Labrador, including

information about who is covering the mental health and addictions “beats,” which may be useful for future researchers aiming to delve further into the journalism landscape in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The number and variety of sources used in each article was analysed since journalistic sourcing was significant to this project. Journalistic sourcing is a powerful tool, especially when reporting on marginalized communities like PWUD, as it acts as a deciding factor on whose voices are heard and in what ways. Importantly, “people speaking on behalf of marginalized communities should not be mistaken for hearing directly from people with insight into their own lived conditions that create urgency for change” (Varma, 2022, p. 1893).

The categories chosen to organize the sources were informed by the ways that the journalist referred to them in the articles themselves. As a new source category was identified while reading the sample, the source’s name and occupation were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. Each category of source was later colour-coded for easy identification. Some sources were difficult to assign just one category. For example, Sandy Penney, identified by an article as a Senior Director of Labrador-Grenfell Health, technically works in a division of the Provincial Government, so deeper evaluation of the articles was needed to determine whether she should be placed in the Healthcare or Government category. In cases where such ambiguities arose, I examined the articles thoroughly to determine how each source was acting in that specific reporting. In Penney’s case, the article focused on her actions as a healthcare provider rather than as a government employee, so she was sorted into the category of “Healthcare”. Allowing individuals to represent multiple source categories would impact the total source count, which would have negative impacts on the final data as some source categories may be overrepresented. A list of all source names and their assigned category is in Appendix A.

When I began coding the articles, I found examples of diction, blame, tone, and sourcing (as examined in Hannant and Garner’s “Stigma Primer for Journalists” (2020)) that contributed to stigmatization. The “Primer” did not act as a concrete foundation for the analysis; however, that the “Primer” aligned with my findings strengthened my results.

Addressing RQs 2 and 3

RQ2: What do harm reduction activists, scholars and workers (a group also known referred to as ‘harm reductionists’) in the province think about the journalistic coverage?

RQ3: Is there anything about the journalistic coverage that harm reductionists would change?

The participants

To address RQs 2 and 3, I used semi-structured interviews with people connected to harm reduction in a professional capacity in Newfoundland and Labrador (“harm reductionists”). “Harm reductionists” included people who, at the time of their participation in the study, were employed in or volunteered at harm reduction hubs (like governmental or nongovernmental organizations centred around providing harm reduction services), medical professionals who have adopted a harm reduction-based approach to their practice, community members who are notable members of the harm reduction community (for example, the owners of the Newfoundland Embassy, a pub distributing Naloxone kits and requiring training for its staff), and academics in the harm reduction and addictions field. Participants recruited for this research project were all publicly identifiable as involved with harm reduction – although, as per my ethics approval, they all had the choice to be publicly identifiable or not in the research dissemination. I used online staff indexes to locate listed employees of harm reduction centres, such as the AIDS Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, and I searched the faculty and

alumni databases of Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador for relevant scholars. I also used Google and LinkedIn searches to identify more people in harm reduction in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Including harm reductionists in journalism research is a way to gain insight into a community (PWUD) that can be difficult to reach and distrusting of researchers and journalists. Harm reductionists have the benefit of being considered professionals, especially if they are (for example) a medical doctor who has taken a harm reduction approach in their practice, so they fit the profile of the typical “expert” that journalists may look for in a source. More importantly, however, while harm reductionists cannot speak for PWUD (though some may be coming from that background), they work directly with PWUD. They see firsthand the strengths and hardships the community has. Crucially, they can point researchers in directions the researcher might not have anticipated. As well, harm reductionists can potentially act as a liaison between journalists and journalism researchers and the community of PWUD. If researchers and journalists can form connections with harm reductionists who PWUD may already trust, perhaps they can bridge the gap between themselves and PWUD.

It would be ideal to conduct this research with PWUD directly, but since this research is exploratory and did not lead to direct benefits for the participants, the risks of involving PWUD (like their being outed as a drug user) directly outweighed the benefits. Due to the stigmatisation and criminalisation against PWUD, many people may refrain from participating in research or journalism to avoid being ostracised. While some individuals are willing to participate in projects like these regardless of the risks, the choice to work with professional harm reductionists eliminates the chance for harm to PWUD.

The qualification “professional” suggested that these participants have experience

mediating these and any other risks, given that they are publicly involved in harm reduction. It is important to clarify that the term “professional” denotes that the potential participant is *formally* involved in the harm reduction community. I choose the term “professional” to indicate something of a career in the field; it should not be taken to indicate any superiority of my chosen participants over other members of the harm reduction community.

The research tool: Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible but controlled qualitative research opportunity with individual participants. This form of interview allows deeper engagement between the participant and the researcher as the participant can elaborate where necessary and the researcher can freely circle back to important topics. However, the researcher still maintains control of the interview and steers it according to the project’s objectives: “Semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the participant as well as data guided by existing constructs” (Galletta and Cross, 2013, pp. 45). Allowing the participant the space to guide the conversation is useful in this exploratory context as they may touch on subjects I may not have considered. This research project has received ethics clearance from Concordia’s Research Ethics Board on November 18th, 2024, with the certificate number 30020858.

The harm reductionists were contacted by Email or LinkedIn messaging from my personal accounts. I explained the purpose of the research to them and when they agreed to schedule an interview slot, I sent them the informed consent document via Email to be signed. The interviews with the harm reductionists were conducted online via Zoom. At the beginning of each call, I asked for permission to record the meeting for audio only. If they had not agreed to the interview being recorded, I would have taken detailed notes on each question response.

However, all of the participants agreed to audio recording so this was unnecessary. After each interview, I used the software Descript to transcribe each audio file while listening along to ensure participants' words are transcribed correctly. Once the interviews were transcribed, the audio and transcription files were assigned the same numbers, participants were assigned letters in place of their names, and each corresponding number and letter was stored on my computer's harddrive. Therefore, even though each participant will have the choice to be identified or not in the final thesis dissemination, their personal information will never be attached to their files directly. Every participant except for one, hereby referred to as "Participant E," selected to be identifiable in the final thesis dissemination. The audio and transcription files will be stored on an external harddrive until thesis submission, at which point the audio files will be deleted. The interview transcripts and the coding spreadsheet will be kept for one year post-submission, then deleted.

Table 1: List of interviewees

Name	Title and organization	Date of interview	Length of interview (minutes)
Emily Wadden	Program Manager, Safe Works Access Program (SWAP)	4/12/2024	51
Meghan Hickey	Owner, The Newfoundland Embassy	4/12/2024	32
Luca Schaefer	Founder, Tweak Easy East	20/12/2024	29

Harsha Ajith	Outreach worker and residential coordinator, Stella's Circle and Residential Staff of the John Howard Society	14/03/2025	36
Participant E	Gender and harm reduction researcher	14/03/2025	28

Interview guide

The interview questions were divided into four categories: Introductory, General assessment of participants' feelings on local news in NL, Participant's personal connections to the local news in NL, and Conclusion.

The introduction section included the most open-ended questions and was used to “[formulate] a short list of important statements made by the participant... that will be relevant to questions later in the interview” (Galletta and Cross, 2013, pp. 48). This section included the following questions:

1. What does ‘harm reduction’ mean to you?
2. Tell me about harm reduction in Newfoundland and Labrador.
3. Where do you get your news from?

This section of the interview was designed to establish an understanding of the participant's connectedness to harm reduction and news generally. It was assumed that different participants would have different definitions and understandings of harm reduction both conceptually and practically, so these questions helped define what each individual thought of “harm reduction.” Question two ascertained the participant's understanding of the harm reduction field specifically in Newfoundland and Labrador to better contextualize the

participant's answers. Question two also coaxed harm reductionists into giving tangible examples of harm reduction in Newfoundland and Labrador, such as needle exchange outposts. The third and final question in the Introduction section was to gauge whether or not the participant is in tune with local news from a formal source (like an online journalistic publication), from social media or word of mouth, or otherwise. This question was important since, depending on the answer, the participant may or may not struggle with later questions about news habits.

Section two contained the most questions as it parsed each participant's relationship to the news as a harm reductionist and community member. The questions were as follows:

4. Mental health and addictions are frequently mentioned in the same discussions. Do you notice any differences in how journalists report on addiction versus mental health?
5. Are there any local journalists or outlets in particular in NL reporting on harm reduction?
6. Tell me a story you've heard in the news in NL about harm reduction.
7. What did you feel while reading or hearing that story?
8. What parts of the reporting did you like?
9. What parts of the reporting did you not like?
10. What sorts of people are quoted in news stories about drugs?
11. Who is missing in news stories about drugs?
12. How often would you say you notice the news you consume feels stigmatizing of drug users?
13. What are the main ways in which you perceive stigmatization from the news?

14. What would it take for news to be less stigmatizing of people who use drugs?

Question four aimed to understand how the harm reductionist feels about the ‘lumping together’ of mental illnesses with addictions. In the “Towards Recovery” reports, the two are considered to be part of the same issue. As someone with lived experiences of both, I wondered how harm reductionists feel about these two enormous issues being looked at as one (especially since the RTA revealed that so little of the reporting dealt specifically with addictions).

Questions five through eleven delved into the participant’s interpretation of the news itself. These questions were less open-ended since the goal of this section was to “shift into questions that are more specific as they relate to your research question” since “some degree of trust has been established and some reciprocity between the researcher and participant has been attained” (Galletta and Cross, 2013, pp. 50). These questions dug into what the harm reductionist thinks and feels about the actual content of the news and opened up other avenues of conversation.

Section three dove into the participant’s personal, direct connection to the news. Its questions were:

15. Have you or someone you know ever talked with a reporter about harm reduction?

16. If YES, what was it about?

17. How did you feel reading the final story?

18. If you could ask a journalist to look into any specific thing in NL about harm reduction and drug use, what would it be?

Question twelve determined the connectedness between publicly identifiable harm reductionists and the local news. In the midst of the toxic supply crisis, harm reductionists – especially publicly identifiable professionals like those in my study - would be useful sources for journalists on that beat. For those who had been involved in journalism before (such as giving

interviews or providing consultation for articles), it was interesting to see how they felt about the process afterwards. Question thirteen was a general question to allow the participant to bring up anything else they think is important that the interview questions had not broached.

The fourth and final concluding section held general questions to act as a debriefing. The questions were:

19. What would you do differently in news reports about drugs and harm reduction in NL?
20. Do you have anything else to add?

Question fourteen put the participant in the shoes of a journalist, asking them to think about journalism as a practice. It was somewhat abstract to ask non-journalists participants to discuss ways they would “do journalism,” but asking such a question illuminated ways the participant perceives bias or stigma from the news. For example, if a participant responded that they would use a more diverse amount of sources, they implied that there is an issue with the current method of journalistic sourcing. Question fifteen offered participants a final chance to bring up anything they felt warranted further discussion.

Coding the interviews for analysis

To code the interviews, I followed some of the suggestions from Braun and Clarke (2022)’s reflexive thematic analysis, including reading and re-reading the samples to familiarize myself with the data. Immediately following each transcription, I highlighted portions of the transcripts that included results that surprised me to make sure they were not lost when I returned for future analysis. Unexpected results were particularly insightful when noting areas for future research. The coding process for the interviews was inductive, just like the coding process for the RTA, so the codes were all generated from the data: therefore, the results and interpretation of

each code often led to more codes being developed.

Results

Reflexive thematic analysis of the articles (RQ1)

This section presents the results of the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of the news articles reports sampled to address RQ1, which asked: How journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador reported on the “Towards Recovery” reports, specifically pertaining to addictions and substance use?

Initial observations of the sampled news articles

This section identifies key characteristics about the news articles sampled for review but does not go into coding the articles for analysis.

Lack of focus on addictions in the journalism

All of the 55 articles were analysed, but only eight of them specifically focused on addictions issues or PWUD. The significant majority of the articles dealt solely with the mental health side of the “Towards Recovery” reports. This was an unexpected finding: As I coded the articles, I noticed that very few centred on addictions, so I began tracking those that did. To identify these articles, I searched for content specifically about addictions, such as discussions of PWUD specifically, discussions of harm reduction or other policy pertaining to PWUD, interviews with PWUD or those related to them, and any other evidence within this realm. In the end, only eight articles fit this description. It is remarkable that so few of the articles in the sample centred entirely around PWUD and addictions, given that the “Towards Recovery” reports are about mental health *and* addictions issues. The implications of this finding will be explored below.

Lack of diverse sources used

Since “Towards Recovery” is a government initiative, government officials should be

expected to appear in such articles. Nonetheless, since the “Towards Recovery” reports relied heavily on input from community members (like harm reductionists, activists, and people with lived experience of drug use and mental illness), the news articles should involve such parties and stakeholders as well. This was not necessarily the case in the sample; indeed, of the 55 articles sampled, three articles featured people with direct lived experience of mental illness and/or addictions. On the other hand, about 26 articles featured government officials. The second-most featured source category is Healthcare workers found in 12 articles, and the third-most is Charity workers found in 9 articles. Figure 1 provides the number of sources by category:

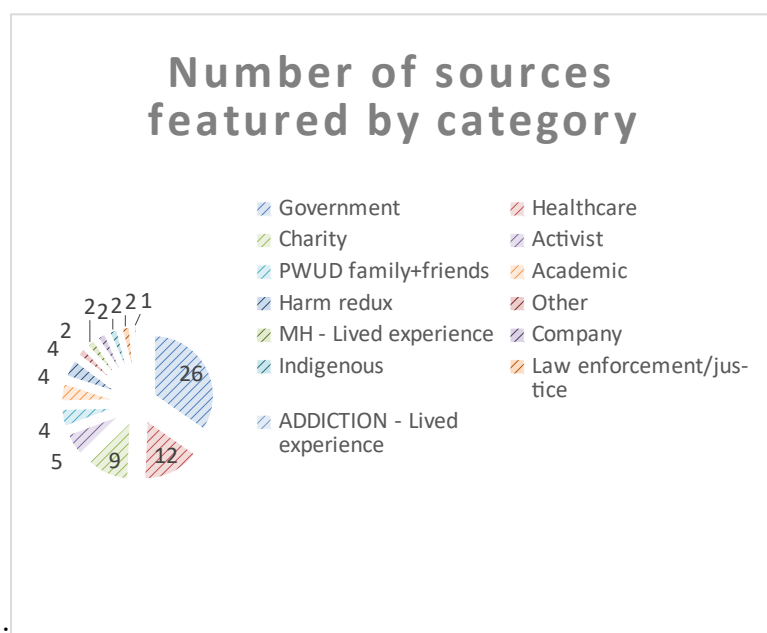


Figure 1:

Every person interviewed by any journalist was featured at least two times across the entire sample and the majority of sources occurred under 10 times. There was wide variation between those who occurred more than 10 times, ranging from 11 mentions to 69 representing the most commonly mentioned source, John Haggie from the government category. Second-most is Gerry Rogers (government category, 53 occurrences), and third-most is Kristi Allan (activist category,

39 occurrences).

Codes produced from the article analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis of the data from the 55 articles sampled yielded nine significant codes which were then analysed further to form three major themes which will be explored in the following section. Here, the individual codes will be listed and explained.

1. Blame

This code reflects a situation when an article placed blame on someone. When discussing addictions issues and PWUD, misplaced blame contributes to stigmatization: when blame for addictions is placed on an individual drug user or seller, the article neglects the overarching systemic and societal factors contributing to issues that stem from drug use. Note that this is simply an initial interpretation of blame as it is necessary to state the function of blame for PWUD to explain *why* it is a code in the first place, but in-depth interpretations of this code is below in the Discussion section.

For example, Jenna Head's April 2024 article entitled "From a little boy 'succeeding in everything he did' to an addict: N.L. mom desperate to get help for her son" places blame on individual users. The article does not say outright that "Michelle's" son is at fault for his addictions, but language in the title and the article suggest that "Michelle's" son made the choice to turn from "'succeeding in everything he did'" to become an "addict". The quotes Head chose to run without context of how they may be harmful from her source, "Michelle", irresponsibly blame individuals for their drug addictions. One quote reads, "'My son, he can't go to school. He's overdosing once every two weeks these days, and some weeks they're closer together,' she ['Michelle'] said" (Head, Apr. 26, 2024). Here, Head could have added context to the quote and drawn attention to the toxic supply crisis as a reason for "Michelle's" son's regular overdoses.

Without adding that context, it reads as if her son is actively overdosing rather than accidentally due to the poisoned drug supply. Another quote from “Michelle” reads, “‘When addicts can't get drugged they aren't the people that they are underneath' [“Michelle”]” (Head, April 26, 2024).

Referencing PWUD as “addicts” is problematic, and while it would be inappropriate for a journalist to alter a source’s quote, Head has the final say as to which quotes are run and what she writes before and after them. Head also chose to use the word “addict” in her title. Choosing to refer to a person as an “addict” emphasizes a person’s drug addiction as the important thing about them. Both of these quotes constitute blaming an individual since they isolate drug addiction down to a single person without adding necessary context about the ways in which drug addictions manifest. Importantly, the article scapegoats “Michelle’s” son, using him as a way to investigate Bill 55 (Secure Withdrawal Management for Young Persons Act), a proposed and passed but never proclaimed Bill that would enable guardians to force minors experiencing substance use disorder into treatment programs. While the article questions the government’s lack of action on Bill 55, it does little to draw attention to factors that may lead to a youth’s drug addiction to begin with, or other ways for youths experiencing drug addiction to get help if they wish to.

2. Empathetic or apathetic tone

This code was used to capture whether an article was caring or uncaring toward PWUD. It has been shown that journalists who display empathy to marginalized communities in their reporting will see their relationships improve (Mathewson, 2021, pp. 164, and “Equity & Inclusion,” *Solutions Journalism Network*). In the case of PWUD, employing empathy in reporting may help undo harmful stereotypes about them as the journalist doing the reporting

will be less likely to see and present PWUD as stigmatized stereotypes. On the other hand, reporting from a more apathetic or uncaring position may lead to inadvertent stigmatization.

Strong instances of empathetic and apathetic reporting come from the same journalist mentioned above, Jenna Head.

One instance of empathy in Head's reporting was found in an article from September 2023 entitled "Province creates new committee for mental health, addictions." The article sources Jeff Bourne, a person with lived experience of drug use and the executive director of U-Turn, an organization dedicated to addiction recovery. He states, "I don't call it overdose, I call it opioid poisoning because if I overdose, I wanted to take my own life. Opioid poisoning is 'you were poisoned'. We've got to change the wording around it because of stigma" (Head, Sept. 2023). This piece of reporting is empathetic since it features a person with lived experience, but it goes a step further and shows an example of how readers can be less stigmatizing in their daily life (substituting "overdose" for "opioid poisoning").

An example of apathy in Head's work comes from the article mentioned above: "From a little boy 'succeeding in everything he did' to an addict: N.L. mom desperate to get help for her son." The quotes from the "Blame" coding above are also examples of apathetic reporting since they reinforce stereotypical and stigmatizing ideas of PWUD. However, a quote from that article that strongly implies apathetic reporting is the following: "Before addiction, 'Michelle's' son was outgoing, smart, involved in sports, and excelling in French immersion... 'He's not here because of neglect'" (Head, April 26, 2024). This quote indicates a lack of understanding that PWUD, even when in active addiction, are capable of living what society dictates to be "productive, regular life" which is apathetic and stereotyping towards PWUD as a whole.

3. Exclusion of PWUD as audience members

Articles often referred to PWUD as extensions of other people inadvertently negating their agency, while suggesting that PWUD are a separate or different group of people than those who read the news. In an effort to garner sympathy from readers, one article referred to PWUD as “‘somebody’s child, somebody’s brother, somebody’s sister’” (Kennedy, “Following rash of overdoses,” Sept. 1 2023), neglecting the following facts: that PWUD are individuals who deserve care and compassion regardless of their family connections; and that PWUD *also read the news*. By making this connection, journalists (likely inadvertently) insinuated that PWUD are not valuable on their own. Furthermore, it negates the fact that PWUD are individuals with dignity, rights, and responsibilities, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that PWUD, regardless of their situation, need intervention from others to “help” them. Even more alarming, segregating PWUD to be strictly considered “someone’s child, somebody’s brother, somebody’s sister” removes them from the journalists’ readership. When journalists fail to treat communities with their due agency, whether on purpose or not, they suggest that these communities are worthy of having news written *about* them but that they do not actually read or use the news themselves.

Simply put, referring to PWUD as “someone’s” family allows that it might be the reader’s family member who uses drugs, but it would not be the reader themselves, alienating PWUD even further from their other community members.

One article worked against such treatment, showing that PWUD have agency to make their own choices. David Maher’s article from January 10 2019, “Group sets guidelines for mental health care overhaul” highlighted the multi-faceted nature of PWUD and harm reduction. He quoted Kaila de Boer, the director of mental wellness and healing with the Nunatsiuvut government, who states “‘For some, it [harm reduction] may mean cutting back on substances, it may mean different substances, it may mean using in a different context... It can really have

such a broad scope” (Maher, “Group sets guidelines,” Jan. 10 2019), showing that PWUD are individuals dealing with unique circumstances capable of making choices for themselves.

Maher’s reporting is more respectful of PWUD than others’ even though he does still treat PWUD as an isolated group, because he makes his reader reckon with the agency PWUD have where other authors do not.

4. Lack of government accountability

This code was used when articles pointed out a governmental failure to display accountability regarding “Towards Recovery” and mental health and addictions generally. One example of this code came from Henrike Wilhelm’s article entitled “Evaluation of N.L.’s mental health plan highlights successes – and work that remains” from July 13 2023. Wilhelm quotes Paul Dinn, Progressive Conservative MHA and the then-opposition’s health critic: ““If you've got the report there and you're saying you've succeeded in hitting that goal, then break it out and tell us how that goal was hit. And that's what's missing here, the more evidence-based information that tells us what was done and what wasn't” (Wilhelm, “Evaluation,” Jul. 13 2023). Another example, also from Wilhelm, references local activist for mental health Kristi Allan: “For mental health advocate Kristi Allan, the report didn't contain enough information to back up some of government's achievements it lists” (Wilhelm, “I found myself digging,” Jul. 7 2023). A third example of the articles referencing government accountability simply points out the lack of effort on the government’s behalf: Rafsan Faruque Jugol’s article, “As psychiatrists departed Western Health, outpatient wait times jumped” notes that “The government reported spending \$236 million in the area of mental health and addictions during the 2021-2022 fiscal year, which represents an allocation of 7.6 per cent -- lower than that target” (Jugol, Mar. 20 2023).

5. Social determinants of health

This code was used when articles directly mentioned the social determinants of health as they relate to PWUD and addictions. These news articles provided context into the many realities that contribute to the harms that can be associated with substance use disorder and addictions.

Affordable housing was the main social determinant of health referenced in the sample. Maher's article also quotes Joshua Smee, an expansion coordinator with Choices for Youth, who references "workers in the field expecting a new provincial housing and homelessness plan" (Maher, "Groups set guidelines," Jan. 10 2019). Another example, published as a Letter to the Editor from former NDP MHA Gerry Rogers, a founding member of the All-Party Committee on Mental Health and Addictions responsible for "Towards Recovery," stressed the importance of stable housing to a person's mental health: "The Canadian Medical Association also identified affordable housing as a key determinant of health. So what gives? This government does not have a housing plan or strategy to address this crisis" (Rogers, "Land sale won't solve housing crisis," Aug. 22 2015). Journalism that included information about the social determinants of health that impact addictions was seen as working against stigmatization, since these - especially safe and secure housing - are critical to a person's safety.

6. Politicization of addictions issues

This code was used when articles indicated that political parties or individual politicians were leveraging the successes or failures of "Towards Recovery" initiatives to further their political agenda. This is different from the "Lack of government accountability" code as examples given here *do not* include a call-to-action for the sitting government, whereas examples given above (like that from PC MHA Paul Dinn) directly request the government to "break it [the report] out" (Wilhelm, "Evaluation," Jul. 13 2023). The main talking point used to politicize addictions issues is the aforementioned Bill 55 - the proposed, passed but never proclaimed Bill

allowing caregivers to force minors into detox programs. Sources from the then-official opposition (the Progressive Conservatives) and the New Democratic Party (NDP) in the articles pointed out the sitting government's failures to act and display accountability, taking attention away from the following facts: 1) "Towards Recovery" was created by the All-Party Committee, meaning representatives from every political party were involved, and 2) real citizens need mental health and addictions services. One example of this exploitation regarding Bill 55 is seen here, in one of journalist Head's articles following her source "Michelle":

The provincial PC and NDP parties didn't know what happened to the bill either. What happened? NDP MHA Lela Evans said they had to look back at what happened to the legislation... PC media relations manager Ashley Politi told SaltWire, "We don't know anything regarding that (what happened to Bill 55). In order for it to be 'shelved' it has to come back to the house and it hasn't. (Head, "From a little boy 'succeeding with everything he did' to an addict" Apr. 26 2024)

Another example of this politicization has to do with the failings of the Towards Recovery reports themselves. See here, a quote from PC MHA Paul Dinn in Wilhelm's July 7 2023 article: "I suspect there's a bit of editing going on... Yes, it's bureaucracy, there's no doubt about it. But at the end of this report, there's real people with real struggles and real needs. And that's what we need to be focused on." Drawing attention back to the Newfoundlanders and Labradorians being adversely impacted by delays in "Towards Recovery's" completion was noble, but Dinn, especially as the opposition's health critic at the time, leans on "bureaucracy" as an excuse to prop up his party's nobility - even though the PCs were represented in the All-Party Committee *and* they did nothing to actually help the "real people with real struggles and real needs" (Wilhelm, "Evaluation," Jul. 7 2023). Allowing Dinn the space to frame the issue in this

way contributes to the politicization of addictions and PWUD rather than serving as an appropriate and compassionate call-to-action that actually centres those who want and need health services.

7. Citizen activism

This code was used when articles were centred around citizen activists and their plights in support of mental health and addictions. Wilhelm did the most reporting on citizen activism since he followed and relied on one such activist, Kristi Allan, as a source regularly. One article following her reported that she “filed an access-to-information request looking for all correspondence about Towards Recovery from Health Minister Tom Osborne between March 10 to early May. She said she hasn't had success” (Wilhelm, “I found myself digging,” Jul. 7 2023). Another example of this code was from journalist Paul Herridge’s reporting on the work of activist Ruby Hoskins in his article “Marystown resident remains dogged in quest for mental health and addictions facility for region.” Herridge wrote about her 11 years of activism on Newfoundland’s Burin Peninsula, stating that “The need for a dedicated facility in the region has only continued to grow in that time, she says. However, despite her efforts, and countless conversations with people in power, there is still no such facility for the region” (Herridge, “Marystown resident,” Oct. 16 2018).

8. Optimism and pessimism about the state of mental health and addictions work

These codes were used when articles maintained or contributed to positive or negative outlooks about the state of mental health and addictions work in Newfoundland and Labrador. One example of optimism was from Peter Jackson entitled “FACT teams at the ready in province” that sourced Paula Corcoran, a healthcare source and executive director of

CHANNAL, an organization dedicated to providing peer support and education to individuals living with mental health or addictions issues. About Corcoran's reaction to the FACT teams being announced, Jackson wrote: "Paula Corcoran has trouble hiding her enthusiasm when talking about recent mental health care announcements in Newfoundland and Labrador" (Jackson, "FACT teams," Jul. 31 2020). An example of pessimism was about the problems with in-patient care in the province. Mark Hoffe's article "'I do not feel that the services are up to snuff': Long-term solutions needed as number of people in N.L. seeking help for mental health rises" sourced Anthony Brenton, an artist with lived experience of mental illness, who claimed that "the institutions are frightening and exclusive. They served me well in my day, but I would not like to re-ensnare myself in acute care" (Hoffe, "'up to snuff,'" Apr. 30 2024). These examples are interesting in conjunction with one another since the optimism is from a healthcare professional while the pessimism is from a person with lived experience. This is by no means enough information to make a generalization, but more research could be done to uncover the differences in attitudes between healthcare workers and people with lived experience in the healthcare system.

9. Lack of actionable information published in articles

The RTA also revealed a serious lack of useful or actionable information for news readers. For example, even in articles where Naloxone (the opioid-agonist treatment used to reverse opioid overdoses) was mentioned, a list of places to access the kits was not provided. Furthermore, even in articles where workers from local harm reduction organizations like SWAP were sourced, no phone number or address for SWAP was published. While a lack of information does not necessarily constitute a code, this absence is critical to this research project.

To summarize, these codes interconnected repeatedly to form three major themes to

effectively respond to RQ1 (How did journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador report on the “Towards Recovery” reports, specifically pertaining to addictions and substance use?). The themes will be explored below.

Themes produced from the articles: Assessing the relationships between different codes

Three broad themes were developed from the codes identified above. They will be explained in detail below, beneath Table 2 which briefly provides the title, corresponding codes, and meaning of each theme:

Table 2: Reflexive thematic analysis theme chart

Theme title	Associated codes	Theme meaning
“Performing” harm reduction instead of “doing” harm reduction	• Politicization of addictions • Accountability • Blame (individuals)	reported on performative measures, such as government officials talking about HR/PWUD without proper context, articles that speak about PWUD and harm reductionists but not with them, etc.
Journalism does not understand PWUD	• Blame • Infantilization • Apathetic tone	demonstrated the ways that a journalist may fail to properly contextualize quotes, statements and their own writing to fairly depict PWUD. May or may not contain content that is overtly stigmatizing, but the message

		can be stigmatizing nonetheless as the coverage might paint a stereotypical or inaccurate picture of drug use
Caring for PWUD	• Empathetic tone • Social determinants of health • Citizen activism	Represented boots-on-the-ground work to destigmatize and alleviate harms for PWUD.

The dataset revealed a tendency for local journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador to talk about harm reduction but not provide tangible examples of it. Theme one, entitled “‘Performing’ harm reduction instead of ‘doing’ harm reduction” encompassed the ways that the news stories lacked information that would be useful in the day-to-day lives of PWUD. The codes under theme one included “politicizing addictions,” “accountability,” and “blame” (specifically against individuals). This theme shows that there was reporting on the failures of government officials to show evidence of work being done, but that the reporting failed to provide information on resources that do harm reduction or work with PWUD. For instance, the primary harm reduction organization dealing exclusively with drug use is the Safe Works Access Program (SWAP), which is only mentioned in three of the articles in the sample. The subset of articles that do mention SWAP feature quotes from its employees, but they do not make note of where SWAP’s offices are, the services they offer, or ways to get in touch with them directly. The value of the reporting may increase if more stories featured people “doing” harm reduction rather than just discussing it.

The sample also showed that there was a lack of effort, for whatever reason, on journalists’

part to properly represent and serve PWUD and harm reductionists. This was captured in theme two, called “Journalism does not understand PWUD” describes the ways in which the reporting poorly represents PWUD, sometimes by perpetuating harmful stigmatization. The codes “blame,” “infantilization,” and “apathetic tone” contributed to this theme by suggesting a failure or an unwillingness to properly connect with the community. Most of the articles in the sample failed to source from people with lived experience with drug use or harm reductionists, instead utilizing a more top-down approach by relying on government and other officials. Perhaps if the articles worked with the community more or provided more opportunities for PWUD and harm reductionists to function in journalistic capacities and circles, the representation and understanding would get better with time. In studies with other marginalized communities, research has shown that communities benefit from “a discursive link that travels in both directions between local media and residents” (Wenzel, 2020, pp. 43).

Finally, the sample illustrated the ways that local journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador depicted community members caring about PWUD. Theme three, “Caring for PWUD” represented the ways that the sample shows people working with boots-on-the-ground for PWUD. Codes under this theme included “empathetic tone,” “social determinants of health,” and “citizen activism.” Articles with these codes tended to feature more community input, be it by people with lived experience or activists, which contributed to these articles feeling less stigmatizing of drug users.

Semi-structured interviews (RQs 2 and 3)

Phase two of the project, the semi-structured interviews with harm reductionists, responds to RQ2 and RQ3: What do harm reduction activists, scholars and workers (harm reductionists) in the province think about the journalistic coverage; and, Is there anything about the journalistic

coverage that harm reductionists would change? There were six major themes derived from the interviews, some of which encompass multiple subthemes. The themes will be examined below to delineate the ways in which the interviews address RQ2 and RQ3. The relationships between the themes will be analyzed in the “Discussion” chapter below.

Theme 1: “Harm reduction” has a wide variety of meanings

Given the contention surrounding the term “harm reduction” as discussed above, the fact that individual harm reductionists working in the same cultural context have different understandings of “harm reduction” is relevant to this research project.

All of the participants agreed that harm reduction in Newfoundland and Labrador has a minimal presence and is behind other provinces, but when it came to actually defining harm reduction, there was no consensus. The participants consider harm reduction to be a wide variety of things, ranging from tangible and concrete (meaning things like direct, person-to-person services like handing out Naloxone kits or offering a needle exchange, or everyday things like wearing a seatbelt while driving) to something more abstract and broad (like seeing harm reduction as a way of life or a lens for seeing the world, or as a different method of “doing care”).

Participants also disagreed about what harm reduction is in principle. Interview 1 criticised the way that some people view harm reduction as a sort of middle step on the way to sobriety, stating “I think a lot of people think that harm reduction, services especially, exists solely to keep people alive until they choose whoever’s speaking version or idea of recovery.” Other participants framed it as exactly that. Interview 4 explained that, to them,

harm reduction is just meeting your population, like, where they are in that moment and not forcing abstinence... And like, seeing what are the other sorts of social factors or what

are their other needs that need to be met in the moment before abstinence is, like, a realistic goal for that particular person.

The rest of the participants were somewhere in the middle of these two perspectives: For example, Participant 2 simply explained harm reduction as “giving people the tools to deal with the issues that are happening in their community or their lives.” This finding is interesting since there are some agreed-upon definitions of harm reduction, but it is likely that these participants’ views and understandings of harm reduction, as well as the ways they “do” harm reduction in their lives and careers, are built upon their own experiences and contexts.

Theme 2: It is dangerous for PWUD to interact with formal institutions like journalism

Participants expressed concern for PWUD who choose to or have to interact with formal institutions like healthcare and journalism. They discussed fears that PWUD will be mistreated or taken advantage of by institutions such as these. For healthcare, specifically hospitals, participants noted that PWUD are “obviously terrified to go to the hospital” (Interview 1). As for journalism, participants were apprehensive at the thought of PWUD interacting with journalists who are not capable of protecting them. Interview 1 worried for those who give their lived experiences as drug users to journalists to publicly report on. She explained,

Everybody’s eager to share their story, and that’s fine, however 9 times outta 10 that’s going to come back and bite people in the ass. You want to rent an apartment, you’d like to get a job, and you’re as qualified as your counterpart? They’re going to Google you and nobody, if given another choice, is going to choose the person who used to do drugs.

However, even though the risk for exploitation exists, the participants did emphasize that responsible reporting involving people with lived experience of drug use and those that work with them (like harm reductionists) made them feel less anxious than reporting where no one

from the community was interviewed. The harm reductionists did not provide detailed explanations of what they believe constitutes responsible use of these vulnerable sources.

Theme 3: Journalism isn't entirely accurate

Participants expressed concern that the journalistic coverage fails to accurately depict PWUD in the province for many reasons. Participants want journalism to broaden its scope away from negative news reporting on things like overdose-related deaths and drug busts and arrests. Instead, they expressed an urgency for journalists to work on creating better reporting surrounding the wider societal causes of addictions. Participants indicated that people need to hear more about things like the cost of living crisis in Newfoundland and Labrador and the ways that trauma can impact people's relationships with drugs.

Further, participants criticised the ways that a narrow frame portrays addictions issues in an inaccurate way: for example, the use of photographs of Downtown St. John's in articles about addictions make it seem like addictions are a place-based, urban issue when they are not. They want future journalism to address the full scope of the issue, and report better on substance use in rural parts of the province, too.

Finally, participants explained that journalists' use of sourcing often fails to represent the real, multifaceted nature of drug use. One participant noted that

people don't frequently question... quotes from some white man in a white coat when in reality, those people typically have the least knowledge. They're not specialists, they're not anything, but what they say is taken at face value and it's so dangerous and causes a lot of harm.

Yet, as proven by the reflexive thematic analysis, these "white man in a white coat"-type sources are the ones who were chosen to vastly represent the "Towards Recovery" reports in news

articles. Recall that only *three* people with lived experience of mental illnesses or addictions were sourced in the articles about “Towards Recovery,” versus 26 Government representatives and 12 medical professionals. This quote in conjunction with this finding shows a clear disconnect between the sourcing that harm reductionists think is useful and safe, versus the sourcing that is actually occurring.

Theme 4: Harm reductionists face complicated, difficult feelings and dilemmas in their work, and journalism about PWUD exacerbates them

This theme repeatedly came up across all of the interviews and manifested in different ways. The feelings mentioned include anger and fear, and dilemmas include suffering from “imposter syndrome,” meaning a belief that one is undeserving of their roles and accomplishments, and serious moral and ethical implications of feeling like you are “enabling” someone’s addictions. On top of these grievances that unfortunately seem to simply come with the job, the participants explained that journalism about drug use often adds fuel to the fire by misrepresenting the community or being exploitative.

Participants said they feel rage when reading news stories that they felt misrepresented or unfairly depicted PWUD and harm reduction. When asked to talk about a story she recently heard in the media about harm reduction in Newfoundland and Labrador, one participant said with exasperation that she sometimes finds herself “screaming at articles and just critiquing” (Interview 1, 11:00).

Participants fear that their clients will be taken advantage of by journalists, or that the news will irresponsibly publish a harmful perspective on harm reduction and cause damage to the community of PWUD. One participant said she has “stopped or reframed several articles that would have just caused panic and fear” (Interview 1, 19:00). Participants were also anxious

about participating in journalism themselves, explaining that they were “anticipating any negative feedback, any criticism of, like, what I said, or something that I didn't say” (Interview 3 7:17).

Theme 5: Harm reductionists get their news in a variety of ways

Every one of the participants referenced Newfoundland and Labrador’s traditional news media forms to one degree or another as a way they access news. These sources included the publications *CBC NL*, *SaltWire/The Telegram* and *The Independent*. Two participants referenced *The Independent*’s journalist Rhea Rollmann and all of the participants were able to refer to at least one major news story to do with harm reduction or PWUD in Newfoundland and Labrador. However, this question was much more complicated than simple name-drops and story mentions. There are sub-themes under this broad theme that delve further into the participants’ understandings and interpretations of their news landscape.

Subtheme: 5a) Hostility and confusion about traditional news sources

Some participants were immediately hostile at the mention of traditional news media sources even if they were not exactly sure what constitutes the entire news landscape. One participant said that they get their news media from “the local news, I guess... whatever that means,” and then immediately went into detail about how they “do not take these things [the local news media] at face value, because oftentimes they’re inaccurate and just plain wrong.”

Subtheme: 5b) Embarrassment about getting news from non-traditional sources

Although every single one of the participants stated that they regularly get their day-today news from word-of-mouth and social media, they all seemed embarrassed or ashamed to confess so. Interestingly, the participants all mentioned the traditional news media sources above quickly and immediately, then spoke more at length (and seemingly more authentically) about word-of-

mouth and social media methods of news discovery. They also felt the need to justify their use of more informal channels where they did not do so for the traditional news publications, even though they knew that the goal of the interviews was to determine the ways in which traditional media can stigmatize PWUD. One would expect that a harm reductionist who believes the news to be explicitly stigmatizing of PWUD would also feel the need to justify why they engage with it to some degree, but no; instead, these responses, even from participants that expressed hostility toward traditional news sources for being stigmatizing, were tinged with shame.

Subtheme: 5c) News article comment sections on social media contribute to stigmatization

A common point of tension for the participants was the comment sections for articles posted on social media sites like Facebook. This was primarily brought up when participants were asked what they feel is different between mental health versus addictions reporting. One participant stated “hell, I mean, look at the comments... Mental health, that’s gonna be like, bashing the system. But addictions? It’s [the comments] going to bash the person.” Another participant noted that the comment section is usually “just a lot of arguments. People pretending like they are experts in mental health and addictions.” Since Meta (the parent company of Facebook) has enacted policy restricting the dissemination of Canadian news on its platforms, further research is necessary to determine the ways in which this subtheme has changed.

Theme 6: Journalistic norms

Without being asked outright about them (or having them explained), some participants mentioned some of the practical norms of journalism, including objectivity and prioritizing “expert” sources. The participants had different ideas as to the usefulness of these norms for reporting on addictions and PWUD.

Subtheme: 6a) Journalistic norms ARE useful

One participant stated that they thought one particular article about addictions was more “well-balanced” than others, “cause it was just presenting facts, and not really opinions,” indicating a preference for notions of objectivity in reporting.

Local journalism that follows traditional methods *is* effective in Newfoundland and Labrador in some ways, participants said. One participant explained that local journalism has a direct impact on her work as a harm reductionist because when harm reduction tools like Naloxone are mentioned in the media, the centre she works at tends to receive more calls inquiring about it. Furthermore, another participant explained that they sometimes feel they are not the right person to be doing harm reduction work but noted that local journalism helped make them feel like a part of the community. They said they were “struggling with a... sense of like... being a fraud or not being the right person to do it” when they first began working in harm reduction in Newfoundland and Labrador, but exclaimed that once an in-depth, well-reported article about their work was released by journalist Rhea Rollmann that they “feel established, I feel known, and I feel like people have a lot more access to support the project” (Interview 3, 8:40). Clearly, traditional forms journalism can assist harm reductionists in their work and alleviate some of the stressors they face.

Subtheme: 6b) Journalistic norms are NOT useful

Other participants touched on various other norms of journalism. One participant, quoted above under theme three (Journalism isn’t entirely accurate), criticised journalism’s reliance on sourcing “quotes from some white man in a white coat,” demonstrating a distaste for sourcing solely from “experts.” Instead, the participant placed an emphasis on sourcing from people with lived experience.

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative, two-phase research project is to contribute to the existing academic conversation about PWUD and harm reduction in Canadian journalism. It expands the focus of journalism and harm reduction studies to better include the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It also includes those working in the field, an important perspective that has sometimes been left out of the research. This discussion section will proceed by examining the overlaps between the findings of the reflexive thematic analysis of the news stories and of the semi-structured interviews. Then, it will reflect on the limitations to the methodological choices for this research project. Afterwards, it will address each research question in detail. Finally, this project's practical implications for journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador will be explored.

How did the news article analysis and the semi-structured interviews impact one another?

The findings from the two phases amplified one another by illuminating similar gaps in Newfoundland and Labrador's local journalism about PWUD and drugs. The RTA on the news stories revealed areas of the reporting that could have worked better for PWUD, and the interviews added more local context to my interpretations. One gap in local journalism in the province was the lack of practical information about harm reduction and safer drug use more generally. The analysis of news coverage revealed that there was barely any mention of usable information for PWUD and the public. Even when there were mentions of Naloxone distribution (just one small component of harm reduction), lists of the places to pick up a Naloxone kit were not provided. Importantly, too, Naloxone is only useful in the case of an opioid overdose, meaning it is not a preventative measure. Preventative harm reduction measures include drug checking tests and services to check for the presence of opioids prior to consumption, for example. Referring to Naloxone only, on top of failing to provide information about where to

access it, does little to support people trying to survive the toxic supply crisis. The semi-structured interviews with the harm reductionists showed that having harm reduction mentioned in the local news *did* result in an increase in public interaction. Still, the news failed to give tangible information directly to the reader which still perpetuates a critical information gap. There is space for local journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador to publish information that PWUD and other community members can actually use in their day-to-day lives.

The RTA and the interviews also circled back to the importance of journalistic sourcing, with the interviews emphasizing the importance of consulting community members. Nearly all of the articles sampled for the RTA failed to feature PWUD or even people with a harm reduction background. Instead, a lot of the articles featured the same sources, most commonly the two provincial Ministers of Health during the timeline examined. Relying on the same sources over and over again is often a matter of convenience or adherence to the traditional journalistic norms of needing a “good quote” (Wenzel, 2020, p. 120). However, using the same people as representatives, rather than finding a more diverse array of community members to work with, sometimes contributes to

the ‘over-accessing’ of people in power at the expense of communities... Those who had positions of institutional authority were allowed to be ‘primary definers’ of local issues in the news media. (Wenzel, 2020, p. 55).

As the “primary definers” of the news, these representatives may be ignorant of issues facing communities, especially those as diverse and hidden as PWUD. Stressing Wenzel’s findings, the semi-structured interviews with harm reductionists recalled that there was not enough representation of individuals from different backgrounds in the media about drug use. In spite of how important diverse sourcing is, the harm reductionists cautioned that the journalism industry

can be exploitative of PWUD. They warned that sourcing PWUD must be done safely, but noted that that was on the journalists to figure out. As the theme titled “It is dangerous for PWUD to interact with formal institutions like journalism” indicated, the harm reductionists reiterated that when journalists worked directly with the harm reduction community, the final reporting usually gave them less anxiety and sometimes made them less angry than those articles written by authors that had *not* consulted the community. It has been shown that newsrooms “must be attentive to the specific concerns that different communities are raising” (Arguedas et al., “News for the powerful and privileged,” 2023), so an open dialogue between PWUD and harm reductionists and journalists may help to increase journalism’s usefulness to that community.

Another instance of the interviews emphasizing the RTA’s findings was that reporting often neglected the social determinants of health. The articles examined through the RTA often failed to address barriers that can increase stigmatization against PWUD. The harm reductionists reinforced the importance of recognizing and reporting on these systemic inequalities, claiming this might be a way for journalists to work against stigmatization since the public will have a broader picture of PWUD. Harm reductionists also noted that they often feel angry when journalists fail to call out the ways that social determinants of health since PWUD still face a lot of blame for their illnesses. They talked about the comment section under articles about drug use, especially those posted on social media: Commenters will often make harsh judgements about people experiencing addictions that the harm reductionists believed would not be made about a person suffering from an illness other than substance use disorder. One social determinant of health involves geography and the differences between rural and urban communities. The articles often focused on the capital city of St. John’s, which harm reductionists thought neglected those in rural communities. Painting addiction as a place-based issue in this way fails to depict the

gravity of addictions in small communities and also neglects the lack of services in these communities. According to the harm reductionists, PWUD outside the capital city of St. John's and surrounding areas are usually forced to rely on either the formal public health system, which poses its own threats to those with structural vulnerabilities like drug use, or the mail. PWUD can order from organizations like SWAP and have their supplies mailed. For this approach to work, the person must have an address it can be sent to and be comfortable giving it out and they must be able to predict when and how much supplies they will need at a time. Since people in active addiction sometimes lead chaotic and stressful lives, these can pose major barriers. The articles made the gaps in reporting about social determinants of health clear, but the harm reductionists' interviews added important specifics and contexts.

RQ1: How did journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador report on the “Towards Recovery” reports, specifically pertaining to addictions and substance use?

Journalists in Newfoundland and Labrador relied on quotes from government officials and largely reported on the All-Party Committee's movements. Even though the “Towards Recovery” Reports were a government initiative, the subject was wholly health-based. As reported above, this sometimes led to the politicization of addictions, taking away from the struggles and needs of PWUD.

Given how controversial harm reduction initiatives can be, framing addictions issues from the political perspective disappointed harm reductionists. The politicization of health issues is detrimental for those experiencing health crises. Tons of health and science topics become politicised - consider the HIV/AIDS crisis and the rise of vaccine skepticism, for some obvious examples - causing both government and media to steer away from the science (Ophir et al.,

2024). In fact, Rosenstock and Lee found that politics had a direct effect on a key harm reduction initiative. Even though “the cumulative evidence was clear in finding that such programs do not increase drug use and do reduce cases of HIV... [the United States government] refused to lift a ban on federal funding of needle exchange programs [in 1998]. Thus, policy was driven by political factors, not scientific ones” (Rosenstock and Lee, 2002, p. 17). While there was no evidence that the journalism about “Towards Recovery” contributed to false information, it still contributed to the politicisation of addictions. The interviews with harm reductionists revealed their frustration with this, noting that PWUD are fighting to survive the toxic supply crisis while the government refuses to implement fact-based policy to alleviate the stressors. One interviewee emphasised that “people are dying... there’s definitely a choice by the government too, to not act. Because at this point, they’re aware of it. (Interview 1, 7:55).

Perhaps if the journalism about the “Towards Recovery” Reports had been done from a health and science journalism angle, there would have been less politicisation and more useful information published. Health and science journalism may help to contextualize drug use and harm reduction within the broader scope of public health since it may be more engaged with other initiatives. Furthermore, a health journalism framework may provide more opportunities for journalists to provide information about things like harm reduction that citizens can actually find useful in their day-to-day life, such as places to pick up a Naloxone kit and what Naloxone actually does. It has been shown that “[for] most people, the mass media are among the most important sources of information on science and health” (Stein and Ometa, 2024, p. 442), so reporting on things like harm reduction, especially in the context of the toxic supply crisis, should be practical and informative to citizens.

RQ2: What do harm reduction activists, scholars and workers (harm reductionists) in the

province think about the journalistic coverage?

Many of the harm reductionists were uncertain about the news landscape in Newfoundland and Labrador. As reported above, some of the interviewees expressed shame or embarrassment about receiving their news from non-traditional news sources such as social media or through word-of-mouth. All five of them also mentioned at least once that they “aren’t journalists,” or that they “aren’t that ‘up’ on the news,” as a caveat before they answered some of the questions. This indicates not just uncertainty about the news landscape, but also a pervasive idea that whatever amount of knowledge they did have is simply not enough. Even the interviewees who gave details about either journalists themselves or specific news stories doubted themselves.

There is room for more research into this uncertainty.

The interviewees agreed on some parts of the coverage. The major similarity amongst them is their respect for some journalists over others. Although most of the harm reductionists did not name anyone specifically, they all acknowledged that there were at least some journalists that they thought were “doing a good job” of reporting on addictions-related issues. Two of the interviewees mentioned the journalist Rhea Rollmann from The Independent as the person doing the work exceptionally well. A brief review of Rollmann’s latest work on the “addictions beat” includes the inaugural story about Tweak Easy East, the grassroots, unsanctioned and advocate-run charge to open a supervised consumption site in the capital city of St. John’s (Rollmann, 2024). More research could be done to determine what harm reductionists liked or found notable about Rollmann’s coverage versus other journalists in the city of St. John’s.

There were some disagreements about the coverage, too. Namely, some of the harm reductionists enjoyed reading coverage that seemed to stick to “just the facts”: some said that sort of reporting felt more objective. On the other hand, other harm reductionists showed

appreciation for those journalists who were willing to collaborate with them, noting that these were the reporters who genuinely seemed to care about PWUD in the community. One interviewee said she had “somebody from CBC” come by her work and they “hung out for two hours” (Interview 1, 13:45), with the journalist following the harm reductionists around and seeing what they do in the run of a day. The word choice “hung out” is especially important, since it denotes a casual relationship between the reporter and the community member. However, these sort of interactions do not fit well within the concept of objectivity or an “objective” journalist. There is room for future research with harm reductionists to determine why some are drawn to journalistic norms like objectivity and others are not. Furthermore, it would be insightful to ask harm reductionists how they want journalists to interact with them, and what (if anything) they think would be beneficial about establishing a close relationship with reporters.

RQ3: Is there anything about the journalistic coverage that harm reductionists would change?

Two questions in the interview guide were specifically designed to elicit thoughtful responses to address RQ3: “If you could ask a journalist to look into any specific thing in NL about harm reduction and drug use, what would it be?” and “What would you do differently in news reports about drugs and harm reduction in NL?” The answers to both of these questions were especially insightful, so each respondents’ answer to both of these questions will be copied into a table below where possible and where ethics approval is not compromised. The quotes will be edited for length and clarity where necessary.

Table 3: Harm reductionists’ responses to questions about changing journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Inter view #	Response to “If you could ask a journalist to look into any specific thing in	Response to “What would you do differently in news reports about drugs
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	NL about harm reduction and drug use, what would it be?”	and harm reduction in NL?”
1	“It would be the harms versus the lack of effectiveness of AA and NA... Even though I don’t believe addiction is a disease, what other ailment exists where doctors are essentially prescribing religion?”	“I don't think so, but I will say as a whole it has been very beneficial for us to be able to use that outlet as a way to get information out”
2	“I would absolutely love for people to take a look at some of the harm reduction initiatives in other parts of Canada and other parts of the world and actually have a conversation about whether there are viable options for Newfoundland or not... [and] The other aspect is to do a deep dive into the wait times to see a mental health professional. Look at the wait times you may get in to see a family doctor, right?”	“I’d keep pictures of downtown out of the article to be honest, when people report on mental health issues, they often focus on the downtown core, and I think that's because downtown is the most visible example, Right? But I think that further stigmatizes the houseless, the vulnerable. It makes it seem like it's a downtown issue when it's not. It's a province wide issue.”
3	“One thing that I believe would be important for a journalist to report on is the strain on first responders. Maybe we	“I think I would just, like, get to know them [the PWUD]. You know, we both like <i>Crackdown</i>. And I think we

	can make them [the audience] empathize with people who use drugs by reporting on the strain that first responders are reporting to overdose prevention calls or overdose response. Then, a part of the article could be ways in which we could lift the strain and increase like health reduction services like this”	both love <i>Crackdown</i> because it's investigative journalism, but it's just so personal... It's understanding everything about a person, not just this small element, which is their drug use. I think I would just want to move at the speed of trust and take more time with the people that I'm reporting with”
4	“I feel like it would be so interesting to do a piece on how the community would feel about a safe injection site... I think there's a lot of value in looking at the societal attitudes towards that type of thing. I feel like now we live in a time where homelessness is so visible, so people really have a lot of polarizing opinions. Like people are either all for having a safe injection site or they're completely against it”	“Definitely incorporating more lived experience into these articles and showing the community that even if this [active addiction or destructive drug use] is the sort of lifestyle you've known forever, there is another side to the coin, and there are people that lived through the same things that you may have lived through and came at the other side and actually found meaning found purpose that wasn't just their addiction”
5	[Can not be copied due to privacy: This interviewee's response provides details which would reveal their identity and they have chosen to remain anonymous as per	“I would love to see someone look into the actual people who use drugs in the community. Do they think that a safer use space would be viable? What are they

	their Consent Form.]	asking for? Things like that. 'Cause I feel like we're getting a lot of government, top down, control of the narrative. That sounds so dramatic, but they do control the narrative, in terms of harm reduction being seen as a “let's reduce stigma smiley face” while not actually doing any meaningful action to reduce stigma... So I would love to see some more like actual work in terms of what is the community like begging for and giving that a platform”
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Harm reductionists displayed curiosity about specific things like the social and practical implications of a safer consumption site in Newfoundland and Labrador and treatment options for PWUD like AA and NA (Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, respectively). Furthermore, many of these answers overlap to indicate a clear desire for deeper, more intentional reporting that works directly with the community. Importantly, this call for more community collaboration includes an indirect challenge for journalists to move beyond the simplistic criminalization and hard-news reporting of drug use. Instead, harm reductionists seem to want journalists to engage with a more complex and thoughtful frame of reporting, working directly with PWUD to see what they want and need from their journalists and perhaps including analyses of more systemic and province-wide issues.

Overall, the harm reductionists saw things that should change about the news coverage in Newfoundland and Labrador, but these things were not major issues like explicit stigmatization. This shows that harm reductionists are not unhappy with journalism, but that they have suggestions for journalists to do better to serve their community.

Solutions journalism and news about harm reduction in Newfoundland and Labrador

This research has suggested that solutions journalism, coined and promoted by the Solutions Journalism Network (the SJN), is an innovative way for journalists to connect with communities often left behind and stigmatized by legacy journalism. Solutions journalism “is rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to social problems” (“Responses to problems are newsworthy,” Solutions Journalism Network). In the articles about “Towards Recovery,” it was common to publish that people are still struggling with addictions and that people are still dying from accidental overdoses, without digging into the implications of, societal reasonings for, or possible ways of addressing these dire issues.

There was no evidence that solutions journalism was being done in Newfoundland and Labrador about the “Towards Recovery” reports, but it emerged as a viable response for local journalists working the addictions and drug beats in the province. Research has suggested that solutions journalism can be effective in combating readers’ helplessness about social issues while driving community connection. Drug-user activists, like those at *Crackdown Podcast*, want to hold “the powerful to account while building more solidarity among drug users” (“Change Intolerance,” Mullins). Solutions journalism has the power to do both: it has been shown to effectively hold officials accountable while building community efficacy. Coverage that offers solutions to societal problems can be “embarrassing to public officials” since these pieces make it clear that change is possible (“Solutions Journalism: What is it and why should I

care?”), thus building grounds on which to hold “the powerful to account.” Additionally, research shows that people who read solutions-oriented stories “experienced statistically significant greater levels of self-efficacy, energy, and connection to their community” (Gielan et al., 2017, pp. 4), which may contribute to “solidarity.” With this evidence, it is reasonable to consider solutions journalism as a viable option for journalists working with PWUD.

Nonetheless, future research in this area is necessary to say for certain as there are some significant barriers to implementing such rigorous forms of reporting in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The economic constraints facing local newsrooms, coupled with the fact that solutions journalism is not widespread, poses a real obstacle to the journalists in Newfoundland and Labrador. Since solutions reporting is significantly more in-depth than simply reporting a problem, journalists may face financial constraints, as well as pressure from their editors to publish quickly. Journalists who are able to commit the time, resources, and energy to adopting a solutions journalism mindset should consider doing so. However, more localized, region-specific research is required to determine whether or not solutions journalism would have a tangible impact on the community of PWUD and harm reductionists in Newfoundland and Labrador.

That being said, Interview 2 suggested a solutions journalism-oriented approach when answering the question “to “If you could ask a journalist to look into any specific thing in NL about harm reduction and drug use, what would it be?” by suggesting journalists “do a deep dive into the wait times to see a mental health professional. Look at the wait times you may get in to see a family doctor,” showing that there is community desire for solutions stories.

Conclusion

This thesis establishes grounds for future studies about harm reduction in journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador. Its initial purpose was to work with harm reductionists to determine the ways in which the news landscape in Newfoundland and Labrador is stigmatizing PWUD. There are some issues that contribute to stigmatization that must be remedied. Instances of poor diction, like the use of the word “addict” and others in some of the quotes journalists chose to utilize, and journalists casting blame on individual PWUD for drug addictions are just two examples. Fortunately, though, the RTA and the interviews with the harm reductionists revealed the news was not overtly stigmatizing, as in using words like “junkie” or calling for hardline criminalization. In other words, the journalism about PWUD in Newfoundland and Labrador - at least about the “Towards Recovery” Reports and that referenced by the interviewees - does not seem to outright fuel hatred or aggression towards drug users. However, it often fails to counter stigmatization insofar as the coverage is not actively destigmatizing. This leaves questions about what destigmatized coverage may actually look like. Unfortunately, this project is far too small in scope to adequately address that question. Further studies should be done, perhaps seeking out any “destigmatized” reporting in other places in Canada and determining ways in which their successes can be replicated in Newfoundland and Labrador. In any case, this project has shown that there are significant areas for journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador to improve to be truly supportive and useful for the communities of PWUD and harm reductionists.

Practical implications of this research

To address the improvements the harm reductionists recommend, journalism in Newfoundland and Labrador can make a few changes. The first change includes taking the time

to build trust with harm reductionists and PWUD. Journalism research on the impacts of journalism in marginalized communities have found that when journalists give community members the opportunity to collaborate on stories about them, the community typically feels more included and better represented (Wenzel et al., 2018, pp. 650). Undoubtedly, this would require time and resources that newsrooms may be unwilling or unable to dedicate, but it is an important step. In the meantime, while journalists work to intentionally build relationships with the community of PWUD and harm reductionists, they can continue to work with community outreach organizations like SWAP to strengthen existing ties. Developing these relationships will make it easier to include underrepresented voices in the reporting.

Another change includes publishing actionable information in the reporting to give citizens the information they need directly. For example, writing phone numbers and addresses in reporting about harm reduction outreach locations and providing lists of places for citizens to pick up Naloxone kits and receive training. This change would not require much effort on behalf of the journalists or their newsrooms and would increase the usefulness of the news for PWUD. For a change like this to happen, though, it requires a wider paradigm shift away from seeing PWUD as “somebody’s child, somebody’s brother, somebody’s sister” (Kennedy, “Following rash of overdoses,” Sept. 1 2023) to recognizing that PWUD *are* news readers as well as people to be written about. There is a pervasive notion in journalism that “our audiences are like us” (Baleria, 2021, pp. 134-135), assuming that they are *not* PWUD, that must be broken down for journalism to effectively serve PWUD.

Limits to these practical implications: Newsroom budgeting

The practical implications and suggestions that this project has generated are limited by the fact that some local newsrooms across Canada are already suffering from a lack of resources,

leading to less journalists having even less time to do reporting. The kind of journalism that this project has shown harm reductionists want - that is, deeply collaborative and community-based journalism - would take a significant re-dedication of resources, journalists, and priorities that newsrooms just may not be able to afford. Sharing this burden across the entire community would enable a more holistic approach to “doing journalism” and shift some of the responsibility from journalists, but it is yet undetermined how this type of community collaboration could play out in Newfoundland and Labrador, or even just its capital city of St. John’s.

Limitations to this research approach

Since this research project has been completed for a thesis in partial fulfillment of the Degree of Master of Arts, it had a time limit which weakened the research. Follow-up research should aim to have more funding and time to contribute to a larger scope (like every other research project would). As well, it would have benefitted from an even more reflexive approach. Having more time and opportunities to bounce back and forth between the RTA and the interviews, rather than conducting the project in a phase-based approach, would have enabled stronger analysis and results.

Another limitation of the project was that the harm reductionist participants were concentrated within the greater St. John’s area. Although some of the participants had first-hand knowledge of work in other jurisdictions on the Island of Newfoundland, there was no representation for harm reduction initiatives in Labrador. Further research to develop a picture of the entire province is critical, but given that the harm reduction resources are mostly centred in the city it remains a solid entry point into the intersection of journalism and harm reduction.

Recommendations for future research

This research project revealed many areas for further research regarding journalism, harm

reduction and Newfoundland and Labrador. These recommendations for future research have been noted in the above sections and they will be reiterated here. It may be useful to study the differences between journalist Rhea Rollmann and other journalists to understand what it is about her coverage that the harm reductionists appreciate. Further, it is necessary to continue researching the ways for journalists to interact with harm reductionists not just in Newfoundland and Labrador but in all of Canada. Finally, research into the emotional and psychological toll that people working in harm reduction suffer in their day-to-day work is critical. This kind of research may help uncover ways for harm reductionists to better cope with these strains.

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Appendix A

List of source title, definition, and count of names per category.

Source title	Definition	Count
Academic	The label “Academic” was used to identify people such as professors and researchers.	4
Activist	The label “Activist” was used to identify those who are directly involved in protests or similar actions.	5
Addiction - Lived experience	The label “ADDICTION - Lived experience” was used to identify those sources whose primary reason for being interviewed/featured is their lived experience with drug addiction.	1
Charity	The label “Charity” indicated people who work for NGOs, non-profits or other outreach programs.	9
Company	The label “Company” denoted business people or companies used as sources.	2
Government	The label “Government” indicated people who work for the government.	26
Harm redux	The label “Harm redux” was used to identify those sources who work	4

	directly in harm reduction services or outreach.	
Healthcare	The label “Healthcare” was used to identify sources whose primary duties are in the field of healthcare, namely doctors or people who work in office roles for public health.	12
Indigenous	The label “Indigenous” referred to sources that are identified as Indigenous in the article they feature in.	2
Law enforcement/justice	The label “Law enforcement/justice” was used to identify people who work either for the police or in the justice system.	2
MH - Lived experience	The label “MH - Lived experience” denoted people who have lived experience within the mental health system.	2
Other	The category label “Other” identified individuals who were featured in articles but do not fit in any assigned category, nor would resting a new category for them be useful to better address any RQs.	2
PWUD family+friends	The label “PWUD family+friends” identified people who have no personal lived experience with drug use, but who were sourced in articles as representatives of loved ones who use drugs/used to use drugs.	4

