

Written evidence to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee of the National Assembly of Wales in relation to their Suicide Prevention Inquiry

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I was asked to comment on the following points:

- Evidence regarding impacts of reporting of suicide (and dramatic portrayal of suicide) on readers/audiences, including on children and young people. Evidence about the 'contagion' effect'.

Reporting suicide responsibly requires sensitivity and compassion due to the potential harmful effect on vulnerable people. Some academic researchers believe there is a correlation between irresponsible coverage and imitative or copycat suicides. A connection between the way journalists report suicide and vulnerable people's susceptibility to repeat the action by taking their own lives has been made by numerous scholars (for example, Gould & Davidson, 1988; Phillips, 1974; Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, & Skehan, 2006; Pirkis et al., 2007; Stack 2003, 2005; Velting & Gould, 1997; Wasserman, 1984). However, these studies do not necessarily show cause, i.e. that media reporting of suicide *causes* other vulnerable people to kill themselves but they do indicate a connection between the two, and on that basis journalists are cautioned to take care and consider the impact of their reporting.

Another perspective is that suicide stories can be in the public interest because they can educate people about broader social and public health deficiencies, as noted by Samaritans in their *Suicide facts for journalists* section of their website. A positive impact is that the media can raise awareness, inform the public about the signs to look for, how to get help, and that suicide is preventable.

The effect on the suicide rate is said to depend on the amount, duration, and prominence of media coverage (Gould, 2001). Imitative or copycat incidents are more likely when the suicide appears on the front page, has a large headline, and is heavily publicised. However, it is less clear what types of content can have a detrimental effect. Some evidence suggests celebrity suicides, particularly when they are on the front page, lead to copycat incidents. Fink et al (2018) found a 9.85% increase in suicides in the USA following the death of Robin Williams. In this case media reporting was criticised for being excessive and for breaching suicide reporting guidelines, especially regarding detailed description of method. However, the authors do acknowledge other factors could have influenced this increase. Other research indicates that non-celebrity stories also have a significant impact, although to a lesser extent, if they receive enough publicity. Young people are especially susceptible to copycat suicides (Samaritans, 2016). However, Luce (2016) warns against selective coverage aimed at particular groups e.g. students, young people, as this can adversely affect public understanding by creating incorrect impressions and fostering myths.

Additionally, there is increasing evidence that the internet and social media can also influence copycat behaviour (Luxton et al., 2012), which is a particular concern regarding young people because they are the most prevalent users. Therefore, news outlets' online content, their use of social media platforms and their sharing strategies require greater vigilance as the immediacy and easy facility to share content via social media could increase the risk of copycat suicides (NUJ Guidelines, 2014). That said, Luce (2016) takes exception to the media principally being held responsible for imitative suicides when other factors could influence such acts. "It has long been thought that the media causes suicide, and while there is *some* research available to support the theory that celebrity suicides influence statistics, it has long been a bugbear of mine that the media take the blame carte blanche for causing suicide." (p.100).

References

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- **How responsible reporting/portrayal of suicide is encouraged e.g. use of guidelines, codes of practice.**

Codes of conduct/practice and media reporting guidelines are the main means by which responsible reporting/portrayal is encouraged. Both the Editors' Code of Practice, which forms part of the Independent Press Standards Organisation's (IPSO) regulatory system, and the IMPRESS Standards Code have clauses on suicide, which those publications who have signed up to their regulatory system are expected to follow. These are:

IPSO: Clause 5: When reporting suicide, to prevent simulative acts care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used, while taking into account the media's right to report legal proceedings. This is explained in greater detail in The Editors Codebook (see <https://www.editorscode.org.uk/downloads/codebook/codebook-2018.pdf>) where they discuss method, copycat suicides and reporting inquests.

IMPRESS: Clause 9: 9.1 When reporting on suicide or self-harm, publishers must not provide excessive details of the method used or speculate on the motives. They offer further guidance on Clause 9.1 to assist journalists in interpreting the clause (see Guidance on 9. Suicide at <https://impress.press/standards/impress-standards-code.html>)

Ofcom provides similar advice for broadcasters on their website, although this is not exclusively for journalists. The BBC Academy offer similar advice relating to reporting mental health and working with the bereaved. These are publicly available and useful resources for teaching journalism students.

The NUJ Code of Conduct does not have an explicit clause on suicide but its Clause 6 would be applicable here. “[A journalist] Does nothing to intrude into anybody’s private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest.”

Additionally, for more than 20 years the NUJ has produced its own guidelines offering extensive advice on a range of topics. They are publicly available on their website (<https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/mental-health-and-suicide-reporting-guidelines/>) and are easily searchable by Google. Other guidelines e.g. Samaritans and WHO are similarly available.

IPSO recently announced they will also publish regular blogs, written by Samaritans and based on detailed research, that will advise journalists on reporting suicides in public places, inquests, self-harm, young suicides and suicide clusters. Samaritans will also cover their media advisory service, which provides practical recommendations, guidelines and factsheets for journalists on areas such as working with bereaved families in the aftermath of a suicide, and reporting on rail suicides and murder-suicides.

Other organisations do similar work. For example, the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland has produced a film to help journalists report sensitively. It contains interviews with people bereaved by suicide and journalists who have reported suicide. It can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/121983892>. This type of material is also a valuable teaching aid for journalism academics.

Lecturers in higher and further education can play an important role in encouraging responsible reporting through discussions in their classes in media ethics, law and practical journalism. At the University of Strathclyde both undergraduate and postgraduate students study the NUJ guidelines specifically as well as Samaritans and WHO guidelines. Guest speakers – journalists, suicide prevention representatives and those bereaved by suicide – are also be invited to talk to the students about their experiences.

Professional publications and websites such as Press Gazette, holdthefrontpage.co.uk and journalism.co.uk regularly run articles about responsible reporting of suicide, thus disseminating messages by some of the organisations noted above to a wider audience of journalism professionals.

- **How well/widely guidelines etc. are implemented.**

Some research indicates that journalists’ awareness, use and opinion of guidelines is generally low or inconsistent, and that news articles contain several breaches of key advice. These studies tend to focus on specific countries e.g. Austria, China, (see Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Nutt et al, 2014; Chu et al, 2018). I am not aware of any similar published study of the UK. I am currently working with colleagues from Bournemouth University on research that explores journalism students’ perspectives on media reporting of suicide. Some of this work tests their awareness of advice contained in media guidelines. We are currently gathering data with a view to analysing it in the near future.

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- How is adherence to guidelines etc. monitored. What is done to identify when breaches occur and what sort of action is taken following breaches?

Because of their voluntary nature adherence to guidelines tends not to be monitored in any formal way by media organisations themselves or the NUJ. Several stakeholders do monitor media reporting of suicide and will contact news outlets to challenge their reporting and advice on better approaches, thus adopting a constructive way forward. These include Public Health Agency in NI, See Me (Scotland), Choose Life (Scotland) and Samaritans.

If one of the press regulators receives a complaint about a perceived breach of their code then they can assist the complainant and the publication to resolve the matter informally or it might be investigated by their complaints team. If the complaint is upheld the publication would be expected to publish the full ruling and possibly an apology. This is mostly a reactive process that is dependent on those at the centre of the story or interested third parties making a complaint. Regulators tend to take action themselves only in high profile cases.

- What kind of joint working goes on between organisations to promote responsible reporting/portrayal of suicide?

Please see some of the examples discussed in the section, *How responsible reporting is encouraged*. Organisations such as See Me (Scotland), Choose Life (Scotland) and Samaritans work closely with the media to promote responsible reporting by advising them on stories they are working on or by putting them in contact with media trained volunteers who have experience of suicide and are prepared to share their stories.

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3 May 2018