

Responsible and deglamourized media reporting [2015]

SCOPING QUESTION: Is responsible and deglamourized media reporting effective in reducing deaths from suicide, suicide attempts and acts of self-harm?

Background

There are a very limited number of studies in the literature which answer directly to the scoping question and demonstrate a reduction in suicide rates after the introduction of media guidelines. In order to answer the scoping question adequately as to whether there is a need to control media reports of suicide, the possible imitative effects of suicidal behaviours were also evaluated.

Population/Intervention(s)/Comparator/Outcome(s) (PICO)

Population:	national population/population in a particular area or city
Interventions:	implementation of media guidelines reporting suicide
Comparison:	suicide rates before and after the media reporting on suicide implementation of medial guidelines of suicide
Outcomes:	reduction in suicidal behaviours

Search strategy

PubMed, Medline and Scopus were searched. Using the following keywords “Media guidelines”, “Media reports”, “Imitation” and “Suicide”, the search retrieved English-language articles. All titles were screened in order to identify a subset of relevant papers. Then the abstracts were reviewed and potentially-relevant references retrieved, and reference lists scanned for further possible articles.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Review papers considering the impacts of media reports on the imitative effects of suicide and the impacts of media guidelines on reduction of suicidal behaviours were included.

Narrative description of the studies (including a study-by-study table)

Author	Title	Reference	Study Design	Description of the study	Results
Stack S (2000).	Media impacts on suicide: A quantitative review of 293 findings.	Social Science Quarterly, 81:957-71.	Quantitative review	Examining the possible impacts of media reporting of suicide on imitative suicides.	The review considered 293 findings from 42 studies which examined the impacts of media reporting of suicide on imitative suicide. The author first conducted a content analysis to categorize different study hypotheses. Then he conducted a logistic regression analysis to predict the occurrence of imitative suicide by different characteristics of the media report. The results indicated that celebrity suicide reports were 14.3 times more likely to find an imitation effect of suicide compared to suicide reports of other persons. Fictional suicide reports were 4.03 times more likely to find the imitation effect compared to non-fictional suicide media portrayals. Newspaper report-based suicide stories were a significant predictor of imitative suicide. The greater the amount of suicide media coverage, the greater the chance of finding the imitation effect. There was no age group difference on the imitative effect reported. The author argues that methodological differences among reviewed studies are strong

					predictors of differences in findings.
Pirkis J, Blood RW (2001).	Suicide and the media. Part 1: Reportage in nonfictional media.	Crisis, 22:146-154.	Review	Examining the impacts of nonfiction media reports of suicide on imitative suicidal behaviours.	<p>The paper considered a total of 42 studies which examined nonfiction media (newspapers, television and books) and its association with subsequent suicidal behaviours. The studies reviewed in the paper were either ecological studies that used a quasi-experimental study design or individual-level studies that used self-reports on attitudes towards suicide or the likelihood of suicidal behaviours using convenient samples.</p> <p>Newspapers</p> <p>Ecological studies: The paper identified that newspaper reports on suicide were associated with a significant increase in suicide rates in major cities in countries such as US, UK, Germany, Japan and Australia, but not in Canada. These studies revealed that reports on celebrity suicide of entertainers and politicians are associated with increased suicide. Furthermore, the high amount of publicity given to a reported suicide is associated with the magnitude of the increase in suicide rates. The review also showed that younger and middle-age groups appeared to be more vulnerable to the imitative effects compared to older age groups. Gender differences regarding the imitative effects were inconclusive.</p> <p>Individual–Level studies: The majority of these studies indicated that their participants were unlikely to be influenced by newspaper reports of suicide, regardless of the circumstances of the suicide. However, some of these studies indicated a Third Person Effect. This means that the participants themselves felt they would not be influenced by a news report on suicide but that others may be</p>

susceptible to the imitation effects.

Impacts of media blackouts/media guidelines

The paper considered three articles. One study examined suicide rates during a period of newspaper blackouts (268 days) in Detroit by comparing the mean suicide rates for the previous 5 years. The result showed that there was a significant reduction in suicide rates among females, particularly those younger than 35 years old. These findings were replicated in a study that examined suicide rates during a newspaper strike (149 days) in New York. In Austria (Vienna), there was a considerable decrease in subway suicides and attempts after the introduction of media guidelines to improve the quality of reports on suicide.

Television: Ecological studies

Studies examined the impact of TV news about suicide on imitative suicidal behaviours. These studies were only conducted in the United States. Most of these studies revealed that TV reports on suicide are associated with increased rates of suicide. This association appeared to be evident in all age groups. However, it is particularly stronger among teenagers and older age groups (over 64 years old).

Books: Ecological studies

Studies found that there was a significant increase in the number of suicides by asphyxiation and poisoning in US national suicide statistics after the publication of *Final Exit*.

Overall Conclusions:

The paper concluded that there was a strong association between nonfictional media reporting on suicide and imitative

					suicidal behaviours. This association appeared to be consistent, strong, coherent, specific and have a temporality relationship (media coverage of suicide comes before the actual suicide) for both the ecological and individual-level studies. The authors emphasized the importance of responsible media reports on suicide.
Pirkis J, Blood RW (2001).	Suicide and the media. Part II: Portrayal in fictional media.	Crisis, 22:155-162.	Review	Examining the impacts of fictional media reports of suicide on imitative suicidal behaviours.	<p>The paper considered a total of 34 studies which examined fictional media (film and television, music and plays) and their associations with subsequent suicidal behaviours. The majority of studies reviewed were small-scale ecological studies but a few were individual-level studies.</p> <p>A number of reviewed studies showed the association between the fictional television portrayal of suicide and subsequent suicide and suicide attempts. However, when these studies have been replicated or extended in scope, the results showed inconsistent findings. The effect may be location-specific, method-specific or age/gender-specific. In regards to the relationships between music preference and suicide risk, heavy-metal fanship was consistently associated with suicide risk but the association was less consistent for country/western music. However, these studies failed to determine whether heavy metal or country music preceded the risk of suicide or vice versa. There has only been one study that examined the impacts of a fictional play about suicide on subsequent suicidal behaviours. This study found no imitation effects of suicide.</p> <p>The review concluded that evidence to support a causal relationship between fictional media portrayals of suicide and their impact on subsequent suicidal behaviours is more equivocal than nonfictional media reports on suicide. However, the authors state the importance of further research in the</p>

					area, including the effect of the internet or the consumption of specific media genres on younger people.
Sudak HS, Sudak DM (2005).	The media and suicide.	Academic Psychiatry, 29:495-9.	Review	Examining the relationships between the media and suicide and the impacts of media guidelines on the reduction of suicide rates.	<p>The paper reviewed 6 studies and 2 review papers that examined imitation effects. They concluded that there was an increased number of suicides resulting from media reports that romanticize or dramatize suicide deaths. Celebrities, political figures and female suicides were more likely to demonstrate imitative effects on suicide than others.</p> <p>An examination of the Austrian Vienna subway paper was presented to highlight the reduction of suicide rates that resulted from media guidelines. However, the authors noted that the impacts of media guidelines on changes in suicide rates needed to be proven.</p>
Mann JJ et al (2005).	Suicide Prevention Strategies: a systematic review.	Journal of the American Medical Association, 294:2064-74.	Systematic Review	Examining evidence for effectiveness of specific suicide-preventative interventions including media guidelines on reporting suicide.	A brief review on media guidelines and suicide. The review states that inappropriate media reports which glamorize suicide or promote it as a solution of life problems can exacerbate suicide risk. Evaluations on the impacts of media guidelines on the reduction of suicide rates are limited. A study indicated that media blackouts on suicide reports have coincided with decreases in suicide rates. Another study from Austria revealed that subway suicides were reduced by 80% after the introduction of media guidelines. The review also raised concern about circulating information on suicide through the internet and its impact on suicidal behaviours.
Pirkis J et al (2006).	Media Guidelines on the Reporting of Suicide.	Crisis, 27:82-7.	Review	Evaluations of media guidelines for reporting suicide on four levels: 1) Evidence for the influence of media	1) The review presented a summary of their previous review papers and concluded that there is a causal association between nonfictional news media and suicide. However, the relationship between fictional media and suicide was less clear.

				<p>on imitative suicidal behaviours;</p> <p>2) Content of media guidelines;</p> <p>3) Process of development and implementation of media guidelines; and,</p> <p>4) Evaluation of media guidelines</p>	<p>2) The paper evaluated the contents of 9 national and international media guidelines. It concluded that the contents of all media guidelines are remarkably similar. All of them recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid sensationalizing or glamorizing suicide or giving it undue prominence; - Avoid providing specific details about suicide; - Recognizing the importance of role models by promoting accurate, responsible and ethical reporting; - Taking the opportunity to educate the public; and, - Provide help/support to vulnerable readers/viewers. <p>8 out of 9 guidelines recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Considering the aftermath of suicide. <p>3 out of 9 guidelines recommend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acknowledging that journalists are vulnerable too. <p>3) The development process of the media guidelines have differed. They can be based on a collaborative effort between journalists and suicide prevention professionals or solely based on a suicide expert's opinion. Implementations of the guidelines were mainly conducted by a mass mail-out to media outlets, except Australia where it was conducted as a face-to-face debriefing.</p> <p>4) The review only identified two studies which used a before-and-after study design. A study from Switzerland indicated that the implementation of media guidelines led to less sensational and higher quality reporting on suicide. However, this study did not examine its impact on suicide rates.</p> <p>Studies from Austria showed that the introduction of media guidelines regarding reports on Vienna subway suicides resulted in a reduction of suicide rates. The rate of subway suicide was reduced by 70% and decreased the overall suicide</p>
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					rates by 20%.
Oguro J, Kaigo M (2009)	Suicide society?: Media responsibility and suicide in Japan	Media Asia, 36(1), 16-22	Ecological study	Examining what role the media are taking in Japan's alarming suicide trend. Do television and newspaper coverage lead to the incitement of suicide in Japan? Does the way the Japanese news media report suicide contribute to the increase in suicide cases in Japan? Are the Japanese news media being irresponsible in their coverage of suicide? These are some of the questions that the authors examine through a thematic content analysis of the Asahi Newspaper	Authors found that there is no significant correlation between the numbers of news articles on suicide each year and the actual number of suicides. From the data analysis, they also confirmed that only 0.3 per cent of the total suicides is actually reported by the media. What is most noteworthy is that suicides of unemployed people who constituted over 50 per cent of all suicides in Japan are very rarely covered in the news. In contrast, suicides of elementary school and junior high school students, which only make up 0.82 per cent of all suicides in Japan, are very likely to be covered in comparison to other cases.
Yang A, Tsai S, Yang C, Shia B, Fuh J, Wang S, Peng C, Huang N (2013)	Suicide and media reporting: a longitudinal and spatial analysis	Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 48(3), 427-235	Review	This study investigated the association of suicide deaths with suicide news in longitudinal and spatial dimensions. All suicides during 2003–2010 ($n = 31,364$) were included. Suicide news	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The media reporting of suicide was synchronized with increased suicide deaths during major suicide events such as celebrity death, and slightly lagged behind the suicide deaths for 1 month in other periods without notable celebrity deaths. 2) The means of suicide reported in the media diversely

	•			in the study period was retrieved from Google News, and included all available news media in Taiwan. Empirical mode decomposition was used to identify the main intrinsic oscillation, reflecting both major and minor suicide events, and time-dependent intrinsic correlation was used to quantify the temporal correlation between suicide deaths and suicide news.	<p>affected the suicide models.</p> <p>3) Reports of charcoal burning suicide exhibited an exclusive copycat effect on actual charcoal burning deaths, whereas media reports of jumping had a wide association with various suicide models.</p> <p>4) Media reports of suicide had a higher association with suicide deaths in urban than in rural areas.</p>
Niederkrötenhaler T, Fu K, Yip P, Fong D, Stack S, Cheng Q, Pirkis J (2012)	Changes in suicide rates following media reports on celebrity suicide: a meta-analysis	Epidemiology and Community Health, 66, 1037-1042	Review	The aim of this study was to evaluate the best current evidence on the association between celebrity suicide stories and subsequent suicide.	The study found that media reports on celebrity suicide are associated with increases in suicides. Study region and celebrity type appear to have an impact on the effect size.

Methodological limitations

There is an extreme lack of research demonstrating the impacts of media guidelines on the reduction of suicide or suicide attempts. Development and implementation of media guidelines are largely based on anecdotal knowledge and are not systematically analyzed.

The majority of studies that examined the impacts of the media on imitative suicide utilized an ecological study design which suffers from ecological fallacy. Many of these studies failed to demonstrate whether media coverage of a suicide story occurred before or after the observed increase of suicide rates. Further, there is no evidence to show that those who committed suicide actually saw the stimulus (media report/portrayal of suicide). There is lack of information about media exposure, inadequately summarized media content, and how these factors influence the effect of imitative suicide.

There are very limited number of studies that evaluate how various audiences (e.g. gender, age, people who are at risk of suicide) interpret a suicide story and how this influences the imitative effect. Many studies focused on the short-term effects of the media report/portrayal of suicide but not the long-term effects.

Directness (in terms of population, outcome, intervention and comparator)

There is limited literature which can provide a direct answer to the scoping question. Only an Austrian study demonstrated the association between the media guidelines and reductions of suicide rates. However, numerous studies demonstrated that media reports/portrayals of suicide are strongly linked to imitative suicidal behaviours. In particular, media reports on suicide that romanticize or dramatize suicide deaths, celebrity suicides, and suicides given a high amount of publicity are associated with increased suicidal behaviours. All the papers noted the need for the media to report suicide in a responsible manner and emphasized the importance of further research to evaluate the effect of media guidelines.

Narrative conclusion

There is ample evidence in the literature to support that media reports/portrayals of suicide are associated with the imitative effect of suicidal behaviours. However, only an Austrian study has reported a reduction of suicide rates after the introduction of media guidelines.

References

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From evidence to recommendation

Factor	Explanation
Narrative summary of the evidence base	There is epidemiological evidence that media reports/portrayal of suicide influence imitative suicidal behaviours. Only one study demonstrated that the implementation of media guidelines was associated with a reduction of suicide rates.
Summary of the quality of evidence	Quality of evidence regarding the impacts of media on imitative suicidal behaviours is moderate and mainly based on ecological studies and a few individual-level studies. However, the observed imitation effect of suicide was consistent, particularly for the fictional media reporting of suicide. Quality of evidence to highlight the effectiveness of media guidelines on the reduction of suicidal behaviours is low and has only been found in the Austrian study. Further research is needed in this area.

Balance of benefits versus harms	Considering the empirical evidence of the imitative effect, there is potential benefit in the implementation of media guidelines for reporting suicide. No harm has been reported in the implementation of media guidelines.
Values and preferences including any variability and human rights issues	None.
Costs and resource use and any other relevant feasibility issues	Development process of the media guidelines can be based on a collaborative effort between journalists and suicide prevention experts or solely based on a suicide expert's opinion. Resources should include the WHO publication "Preventing Suicide: a resource for media professionals". Further research is needed to identify the effectiveness of media guidelines by different development and implementation processes. Implementation of responsible reporting could be by a mass mail-out to media outlets or face-to-face briefings; thus, the health sector needs to involve and seek collaboration with the media sector.
Recommendation(s) At the population level, responsible reporting of suicide (such as avoiding language which sensationalizes or normalizes suicide or presents it as a solution to a problem, avoiding pictures and explicit description of the method used, and providing information about where to seek help) is recommended for the reduction of suicidal behaviours. The health sector should assist and encourage the media to follow responsible reporting practices related to suicidal behaviour. Strength of recommendation: STRONG	