

**Suicide reporting in British newspapers:
content analysis of adherence to media guidelines by arts journalists**

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Abstract (word count 199 of max 200)

Background: A growing evidence base demonstrates that irresponsible reporting of suicide can give rise to imitative suicidal behaviour. Consequently the devolved nations of the United Kingdom are among many high-income countries that have developed media guidelines on suicide reporting. These aim to minimise possible negative influences when media professionals report suicides.

Aims: To test the hypothesis that British arts journalists do not adhere to media guidelines on suicide reporting.

Methods: Purposive sampling was used to capture current suicide reporting practice by identifying recent major UK exhibitions of artists who had died by suicide: Kirchner, Rothko, Gorky and Van Gogh. Content analysis of all UK national newspaper coverage of these exhibitions was performed to measure the articles' adherence to widely-accepted media guidelines.

Results: 67 newspaper reviews satisfied inclusion criteria, with 100% failing to show full adherence to media guidelines: 21% used inappropriate language; 37% provided explicit descriptions of the suicide; 8% employed simplistic explanations for suicide triggers; 25% romanticised the suicide; and 100% omitted information on sources of support.

Conclusion: The output of British newspaper arts journalists deviates considerably from media guidelines on suicide reporting. The findings suggest scope to improve implementation of this component of UK suicide prevention strategy.

Keywords:

suicide reporting; media guidelines; suicide prevention; content analysis;
imitative behaviour

Conflicts of interest: None

Ethical approval: Not required

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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization argues that the majority of the estimated 900,000 suicide deaths annually worldwide are preventable through community and national-level programs (1). Although the strongest evidence-based approach to suicide prevention lies in means restriction (2), there is a parallel role for the promotion of responsible reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media (3-5). This is founded on a mixed body of evidence that media portrayals of suicide can have imitative effects on suicidal behaviour and completed suicide (6;7) through a process of social modelling (8).

The media's influence on suicidal behaviour appears to be stronger in relation to newspaper reports (6), non-fictional accounts (9), dramatic or unusual circumstances (10), the volume of coverage (5), and celebrity suicides (11-16), particularly among same-gendered younger people using the same method (11;12). A quantitative review of the effects of reporting non-fictional suicides found that although the majority of suicide reports (64.2%) showed no imitative effect, reports on the suicides of entertainment and political celebrities were associated with a five-fold excess risk of imitative effects (16). This suggests a role for media guidelines, particularly in the reporting of celebrity suicides.

On the basis of this mixed evidence for the effectiveness of media guidelines (3-5;17) a number of suicide prevention strategies, including those for Australia (18), the US (19), and each UK nation (20-23), promulgate this population approach alongside

targeted interventions. The strategies promote media guidelines as a means of improving reporting, with a number of broadly similar national (24-27) and international versions (28) available. They advise on preferred language and reporting styles, applied to a wide variety of print and broadcast media.

Guideline publication is no guarantee of journalists' adherence, particularly given that many guidelines were developed without the involvement of journalists (27). Poor compliance with guidelines has been observed in US (29) and Chinese (30) newspapers, but no formal evaluations of British press compliance have yet been conducted. This is a concern given the burden of suicide amongst young men and women in many parts of the world (31), and the suggestion that young people may be particularly susceptible to the effects of irresponsible suicide reporting (6). There is a clear need to evaluate progress in implementing initiatives aimed at improving suicide reporting, and to identify areas where further work is required.

Our aim in this study was to evaluate implementation of UK suicide prevention strategy in relation to media influences, introduced since 2002 (22;23;32;33). We assessed British national newspapers' compliance with media guidelines by focussing on some of its least monitored content: articles written by arts journalists. This is an area of journalism in which the suicides of celebrities may be reported and disseminated widely, but where messages about sensitive reporting of suicide may not have penetrated beyond core news teams. Given the growth in media content, media surveillance organisations are likely to lack the resources to monitor non-news output. These factors would increase the risk of exposure to potentially harmful material. No previous studies have assessed adherence to media guidelines among arts journalists, the risk factor profile of their audience, or indeed the specific impact of their reporting of suicide on suicidal behaviour. The hypothesis tested was that British arts journalists do not adhere to media guidelines on the reporting of suicide.

METHOD

Selection criteria

Purposive sampling was used to identify recent nationwide arts media coverage of artists who had died by suicide. This targeted major UK solo exhibitions of any post-nineteenth century artist who had died by suicide. Although the deaths had occurred historically, the time period of interest was the decade prior to data collection, reflecting recent journalistic practice. These criteria identified four exhibitions:

- Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938): Royal Academy, London (28/6/03 - 21/9/03)
- Mark Rothko (1903–1970): Tate Modern, London (26/9/08 – 1/2/09)
- Arshile Gorky (c.1902-1948): Tate Modern, London (10/2/10 – 3/5/10)
- Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890): Royal Academy, London (23/1/10 - 18/4/10)

The comprehensive press-cutting archives of two major UK galleries (the Royal Academy and Tate) were hand-searched to identify all British national newspaper articles which related directly and specifically to each of the four exhibitions. Internet searches were used to check that no articles were missing from the archives. Inclusion criteria defined eligible articles as those which had been published within a year preceding or following the exhibition, and which specifically mentioned the artist's death. This sampling method identified articles located in national newspapers' Arts sections, News sections, and Features sections. All were included given the practice of arts journalists contributing to other newspaper sections.

Analysis

Content analysis, a technique well-established in the study of media messages (34) was used to analyse the full text of articles satisfying inclusion criteria. A content analysis abstraction or coding form was created, synthesising three independently-produced sets of media guidelines issued by well-established UK organisations: The MediaWise Trust (24), Samaritans (25), and the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) (26) (see **Box 1**). Each article was independently coded Yes/No by two researchers (the authors), according to whether each guideline was transgressed. This benchmark was a pragmatic choice, given the wide acceptance of these guidelines in the UK and the assumption that newspaper journalists would be familiar with at least one of them.

Qualitative content analysis was used to identify which media guidelines had been transgressed. Quantitative content analysis was used to derive frequency counts for the number of articles transgressing each media guideline.

Box 1 here

RESULTS

We identified 67 articles satisfying inclusion criteria. These had been published in 14 newspaper titles, spanning a broad political spectrum: the Financial Times, Guardian, Observer, The Independent, The Independent on Sunday, The Times, The Sunday Times, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Morning Star, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, and Sunday Express. The majority of articles (49 (73%)) were Arts reviews located in the newspapers' Arts sections, while 11 (16%) were Features (Comment, Opinion, Profile, Gardens, Diary) located in the newspapers' Features sections, and 7 (10%) were News articles (reporting a newsworthy aspect of the exhibition) located in the newspapers' News sections. Relevant citations and extracts from all articles included in the analysis are available on request from the authors.

Qualitative content analysis identified 7 media guidelines that had been breached by any of the included articles, which were assimilated into 5 codes:

- Use of inappropriate language (including the phrases “to commit suicide”; “a successful suicide”)
- Explicit descriptions of the suicidal act (including suicide method, and quotations from suicide notes)
- Providing a simplistic explanation for the triggers for suicide
- Romanticising or glorifying the suicide
- Omitting to provide sources of support for people affected by suicide

Quantitative content analysis showed that all 67 articles (100%) had breached at least one of these 5 media guidelines, with all 67 omitting to provide details of support available. Where an article transgressed a specific guideline more than once it was counted in that category only once. Inter-rater agreement was high, with a kappa value

of 0.99. The sole coding disagreement (out of 335) was referred to a third independent researcher (HL) who analysed this blinded to the codes assigned by (the authors) to achieve a simple majority consensus.

A breakdown of frequency counts by artist and guideline type is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 here

Inappropriate language

Of the 14 (21%) articles using language that had been explicitly advised against in media guidelines (such as ‘to commit suicide’ or ‘a successful suicide attempt’), 14 articles used the term ‘to commit suicide’, including one which used the phrase “before successfully committing suicide”. The majority of these articles (10 (71%)) were located in the Arts pages of those newspapers, with 2 (14%) in News sections and 2 (14%) in Features sections. Quotes are given in Box 2.

Box 2 here

Explicit content

Of the 25 (37%) articles providing explicit accounts of the artist’s suicide, 22 described the method used (88%) and 4 (16%) indicated the contents of the suicide note (including 1 article which described both). The majority (19 (76%)) of these 25 articles were located in the Arts pages of those newspapers, with 2 (8%) in News sections and 4 (16%) in Features sections. Quotes are given in Box 2.

Providing a simplistic explanation for the suicide

Qualitative content analysis identified 5 (8%) articles which provided a simplistic explanation for the suicide, by suggesting that it had occurred as a result of a single factor or trigger. Samaritans guidelines specifically warn against presenting suicide as a natural, understandable or acceptable response to a problem or situation (25;35). One article included the unchallenged suggestion that Van Gogh had chosen suicide because he feared his allowance would shortly cease. Several articles suggested that

Kirchner had killed himself because the Nazis had labelled his work ‘degenerate art’. These articles failed to explore the variety of risk factors influencing suicide risk in each artist, most notably their severe and enduring mental health problems. The majority of these articles (4 (80%)) were located in the Arts pages of those newspapers, with 1 (20%) in a Features section. Quotes are given in Box 2.

As an extension to this analysis we expanded the content analysis abstraction form to include a frequency count of articles which had described the suicide in the context of a series of psychological stressors against a background of mental illness. Such articles would appear to have adhered more proactively to the guideline encouraging journalists to avoid simplistic explanations and to acknowledge instead the complexities of suicidal behaviour (see **Box 1**). We found 22 (33%) examples of this approach, with frequencies shown in Table 2. The majority of these articles (20 (90%)) were located in the Arts sections of the newspapers, with 2 (10%) found in Features sections. Quotes are not given because it was the article as a whole that was evaluated for its consideration of contextual factors.

Romanticisation of the suicide

Qualitative content analysis identified 17 (25%) articles which had romanticised the suicide or glorified it by implying an honouring of the suicidal behaviour. Several of these implied that suicide was the ‘only way out’ for a ‘real artist’ to choose. The suicide of an artist was portrayed as having elevated them to the status of a ‘modern martyr’ or a ‘tragic and self-destructive hero’, in which ‘suicide made the myth as much as completed (the) art’. The majority of such articles (16 (94%)) were located in the Arts sections of those newspapers, with 1 (6%) in a Features sections. Quotes are provided in Box 2.

Omitting to provide sources of support

No articles provided information on sources of support for readers affected by the issue of suicide. On this basis every one of the 67 (100%) articles had breached media guidelines on reporting suicide.

Triangulation

We triangulated our findings by mapping a less stringent set of guidelines onto our data to study it from a different viewpoint. This approach was taken to provide a more balanced picture and to acknowledge different social realities, namely that one constructed by researchers may differ from one constructed by journalists or their readership. Adherence to media guidelines was re-explored by excluding the expectation that information on sources of support should be provided. As the frequency counts in Table 1 show, the majority (45 (67%)) of articles had transgressed any of the guidelines other than omitting to provide sources of support. Table 2 also illustrates a reframing of the study's findings, showing that overall a minority (7 (10%)) of articles acknowledged the complexity of suicidal behaviour whilst also demonstrating no media guideline transgression (apart from omitting information on sources of support).

Table 2 here

Coding validation

The coding framework was validated through successive presentation of results at academic seminars: two departmental seminars (one conducted jointly with Samaritans) in UK university departments of psychiatry, a local NHS mental health trust academic seminar, and the annual international congress of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Feedback from these meetings indicated that media guidelines may be considered as less relevant to arts journalists because historical accounts of an artist's suicide may have less influence on suicidal behaviour than contemporaneous reports. Seminar participants also suggested that culturally an artist's suicide may be regarded as less newsworthy (and implicitly more acceptable) than the suicide of celebrities such as sports professionals, because of beliefs about mental health difficulties feeding artistic creativity. Having acknowledged personal and theoretical reflexivity, the original coding was retained on the basis that: a) there is no research evidence to support the above theories; b) arts journalists also cover recently-deceased individuals; c) media guidelines are intended for all branches of the media; d) disagreements would invite further discourse.

DISCUSSION

This analysis of British newspaper articles has shown poor compliance with media guidelines on the reporting of suicide among arts journalists. Given existing evidence of the harmful effects of irresponsible reporting on suicidal behaviour (6-12), these results suggest that many British arts journalists may expose their readers to potentially harmful influences on attitudes to suicidality. Comparison with other findings is hampered because similar studies have not focussed solely on arts journalists. A US study found that 56% of newspaper reports provided details of suicide method (29) compared to the 28% in this UK study. A Chinese study found that 4-14% of newspaper articles provided information on sources of help for people affected by suicidal thoughts (30), compared to the finding of 0% in this UK study. This suggests that news journalists in those settings have a greater awareness of media guidelines than British arts journalists.

Strengths

The strengths of this study are that it investigated the implementation of a central component of UK suicide prevention strategy, using a systematic approach to test a specific research question. The sampling method went beyond the traditional focus on news reports, investigating media content not usually scrutinised in this way. By identifying artists whose exhibitions had generated a high level of media interest this study has relevance to the hypothetically large numbers of people exposed to these styles of reporting suicide. Reliability, face validity and external validity were enhanced by using the benchmark of clear guidelines issued by three independent organisations. As these guidelines and the press archive are publicly available the analysis is replicable, permitting further tests of inter-rater reliability.

Weaknesses

This analysis was based on the assumption that all British journalists would be familiar with at least one of these sets of widely-accepted guidelines. Demonstration of poor compliance is not proof of poor awareness, and it was not possible to identify

whether journalists had chosen not to follow guidelines. The mode of analysis focussed on the content of media reports but did not directly collect data upstream or downstream of the communication content (34;36). Upstream variables describe antecedent conditions such as journalists' individual psychological variables or professional characteristics, and the wider social, cultural, historical, political, or economic context. Downstream effects describe the effects of communication such as circulation rates and exposure; characteristics of those exposed; and suicide rates, self-harm rates and individuals' attitudes to suicide before and after exposure. A more detailed analysis would be able to determine whether those with the outcome of interest had actually been exposed to the media content (8). Although this study did not collect data on these upstream and downstream effects, a focus on the actual content of media reports was in keeping with the aims of current suicide prevention policy (20).

Although the sample size was small ($n=67$) the circulation of these newspapers at the time of publication ranged from 2,100,000 (Daily Mail) to 25,000 (Morning Star). Despite the absence of downstream data enumerating the arts pages' readership or the risk factor profile for this audience, there existed a theoretical potential to influence large numbers of people. The articles included in this analysis reported deaths occurring up to a century ago, whilst the majority of research on media effects has focussed on contemporaneous deaths. We chose to analyse current coverage of old suicides because it is difficult to predict which types of celebrity suicides will have greatest resonance among those at risk of imitative suicide. While Wasserman's 1984 study found a fall in suicides (observed minus expected) in the month after the death of Mark Rothko, the mythology that has grown around his death in subsequent decades may now contain strong personal significance to groups at risk of suicidality (see Box 2).

The reductionist approach of content analysis, and its reliance on numbers, may be inappropriate for capturing nuances of meaning within articles of this kind. The use of clear and established guidelines was intended to increase inter-rater reliability by increasing the likelihood of similar interpretations. However although the deductive analysis was theory-driven, an interpretive element was involved in coding texts, subject to inter-rater agreement. Our kappa value was high in comparison to similar

studies (37), but there remains the possibility that other researchers might make different inferences. This applies particularly to guidelines involving more subjective judgements of the language, tone and structure used throughout each article in the context of the artist's full biographical information. Individual appraisal of whether a suicide has been romanticised or sensationalised is particularly subjective (37). Finally, despite best efforts, incomplete archiving may have led to some articles having been overlooked.

Policy implications

This study's demonstration of low adherence to media guidelines among arts journalists indicates inadequate implementation of UK suicide prevention strategy relating to media reporting within this field of journalism. It suggests a need to identify evidence-based means of improving arts journalists' awareness of media guidelines and their motivation to follow them. Further work is needed to investigate whether low adherence also applies to newspaper journalists covering other fields, such as news, sports, business, and obituaries, as well as other media channels. Sports journalists are of particular interest given evidence of an association between extensive reporting of suicide in sports professionals and suicide rates (38;39).

In relation to news reports, evidence from Switzerland suggests that establishing good relationships with newspaper editors may be most influential in improving the quality of reporting (40). In Australia, Belgium and Denmark the use of media awards to encourage responsible reporting of suicide shows promise as a means of peer-to-peer education (41). Substantial international variability in the involvement of media professionals in the development and implementation of media guidelines (27) may be a factor in differential adherence. Indeed New Zealand journalists have expressed resentment of what they perceive as excessive restrictions on their freedom of speech, and scepticism about the damaging effects of suicide reporting (42). These barriers to compliance suggest that both a strengthening of the observational evidence base and improved communication of this evidence may be powerful educational tools. In summary, this evidence suggests that reactive and punitive approaches, such as enforcing regulatory agencies' relatively weak penalties for breaching guidelines, are unlikely to be as effective as proactive and collaborative approaches.

Although UK suicide prevention strategies draw attention to media guidelines and promote active engagement with the media, they provide little practical guidance on how to achieve the latter. Previous consultation work in the UK has suggested a need for more succinct media guidelines (endorsed by high-profile figures or organisations), inclusion of suicide coverage in journalists' vocational training, and access to media advisory services (43). However this primarily reflects the views of news journalists, and the current study suggests a need to identify collaborative and educational approaches appropriate to other fields of British journalism. Such educational approaches should not neglect medical academics and medical journalists, given the many examples of guideline transgressions also found in the academic and medical press (see **Box 3**).

Box 3 here

Future research

The results of this analysis suggest a need for further international work in three areas:

- measurement of media guideline awareness among reporters in each journalistic field, and their perceptions of whether guidelines are applicable to their own specialism;
- observational studies measuring the impact of suicide reporting by different journalistic fields and media;
- interventional studies to identify effective means of encouraging journalists in a range of fields to report suicide responsibly.

This body of evidence would improve the evidence base for recommendations within UK suicide prevention policy in relation to media influences on suicide.

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