

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

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Boxes and tables (in order of appearance in the text)

Box 1: Coding framework

Synthesis of media guidelines produced by Samaritans, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), and The MediaWise Trust (source in parentheses)

Guidelines in bold were those identified for inclusion in the study's coding framework. (*could not be analysed using this method)

- **Avoid sensational headlines, images, and language** (MediaWise; Samaritans)
- **Avoid language such as “to commit suicide” or “a successful suicide attempt”, in favour of alternatives such as “to die by suicide” and “a completed suicide”** (Samaritans)
- **Avoid excessive detail about the method used** (MediaWise; Samaritans; PCC)
- **Avoid disclosing the contents of a suicide note** (Samaritans)
- Avoid speculation, misinformation, censorship or reporting of rumours (MediaWise; Samaritans)
- **Avoid the simplistic suggestion that suicide occurs as a result of a single factor or trigger, and instead acknowledge the complexities of suicidal behaviour** (MediaWise; Samaritans).
- Avoid implying a connection between 2 or more suicides (Samaritans)
- **Avoid sensationalising or romanticising suicide, including the suggestion that mourners might honour the suicidal behaviour** (Samaritans; MediaWise)
- Challenge 'myths' about suicide which can also be thought of as misleading

implications (MediaWise; Samaritans). For example:

- 'those who threaten suicide are unlikely to do it'
- 'if someone wants to kill themselves, nothing will stop them'
- 'people who threaten suicide are just seeking attention and shouldn't be taken seriously'
- 'people who are suicidal want to die'
- 'you have to be mentally ill to think about suicide'
- suggesting that the suicide resolved a particular problem
- Discourage the use of permanent memorials or identifying suicide hotspots (Samaritans)
- **Provide information about where people can access help and advice if the issues affect them** (MediaWise; Samaritans)
- Consider the feelings of interviewees who have been bereaved (PCC; Samaritans)*
- Provide support for journalistic colleagues involved in reporting suicide (MediaWise; Samaritans)*

Table 1 - Table showing frequency of articles transgressing media guidelines

Artist	Kirchner	Rothko	Gorky	Van Gogh	Total
Total number of articles included	15	16	10	26	67
Inappropriate language	2	6	1	5	14 (21%)
Explicit detail	0	7	5	13	25 (37%)
Simplistic explanation for suicide	4	0	0	1	5 (8%)
Romanticisation of the suicide	5	6	0	6	17 (25%)
Omission of sources of support	15	16	10	26	67 (100%)
Transgressed any of the 5 relevant guidelines	15	16	10	26	67 (100%)
Transgressed any guidelines <u>apart from</u> omission of sources of support	11	12	5	17	45 (67%)

Box 2: Examples of extracts from articles breaching media guidelines

Examples of articles using inappropriate language (language transgressions in bold)

Gorky:

“after trying to hang himself from various trees, (Gorky) **successfully committed suicide** in 1948” Waldemar Januszczak 14 February 2010 A slow meander with a modern master *The Sunday Times*

Vincent Van Gogh:

“(Van Gogh) went mad, cut off his ear and **committed suicide**.... Van Gogh, of course, **committed suicide** a year after being hounded out of Arles” Waldemar Januszczak 24 January 2010 Louder than words *The Sunday Times*

Examples of articles containing explicit content

Mark Rothko:

“He had swallowed a massive dose of barbiturates, apparently, and slicing deep into his inner arm at the elbow had taken his own life”. Rachel Campbell-Johnston 24 September 2008 Doorways into the darkness *The Times*

Arshile Gorky:

“Gorky’s body was found a week later, hanging in a shed near the house. On a beam he had written “Goodbye my loveds””. Mark Hudson 10 January 2010 Armenian Rhapsodies *The Sunday Times*

Examples of articles providing simplistic explanations of suicide

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner:

“Kirchner shot himself in 1938 when he was included in the Nazi’s infamous touring show of “degenerate art”. Having helped reinvent German art alongside other expressionist stars ... he was devastated that he was being disowned, and destroyed the work in his studio before turning his gun on himself”. Fiachra Gibbons 25 June 2003 Genius recognised: RA showcases art of Nazi victim Kirchner *Guardian*

Vincent Van Gogh:

“There is... the remarkable still life that, new research by the author Martin Bailey suggests, may bear the reason for Van Gogh’s suicide. ... Bailey argues that the letter in the painting contained news of (his brother’s) engagement and perhaps led to Vincent’s panic that his allowance would no longer be forthcoming. It’s one theory”.

Rachel Campbell-Johnston 19 January 2010 Lending an ear to Vincent *The Times*

Examples of articles that romanticised the suicide**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**

“Kirchner lived the sort of life we secretly believe a real expressionist should live. Early success in Dresden was followed by the neglect of critics and patrons after his move to Berlin in 1911. A long exile in Switzerland ended with his suicide at the age of 58 in 1938.” Richard Dormant 9 July 2003 Expressions of pleasure. *Daily Telegraph*

Mark Rothko:

“Rothko’s problem...is the dark myth that he allowed to emerge around him while he was alive... This...story line presents him as the Melancholy Martyr of Modernism. His suicide topped it all off splendidly.” Waldemar Januszczak 28 September 2008

Mark Rothko in a whole new light *The Sunday Times*

Table 2 Table showing frequency of articles adhering to media guidelines

Artist	Kirchner	Rothko	Gorky	Van Gogh	Total
Total number of articles included	15	16	10	26	67
Number of articles showing no transgression of media guidelines <u>apart from</u> omission of information on sources of help	4	4	5	9	22 (33%)
Number of articles considering multiple stressors prior to suicide	9	3	5	5	22 (33%)
Number of articles which considered multiple stressors and did not transgress any media guidelines <u>apart from</u> omission of information on sources of support	3	0	2	2	7 (10%)

Box 3: Examples of articles in the medical academic press that transgress media guidelines on the reporting of suicide

Examples of articles using inappropriate language (language transgressions in bold)

- “In this group, 258 men and 125 women later successfully **committed suicide**”
Runeson B, Tidemalm D, Dahlin M, Lichtenstein P, Langstrom N. Method of attempted suicide as predictor of subsequent successful suicide: national long term cohort study. *BMJ* 2010 341:c3222
- “A quarter page photograph showed the prone corpse of a 35 year old woman who had **committed suicide.**” Parry J. Can media depictions of suicide influence copycat acts? *BMJ* 2010 341:705

Examples of articles containing explicit content

- “(Rothko) killed himself in his studio by severing both brachial arteries with a razor blade” Buckley PJ. Mark Rothko, 1903-1970. *Am J Psychiatry* 2010 167(11):1304
- “Rothko’s body was found on the floor of his studio the morning after his overdose, having also severed his brachial arteries” Pitman A. Mark Rothko (1903-1970) - Psychiatry in Pictures. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 2008 193(6):484