

Article

Media influence to suicide: The search for solutions

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Abstract. This review explores the influence to suicide in print and electronic media, and considers both real and fictional deaths. The conclusion appears inescapable that reports about celebrities which are multi-modal, repeated, explicit, front page, glorify the suicide, and describe the method lead to an increase in deaths from suicide, particularly in the region in which reports are published. The paper argues that even if there was multi-national agreement to international guidelines, media will continue to report suicide when it is considered to be “a matter of public interest”. What appears crucial is a collaborative approach between professionals and the media to promote a negative attitude toward suicide without increasing stigma toward those with mental health problems.

Key words: attitude, guidelines, influence, imitation, media, suicide

Introduction

The 19th International Association for Suicide Prevention Conference: “Suicide Prevention – The Global Context” was held in Adelaide, South Australia, from 23rd to the 27th March 1997. As part of the preparation for the conference, the local organising committee prepared a set of reporting guidelines for attachment to media releases. While the consensus was that the reporting of scientific papers was unlikely to lead to influence, the guidelines (reflecting others worldwide) warned against front page or sensational reports, personal stories, those with suicide in the title, photographs of suicides or in depth discussion of method of suicide. With very few exceptions the committee were delighted with the quality of the nearly 150 multiple media ‘hits’ generated by discussion at the conference. With some confidence, the committee agreed that a complex and sensitive issue had been handled successfully.

To general dismay, on the 27th March fragmented television news reports discussed the 39 deaths of the Heaven’s Gate cult. Over the next few days newspapers, television news reports, and magazines focused on the story with morbid fascination (Gleick et al., 1997; Lusetich, 1997; Miller, 1997a,b),

breaking all available media guidelines on the reporting of suicide. Results in terms of a possible increase in suicide deaths from either of these episodes will not be known for some time, but the stark contrast in approach demonstrates the gulf which exists between professional opinion about the impact of such reports and the media's insistence on the public's right to know.

Influence from print media

Newspaper stories about suicides may lead to imitation. A key study of what has become known as the "Werther effect" (Phillips, 1974), examined monthly US suicide data from 1948 through 1968 comparing it with suicide stories from page 1 of the *New York Times*. He showed that monthly suicides increased significantly after 26 of 33 stories, but did not show an increase in the month prior. Suicide increases were correlated with the number of reports and the geographic area in which reports occurred, and did not appear to be influenced by seasons or trends, misclassification, bereavement, prior conditions or precipitation of suicide which might have occurred anyway (Phillips, 1974, 1989; Phillips et al., 1992). A suggestion in an extension of the study (Wasserman, 1984) that suicides only increased after celebrity suicide was refuted by Stack (1987, 1990) although further work (Stack, 1992) showed that celebrity suicides might influence rates under certain circumstances (possibly the "receptiveness" of the community) – for instance, suicides of politicians in a context of unemployment during the Great Depression.

Phillips's careful work seems to add substance to a previous study by Motto (1970) on newspaper strikes, even though other work (Blumenthal & Bergner, 1973) and an earlier paper by Motto (1967) do not support the significant reduction in young female suicide during the 268 day Detroit strike.

One issue of importance is whether suicide stories are carried on the front page. Phillips's work was confined to this, and other studies using similar methodology seem to confirm the finding (Ganzeboom & de Haan, 1982; Ishii, 1991; Kopping et al., 1989; Yoshida et al., 1991). In contrast, Phillips et al. (1992) argue that studies not restricting reports to front page news (e.g., Barraclough et al., 1977; Littman, 1985) dilute the impact, and this may account for their apparent inability to show an effect.

Extending this argument, Phillips concludes from his studies that imitation is more likely when the suicide is not only front page, but in large headlines (particularly with the word "suicide" prominent), heavily publicized, a lengthy report, contains pictures, and/or concerns political or entertainment celebrities. This suggests a "dose-response relationship" (Phillips et al.,

1992). An elegant development from this has recently led to an empirical scoring system (Hassan, 1995) which demonstrated a significant increase in male suicide in the three days following newspaper reports from 1981 through 1990 in Australia.

Less direct influence may come from media publicity which “models” suicide, creating “natural advertisements for suicide” (Phillips et al., 1992). This may lead to imitation of method (Goldney, 1986), and be part of the concept of “normalising” suicide (Goldney, 1989).

If the arguments presented are true then it should be possible to reduce suicides resulting from imitation by reducing newspaper reports. Recent work by Sonneck et al. (1994) confirms this. They demonstrated that subway (but not other methods of) suicide in Vienna was significantly reduced from 1987 by persuading the two largest circulation newspapers to curtail their reporting of subway suicide. This points the way to suicide prevention through change in policy, even if the imitation effect is estimated to be only 3–5% higher than the expected suicide rate (Maris, 1989).

It is of interest that very little work relates print media reports specifically to young people under the age of 25, yet it is suicides from this group who currently receive the most media focus and are most likely to be influenced. Luckily, it appears (at least anecdotally) that very few young people read newspapers, even if they do read magazines. There is clearly a place for research which takes the ideas originated by Phillips (1974) and actioned by Sonneck et al. (1994) and applies them to the print media most likely to be accessed by young people.

Influence from electronic media

There is a world wide explosion in the ownership and usage of televisions. Australians, like Americans and Canadians, are heavy consumers, and the violence content in programs from these countries is comparable (McCann & Sheehan, 1985). Young people, in particular, watch several hours of daily television, and there is evidence that attitudes and behaviors may be influenced by what they watch (Rubenstein, 1982; Tonge, 1990; Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, 1979). Although non-specific exposure to television may not be a risk factor for suicide (Centerwall, 1990; Lester, 1994), college students have been shown to have significant changes in attitudes to suicide, as well as emotional arousal, following films about suicide (Biblarz et al., 1991), even though other work on the impact of plays was unable to show significant change in suicide potential or level of depression (Jackson & Potkay, 1974). Possible impacts may be divided into those leading to suicide and those

leading to other suicidal behaviors. Equally, it is important to consider both news reporting of real events and the impact from fictional stories.

The impact of news reporting

Evidence for similar imitation effects from suicide reported through television is also clear. Bollen and Phillips (1982) examined daily figures for suicide and, using time-series regression analysis, found that suicides increased up to 10 days after television news reports about suicide for 1972–76. Despite criticisms about methodology (Baron & Reiss, 1985a,b) effects appear to remain significant after correcting for day of the week, holidays, seasons and unequal variability (Phillips & Bollen, 1985). Multiprogram, multichannel and highly publicized stories appear to have the greatest impact and are more likely to affect youth, not necessarily only those predisposed (Phillips & Carstensen, 1986, 1988).

In contrast, Horton and Stack (1984) completed a time-series analysis of the monthly suicide rate for 1972–1980 correlated to national television news time (in seconds) allotted to suicide stories during the same period. They were unable to show a relationship between news coverage and suicide although a strong association existed with unemployment and a secondary springtime influence. They claim their results do not support an imitation model of suicide, but rather an economic one.

Kessler et al. (1988) were able to replicate the work by Phillips and Carstensen (1986), for the years 1973–1979, but noted a decreased number of teenage suicides after newscasts for years 1980–1984, even though an overall significant increase was noted following celebrity suicide for the total years 1973–1984. Clark (1989) criticized this study for inadvertently diluting the overall sample with non-celebrity cases and feature stories. Phillips et al. (1992) also criticized the study, and a later reworking (Kessler et al., 1989), on methodological grounds and for not restricting attention to multi-program stories. This criticism might also be applied to the Horton and Stack (1984) work which dealt with *all* reports of suicide, not just those of celebrities or those reports repeated in multiple broadcasts. Phillips et al. (1992) argue that repetition may be a key factor in “advertising” suicide as it is in other advertising which influences.

The impact from fictional stories

Evidence of influence after fictional stories on television is not as clear. Holding (1974, 1975) demonstrated an increased access to suicide prevention services following a 10-week fictional series about suicide support (*The*

Befrienders), but failed to show significant changes in attempted suicide, or suicides, during the series or in the four weeks after. Equally unclear (Platt, 1987) are reports regarding increased suicides following a much-publicized British television fictional suicide attempt (Angie from *East Enders*) (Daniels, 1986; Ellis & Walsh, 1986; Fowler, 1986; Sandler et al., 1986). A significant increase in overdoses in those attending the 63 hospitals studied by Platt was recorded but he argues that the mean age of the attempters is much older than the character and that imitation may be a spurious issue in the study. Simkin et al. (1995) were also unable to find an imitative effect following a two part drama about paracetamol self-poisoning, and note that the method of study is crucial to the conclusion.

Phillips (1982) examined data provided by the National Center for Health Statistics for 1977 and was able to show that suicides, motor vehicle deaths, and non-fatal accidents all rose in the week immediately following soap opera suicide stories, and that the increases were statistically significant, persisting after correcting for the presence of non-fictional suicide stories, linear trends, seasonal fluctuations, and day-of-the-week fluctuations in the data. Kessler and Stipp (1984) re-examined this data, noting that Phillips' information about programming was incorrect in 8 of the 13 episodes of soap opera considered; they were unable to confirm an association between fictional suicide and imitation.

Ostroff et al. (1985) and Ostroff and Boyd (1987) were able to show a significant increase in young people admitted to a Connecticut hospital with suicidal behavior after four fictional telemovies were shown over 5 months. The work was extended by Gould and Shaffer (1986), who were able to confirm a significant increase in attempted and completed suicide after at least three of the telemovies, despite variability between geographic areas (Gould et al., 1988; Phillips & Paight, 1987). Berman (1988) was unable to replicate the Gould and Shaffer (1986) study except to show an association with suicidal method following one movie.

Strong evidence for the Werther effect (Phillips, 1974, 1985) is reported by Schmidtke and Häfner (1988) who showed a significant increase in young male suicides after a six episode series about a 19-year-old student who jumps in front of a train. The increases occurred after both the 1981 and 1982 screenings of the series and corresponded to the respective audience figures for the age group. The study suggests that there was not just an increase of the train jumping method over others, but additional suicides. One notable feature of the televised series was that a fragment of the suicide was shown during each episode, thus fulfilling Phillips et al. (1992) criterion of multiprogram "dose-response" influence.

Influence to attempt suicide

Fewer studies consider influences on attempted suicide, and this may be because the data are much more difficult to collect and complex to interpret. Studies of completed suicide predominantly use Bureau of Statistics or coroners' (medical examiners') data regarding patterns of deaths. Even taking into account arguments about what constitutes a suicide, these data are more likely to be complete. In contrast, there are likely to be many more attempters than those who attend hospital emergency departments or are admitted because of the seriousness of the attempt (Coombs et al., 1992; Diekstra & van-Egmond, 1989; Hawton et al., 1994), and the data are difficult to interpret (Meehan et al., 1992). Only a small percentage of young attempters may seek medical help after attempts (Pearce & Martin, 1993; Smith & Crawford, 1986). As a result it is difficult to determine the overall effect of heavily publicized stories which could lead to immediate increased community sub-lethal suicidal behavior with an impact on the completed suicide rate at some later date.

Range et al. (1988) and Steede and Range (1989) examined responses of normal young people to videotaped vignettes about suicidal behavior and demonstrated what they called "behavioral contagion". However the work has been criticised because no attempt was made to define prior vulnerability (Halasz, 1988; Stack, 1993), and the "dose" (Phillips et al., 1992) was small and implicit. Despite the criticisms, this method of studying influence may be of importance, given that since about 1988, access to hired commercial videotapes about suicide (for instance *Night Mother*, *Heathers* or *The Doors*) has burgeoned. Vulnerable young people have the opportunity to replay sequences of interest over and over, thus increasing the possible "dose-response relationship". We know very little about the impact of the videotape industry on attitudes to suicide, or suicidal behaviors.

Our own work (Martin, 1996) has shown that, although they watched more TV, particularly videos, high school students reporting frequent exposure to television suicide were different; they had higher risk-taking, substance use, and depression scores, and were less upset by what they see. Furthermore, they reported more suicide attempts. Regression analysis suggested frequent exposure to television suicide made a small independent (1.3%) contribution to deliberate self-harm, but not to suicidal thinking or to depression scores. However, knowledge of an actual suicide appeared to be an intervening variable.

Influence from music

Distressed parents of suicides in recent years have accused heavy metal music groups of influencing their adolescent's death; Judas Priest (Litman & Farberow, 1994) and Ozzie Osbourne have both been unsuccessfully sued by parents because their music was being played while adolescents died. The media and lay press have made much of such associations. However, despite the immense amounts of money and time invested by young people in pop and rock music and the reported relevance of some of the lyrics in the music (Mark, 1986; Mendelson, 1989; Wass et al., 1988, 1991), little empirical work has investigated the possible links between music preference, potentially influential lyrics and adolescent suicide.

King (1988) and Weidinger and Demi (1991) suggest that significantly higher percentages of disturbed or drug abusing youngsters prefer heavy metal music. Our own work on high school students (Martin et al., 1993) demonstrated associations between rock/heavy metal music and depression, delinquency, risk taking and drug taking behaviors, suicidal thinking and deliberate self-harm. There were also associations with parental status and lack of closeness in the family. The group of young women claiming to prefer heavy metal appeared to have the highest level of disturbance. Of note, the majority of young people claimed to feel happier having listened to the music, but 11% felt sadder. It was this latter group who appeared most vulnerable to acting out the lyrics or themes from the music.

Recent work by Stack et al. (1994) seems to confirm this association. They studied data on heavy metal magazine subscriptions and youth suicide in all 50 states of the US, concluding that, controlling for other predictors of suicide, the greater the strength of the metal subculture, the higher the youth suicide rate. The model proposed explained 51% of the variance in youth suicide.

Previous work suggested country music might also be implicated. Stack and Gundlach (1992) showed that the greater the airtime devoted to country music, the greater the white suicide rate in the 49 US cities studied. The effect was independent of divorce, southern region, poverty, and gun availability. It was postulated that the existence of a country music subculture might reinforce the link between country music and suicide, a view not shared by all (Mauk et al., 1994). A later replication (Maguire & Snipes, 1994) failed to show as large an effect, but Stack and Gundlach (1994) have criticised this work for methodological flaws.

Overall, the quantity of work completed in this area is not large, and the studies do not present evidence as strong as that for newspaper or television reports, yet there is support for the conclusion that certain types of music are associated with suicidal behaviors. There is a clear need for high quality

studies to examine issues to do with particular lyrics, and the “dose response” relationship (Phillips et al., 1992).

One issue which needs further exploration at this point relates to music celebrities who suicide. Given the level of publicity which accompanies such deaths, its repetition in a range of media, and the passion with which young people identify with their icons, an increase in suicides might be predicted in young people, particularly in the area local to the origin of the celebrity, or in the locale of reports. Jobes et al. (1996) studied the impact in the Seattle area after the death of Kurt Cobain, lead singer for grunge metal band *Nirvana*. They concluded that although calls to crisis hotlines increased over several days, and one suicide was clearly linked in time to the announcement of the suicide, there was no overall increase in suicides. Another study (Martin, 1997) compared all deaths in the 15–24 age range in Australia for the month after Cobain’s suicide with the previous five years, demonstrating a substantial fall in suicides (24% from the previous year, a return to the 1990 rate) and no evidence of a rise in the method used by Cobain. The explanations for this unexpected result include the possibility that young people may be more likely in recent years to react aversively to reported suicides (recalling Kessler et al., 1988), that the nature of the death and its reporting may have put young people off, or that the way the death was handled by Courtney Love, Cobain’s widow and mother to his child, may have assisted a negative response to the suicide.

Influence from the internet

There has been a vast surge in public usage of the internet over the past five years, and an increasing number of web sites address issues to do with suicide. A search using “Yahoo” revealed 219 web sites which contained the word “suicide”, but varied from “Dance to the sound of a suicide” (an introduction to being a “gothic”) through commentary on the mass suicide in San Diego, to a site full of frequently asked questions (FAQ’s) about suicide (facts taken from the US National Institute for Mental Health) and finally to a site claiming 45 personally tested reasons to say “no” to suicide. Despite this, a broad based electronic literature search did not produce any scientific articles connecting internet access or specific sites with suicidal behaviors. Yet press coverage of the “Heaven’s Gate” cult mass suicide is suggestive of their site (<http://www.heavensgate.com>) being an entry point to the cult and positive attitudes toward suicide, and “. . . must qualify as the most elaborate suicide note in history” (Quittner, 1997, p. 31).

Several papers at the 1997 IASP conference addressed concerns about free access to the internet, and the possibility that young people in particular

(who make up more than 35% of the regular users of the world wide web) might seek out information about suicide methods should they be suicidal. One plenary address presented *Reachout* (a site under construction) which seeks to provide a partial solution to this problem through information about risk factors and warning signs to look for, geographical mapping of support agencies in Australia, and mental health promotion. Differential access is provided for professionals, parents and carers, and young people. Despite these early attempts to give scientific consideration to issues to do with the internet, or attempts to apply carefully the best available knowledge to preventive sites, there is a need for serious study of the impact of the available sites before we can pass sensible judgment.

Discussion

Durkheim (1951) postulated that imitation is not involved in the act of suicide, and instead that suicide is an individual response separate from social group or subgroup manifestation. The evidence presented above challenges this view. David Phillips's careful work over many years (see Phillips et al., 1992) considering newspapers, news on television and the impact of fictional stories provides a scientific basis for the belief that excessive media reporting of suicide leads to an increase in suicide. This work is substantially supported by that of many others. While there are studies which have been unable to replicate some aspects of the work, criticisms of some of the early methodology, and concern that the conclusions, once drawn, lead to an inevitable battle between researchers and the media, the work stands up to careful scrutiny. Further, the research on the influence of fictional stories about suicide on television from Schmidtke and Häfner (1988), from Hassan (1995) confirming the impact of newspaper reports of suicide, and from Sonneck et al. (1994) regarding the impact of policy change provides the strongest supporting evidence.

We must now accept that reports that are "front page", repeated and/or multi-channel, have suicide prominent in the report or in the title, glorify suicide in some way, are accompanied by photographs, discuss in detail the method of suicide and, in particular, concern celebrities, will influence others to suicide. The concept of "dose-response" (Phillips et al., 1992) seems to be confirmed by both Schmidtke and Häfner (1988) and Hassan (1995).

What follows logically is that the media in all its forms must accept these conclusions, must put in place a set of clear rules for the reporting of suicide, and must monitor adherence to the rules, enforcing them in some way if necessary. If this does not occur then the media collectively must accept

some responsibility for the ongoing number of unnecessary suicides across the world.

Guidelines for media reporting of suicide do exist. The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, the Japanese Association for Suicide Prevention (Takahashi, 1995, 1996), and other national associations have guidelines. In Australia, an attempt has been made to gain agreement with the media over constraints; in general, as the report of a major 1996 national seminar appears to show, the media continue to believe that suicide is rarely reported, that satisfactory guidelines exist and that there is no place for enforcement (Herman, 1996). This is clearly not the case when so much front page space in Australian newspapers can be given over to the San Diego deaths. The Australian Government has now funded the development (jointly by Suicide Prevention Australia and the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention) of formal guidelines for media reporting of suicide. These are likely to reflect the international consensus, but will need national agreement if they are to lead to any impact.

Rather than be proscriptive with the media, an alternative strategy seems to emerge from the work of Kessler et al. (1988). Overall, they confirm the impact of celebrity suicide, but there is a suggestion that the response of young people for the study years 1980–1984 was different. The implication is that their attitude may have changed, or perhaps that young people are not so easily persuaded in the electronic age. The question raised appears to be whether it is possible to work *with* the media, providing information about suicidal behavior which does not influence toward suicide, but rather promotes the decision away from suicide.

Further, the possibility that attitudes might be influenced toward a positive result is suggested by the work of Jobes et al. (1996) and Martin (1997). In both, the expected rise in suicide after a celebrity suicide did not occur, yet the media reporting fulfils most, if not all, of the criteria for there to have been considerable influence. It could be that the group most likely to have responded with imitation had already developed some form of resistance (a reduced form of the “receptivity” described by Stack, 1992), but there is no scientific work to support this notion. One major difference appears to be the attitude actively promoted by Cobain’s widow Courtney Love, by his family and subsequently by the media. Immediately following the death Love made an audiotape containing excerpts from a note left by Cobain; she commented in a negative fashion on each part (Gaines, 1994, p. 107). For instance; “I don’t have the passion anymore, so remember – (*And don’t, because this is a f . . . ing lie*) – It’s better to burn out than fade away (*God, you asshole.*)” (Sandford, 1995, p. 244).

Could attitudes be the key to whether suicides become influential or not? As Farberow (1989) notes:

A major problem in the field has been the efforts to exert a selective influence on the taboos, one that would lessen the degree to which the taboo interfered with the expressing and the receiving of the cry for help, and at the same time supported the portion of the taboo which emphasized the value of life (p. 281).

In other words, how can the act of suicide be destigmatized, without normalizing it (Goldney, 1989) as just one option for solving life's problems? Schmidtke and Häfner (1989) quote evidence to suggest that more lenient attitudes may be responsible for changes in the suicide rate. Platt (1989) makes the same point. It would appear possible to resolve the Farberow (1989) "major problem", at least in part, by developing a two pronged attack on media reporting – through appropriate limitations, and through collaborating with media to change public attitudes toward suicide.

First, it is crucial that the media internationally accept constraints on the reporting of suicide, based on the substantial evidence presented. Important aspects of this acceptance concern the training of new reporters, the monitoring of infringements against the guidelines and constraints (perhaps most of all in magazines, newspapers and television programs where editorial vigilance is likely to be less stringent), and perhaps with a special focus on reports which are most likely to reach males in our society. Second, it is important to develop, wherever possible, an attitude toward suicide as wasteful, destructive to those who remain, an act with no inherent value.

It is unlikely that the media will cease the reporting of suicide completely. Further, it is unlikely that the press is ever going to be shackled by voluntary agreement or guidelines. There will always be the media position that the public interest is paramount, even where the media itself has presented a contrary argument (for instance, Hobart *Mercury*, 1996). Furthermore, there will always be a debate about the ongoing existence of literature, art, poetry, opera and film which depict suicide. As an example, Shakespeare's play about the star-crossed lovers Romeo and Juliet will not be withdrawn from sale nor have the ending altered, despite public concern about the most recent portrayal (Director: Baz Lurman) which is deliberately made more relevant to young people today, with a more contemporary and more poignant ending.

These complexities and the need for concerted professional response are made more explicit, and more urgent, by the opening up of the internet with the World Wide Web. Increases in the availability of material about suicide, both positive and negative, are likely to be unstoppable. Software does exist for parents and others to curtail accessibility for the young or vulnerable,

based on key words, but their general usage is likely to be limited without some media-driven mass education of the need for censorship.

In summary, the evidence for influence to suicide for a range of media is increasingly clear and cogent. It is unlikely that media reporting of suicide can be made to cease, even with an acceptance of internationally agreed guidelines at national levels. However, education of journalists in training, responsible editorial vigilance, the ongoing monitoring of guideline infringements and their impact on vulnerable groups and, where possible, editorial policy change, may have a desired impact. These issues demand concerted effort and coherent statement and restatement of the facts to achieve consensus.

In addition, it would appear necessary for there to be further discussion and research on how a more negative attitudinal change toward suicide can be promoted through all media outlets, without an increase more generally in stigma for mental health problems. This is an issue of some complexity and demands that professionals actively collaborate with the media to achieve the optimum result.

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