

Suicide As Covered in the Media

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The media plays an important role in shaping the public about suicide. The media has a professional and moral obligation to report incidents of suicide in an appropriate manner. The Center for Disease Control has set forth requirements for the media; making recommendations about how incidents of suicide are best reported. In 1989, the CDC established these guidelines, yet many national newspapers are not following these requirements. This study explained that the media has not made any progress in this area since the CDC's recommendations. Thirty-six articles from three national, daily newspapers were critiqued with questions from the CDC's requirements. The study's hypothesis was not established, as there was minimal progress made since the 1989 recommendations, it is clear and evident that much progress is yet to be made.

The question of why people commit suicide has been asked for many years. Something to consider is how the media covers incidents of death by suicide. Understanding how the media reports incidents of suicide can be important in saving people's lives. By studying how people respond to reports of suicide, we will understand motives, intentions and methods for suicidal people. With this information, we can gain insight in order to prevent these tragic events.

The media plays an important role in informing and educating the public about suicide. Stories of suicide can provide insight to causes of suicide, warning signs, suicide rates and treatments. Media coverage can assist in preventing suicide; however, it also

has the ability to do harm. Media coverage on suicide has sparked a phenomenon called “suicide contagion.”

Suicide contagion is a process by which exposure to the suicide or suicidal behavior of one person influences others to commit or attempt suicide. (Gould, 2001) Non-fictional articles, printed in national newspapers have been linked to a significant increase in suicides. In November, 1989, The Center for Disease Control, known as the CDC, endorsed a national workshop to address concerns and specific recommendations for reducing the possibility of media related suicide contagion. Many suicidologists, public health officials, researchers, psychiatrists, and psychologists assisted the CDC in establishing requirements for all media reports (see Appendix A). Even though this information has been provided to media institutions, newspaper reporters and the media establishments that they report for are not following the recommendations that the CDC has set forth.

Method

Materials

This study was performed from data gathered from various national newspaper articles. The articles were written about people who died due to suicide. These randomly chosen articles were retrieved from several databases and search engines, including ‘NexisLexis’ and ‘America’s Newspapers’. Articles were from three daily newspapers: *The St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *the Chicago Tribune*. Articles retrieved were published from January 1, 1988 through February 28, 2005 (see Appendix C).

Procedure

Each article was critiqued by the researcher, with criteria determined by the Surgeon General's National Strategy for Suicide Prevention. For the purpose of this study, a 'critique sheet' was created with select 'categories' and 'questions' relevant to the criteria set forth. Six articles were chosen from each of the three newspapers before the CDC requirements. Six articles were also chosen from each newspaper after the CDC requirements. Two researchers evaluated each article to ensure there was as little bias as possible. Scores were taken from the second researcher, as there were more controls in the process. Scores were almost identical for both researchers. The critique sheet was created with consideration to the recommendations and requirements set forth by the CDC (see Appendix B).

The 'critique sheet' composed for this study was completed on each article. The critique sheet recorded the answers to the questions contained in each article. The data being reviewed were victim's age, gender, method of suicide, place of suicide and if a suicide note was found. Critique answers were evaluated and then were then recorded.

Answers are either 'yes' or 'no', with 'no' being the appropriate, recommended answer, according to the Surgeon General. The recommendations are from the Surgeon General's National Strategy for Suicide Prevention and the AFSP (see Appendix A). A grade is then established. Using these data and score, this study assessed how responsive media sources are to the recommendations given in order to prevent suicide.

Ten Symptoms of Depression

The Surgeon General suggested reporters consult with an expert on depression or suicide. They list 10 danger signs that a person is depressed. Although most depressed people do not commit

suicide, most suicidal people are depressed. Depression may be present if at least five of the following symptoms have been present nearly every day for at least 2 weeks: Depressed mood. Change in appetite or weight. Change in sleeping patterns. Speaking/moving with unusual speed or slowness. Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities or hobbies. Decrease in sexual drive. Fatigue or loss of energy. Feelings of worthlessness, self-reproach or guilt. Diminished ability to think or concentrate, indecisiveness. Thought of death, suicide, or wishes to be dead. (from www.afsp.org/education).

6 Warning Signs for Suicide

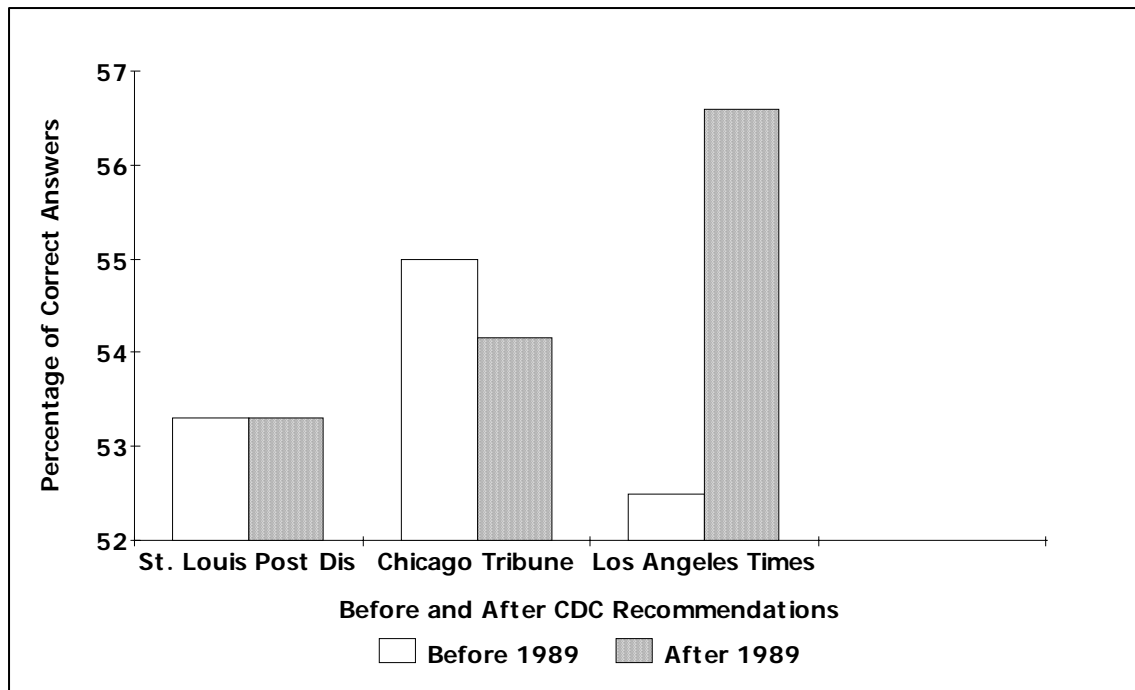
The Surgeon General has listed six signs of suicide crisis: A recent traumatic event such as the death of a loved one, or career failure, or a man's abusive behavior while drinking causes his wife to leave him. Intense Affective State/Depression Desperation – anguish plus rage, anxiety, guilt, hopelessness, acute sense of abandonment. Changes in behavior. Talk or Discussion – Talk or discussion suggesting the person is close to suicide. 'My family would be better off without me.' Talking as if they were 'going away' or saying 'goodbye.' Actions ranging from buying a gun to suddenly putting one's affairs in order. Deterioration in functioning – at work or socially, increasing use of alcohol, other self-destructive behavior, loss of control, rage explosions. (www.afsp.org/education).

Results

Scores comparing the three daily newspapers before the CDC requirements were as follows: St. Louis Post Dispatch 53.3%, Chicago Tribune 55.0%, and Los Angeles Times 52.5. With the same criteria applied after the CDC requirements, the newspapers scored as follows: St. Louis Post Dispatch 53.3%, Chicago Tribune 54.1% and Los Angeles Times 56.6% (see Figure 1). The average score before the CDC requirements was 53.6%. The average score after the CDC requirements was 54.6%. There was a minimal difference of 1% from all articles written before the CDC recommendations to after the recommendations. Considering each newspaper separately to assess for any

progress in commitment to follow CDC requirements, the St. Louis Post Dispatch had 0% change. The Chicago Tribune had .84% increase in compliance. The Los Angeles Times had an increase of 4.1% in compliance.

Figure 1. CDC compliance before and after CDC recommendations



Discussion

Though the purpose of the study was to show that the media has not made any improvement in how they report suicides in newspapers, the scores show a minimal increase of 1% from before the CDC requirements were put in to place to after the recommendations came out in 1989.

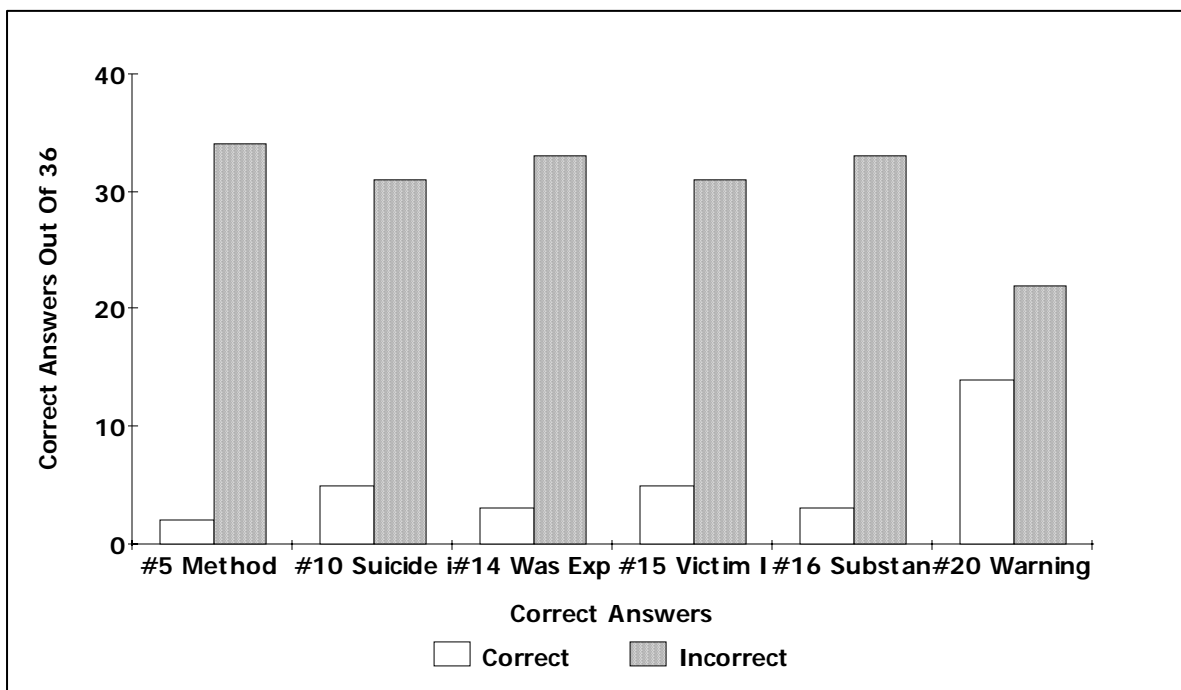
When considering before and after the CDC requirements, there was no difference in the score that the St. Louis Post Dispatch earned. The Chicago Tribune actually went down .84%.

The Los Angeles Times, however, had the worst compliance score before the CDC recommendations, yet improved the most with an increased score of 4.1%.

Even with these improvements, it is still important to mention that the average total score was only 54.6%, showing that most newspaper articles got only about half of the questions correct. There was a median score of only 53.0% for all articles.

Another interesting factor was which questions the newspapers typically missed. Although most scores were low, they were also very consistent throughout all the newspapers. The questions missed the most in each article were Question 5 and Question 19. Question 5 asked if the article indicated the method that the person committed suicide. Only 2 out of 36 articles were written correctly according to the CDC. Question 19 asked if the writer of the article took the time to ask if the family of the person that committed suicide had any mental disorders or symptoms of depression. Only 1 out of 36 answered this question correctly (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. CDC compliance by question type



Another pattern of answers indicated that most reporters/writers need additional training in the area of mental health issues. Questions that relate to mental health were not asked/reported correctly, according to the CDC recommendations. Scores indicated that hardly ever did the reporter/writer ever consult an expert in mental health to better understand or report the suicide. Most of the time, reporters/writers did not investigate if there were past mental health issues or substance abuse issues. These mental health issues are very important when reporting suicide, however, they were the most commonly missed questions in this study.

Finally, the scores indicated that reporters/writers are doing a poor job of picking and choosing headlines regarding suicide. The CDC suggests that newspapers do not use the fact a person's death was due to suicide in the headlines. Only 5 out of 36 articles followed this recommendation. This is the first thing that people reading the newspaper will notice, and it was only found in compliance 13.8% of the time.

Morally and professionally, the media must require their reporters and writers to comply with CDC requirements. The purpose of these requirements, according to the CDC is to lower the risk of additional suicides from sensationalism or contagion. It is disappointing and socially irresponsible that the media is not doing more to stay in compliance.

References

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Appendix A

Recommendations/Requirements

Avoid Sensationalization with Graphic Detail

In one article, the method was mentioned many times in graphic language/wording. “He leapt to his death”... and “He jumped onto the tracks and was killed instantly, as the train was traveling 60 miles per hour”. Another article was called ‘A Kiss Before Dying’. The article was about a couple that committed suicide together. These articles contained unnecessary uses of wording and description that promoted sensationalism.

Do Not Describe a Memorial For The Victim

One article devoted three paragraphs to discuss a makeshift memorial at the train station where a suicide occurred. It also included descriptions of personal items and gifts left at the funeral home. Nationally accepted recommendations for reporting suicide explicitly warn that dwelling on the memorializing details of a suicide have a danger of encouraging suicide contagion and/or copycat suicides.

Do Not Describe People Grieving Over Victim

After a suicide, one article discussed ‘hundreds of parents with their arms slung around their children’s shoulders... groups of teens hunched closely together’. This description has the risk of leading young people to see suicide as a way of getting the attention that they think is otherwise not available.

Do Not Refer To Suicide in Headlines

One article headline read ‘Former Enron Vice Chairman Commits Suicide’. Recommendations from the Surgeon General state that ‘suicide’ or the method of death should not be in the headline, but included appropriately in the body of the article.

Avoid Portraying Suicide As Heroic

One article headline reads “With Suicide, an Admiral Keeps Command Till the End.” This suggests that the courage and emotional control he displayed during times of war were the same heroic virtues that motivated his joint suicide with his wife.

Romanticized Coverage

In an article about the double suicide of two young people who were dating, the article quoted a friend as saying the suicide was a ‘Romeo and Juliet thing... they would not allow anyone to keep them apart and they kept their word.’ This romanticized the story and has great potential to encourage imitation suicides.

Do Not Include Pictures of Suicide Victim

An article titled ‘A Kiss Before Dying’ included a picture of the victim with very detailed description of the suicide method. It is said that by including pictures of the victim, others will begin to identify with the victim. This encourages imitation suicides. Pictures should never be included in public media articles.

Do Not Include Pictures of Place Suicide Occurred

An article about a model that jumped to her death from a 24 story building included an actual picture of the victim, jumping to her death. This picture was on the front page. This has several negative effects to the reader. The reader may be traumatized from seeing an actual suicide act. Children may see the picture and have the same repercussions. Finally, it could sensationalize the notion of suicide and encourage imitation or copycat suicides. It lends to the idea that the victim received a lot of publicity and attention from committing suicide.

Do Not Discuss Method of Suicide

It is believed that the danger in imitation suicides and copycat suicides are substantially greater when the article contains detailed descriptions of the method of suicide.

Do Not Portray Suicide as Inexplicable

Reporting suicide as the inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy or high-achieving person may cause identification with the victim.

Must Provide Clear Statistics That Public Can Understand

An article headline reads '11 Years, 11 Suicides'. Based on 10 undergraduate suicides over 11 years, the article concluded that suicide was a greater danger at MIT than anywhere else. When one considers that science and business students have considerably higher suicide rates than liberal arts students, and that male college students kill themselves five times more often than female college students, the figures quoted prove nothing. MIT is cited as currently being composed of 59 percent male students; that fact alone would make the suicide rate differences with most other colleges understandable. Statistics can be very misleading if not written correctly and misunderstood.

Media Should Consult A Professional Regarding Suicide/Depression – 10 Signs of Depression

One article stated that the victim did not leave a note, and no one that knew him thought that he had any depressive symptoms. The article said the 'circumstances around his death were unclear.' No medical experts on depression or suicide were consulted, leaving this article with little creditability in examining the victim's motives.

Include If Victim Received Treatment for Depression/Mental Disorders

Articles should include information about whether or not the victim has had past/current treatment for depression or other mental illness, as it could assist in showing cause. Over 90 percent of suicide victims have a significant psychiatric illness at the time of their death.(CDC) It is also thought that if this information is included, readers will be exposed to the idea that if you are depressed or mentally ill, that it is appropriate and preferable for you to get treatment. Treatment can help prevent suicides.

Discuss If Victim Had Issues of Substance Abuse

One article discussed a suicide victim with a \$300 a day drug habit, but did not report that anyone tried to get the victim help. The article did not inform the reader that drug abuse is a problem that half of suicide victims have. Recommendations by the Surgeon General state that many of the people who are suicidal have or did have substance abuse issues. This could help establish cause. People that have a mood disorder with substance abuse issues are at even more risk of committing suicide.

Report Should Include Options For People, Other Than Suicide

The writer should discuss that there are options for people that are depressed, besides suicide. People should be encouraged to talk to family/friends or to seek professional help.

List Any Recent Struggles Victim May Have Had

One article discussed an Enron executive that committed suicide. The family stated that the victim was frustrated and distraught over the fact others were abusing company money and he could not do anything about it. Family said that the frustration of his struggle caused the depression that led him to suicide.

Report Any Family History of Mental Disorders/Suicide

Depression has genetic and environmental links, so establishing whether or not family members suffer from depression or other mental illness could assist in understanding motives and causes.

Report Any Warning Signs – 6 Warning Signs

Suicidal people tend to show some signs/symptoms of their decision. Reporting any warning signs could show cause and motive, as well as teach the readers about what signs to watch out for. Also, acknowledging the victims problems and struggles as well as the positive aspects of their character contributes to a more balanced picture.

Scapegoating/Placing Blame

An article about a female college student that committed suicide reported many comments from the parents. These comments made it seem that the school was responsible for her death, as they did not require her to be hospitalized, nor did they contact the parents about any possible mental health issues. (The victim was over 18 years old and there are laws about confidentiality). The parents also blamed past physicians for her death. It is common for parents of suicide victims to want to blame others, but journalists must be careful when quoting people... to discuss and determine what is someone's opinion and what is factual.

Sensitive Language/Wording

Do Not Use the Words 'Committed Suicide'. The Surgeon General's recommendations suggest that using the words 'committed suicide' imply that the victim committed a criminal or sinful act. It is suggested that reporters use words like 'having died by suicide'.

Appendix B

Critique Sheet Questions

Article #: _____

Grader #: _____

SENSATIONAL W/ GRAPHIC DETAIL/ROMANTIC = _____ of 7 = _____

- 1) Does article portray suicide as romantic?
- 2) Does article portray suicide as sensational?
- 3) Does article provide pictures of the suicide site?
- 4) Does article show pictures of suicide victim?
- 5) Does article discuss the method of the suicide?
- 6) Does article portray/describe people grieving over the victim's death?
- 7) Does the article describe a memorial for the victim?

VARIOUS/OTHER = _____ of 6 = _____

- 8) Does article portray suicide as heroic?
- 9) Does article suggest that someone/some place played a role in blame because they did not do enough to help prevent suicide?
- 10) Does article refer to the suicide in the headline of the article?
- 11) Does article use the words 'committed suicide'?
- 12) Does the article contain inconsistent statistics?
- 13) Does the article contain hard to understand information?

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES = _____ of 7 = _____

- 14) Did the writer publish article without consulting an expert on mental health?
- 15) Did the writer publish the article without including if the victim ever received treatment for mental disorders?
- 16) Did the writer publish the article without suggesting whether the victim had issues of substance abuse?
- 17) Did the writer publish the article without suggesting that others seek treatment to get help rather than take one's own life?
- 18) Did the writer publish the article without acknowledging the victim's current struggles?
- 19) Did the writer publish the article without reporting if any family members have suffered from any mental disorders?
- 20) Did the writer publish the article without asking if the victim had any warning signs?