

News coverage of suicidal behaviour in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

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AUTHOR NOTE

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ABSTRACT

Background: Media reporting of suicide has been associated with imitative acts.

Internationally, this has led to the development of guidelines to promote responsible reporting of suicide.

Aims: To examine the nature and quality of news coverage of suicidal behaviour in the United Kingdom (UK) and Republic of Ireland (ROI).

Method: UK and ROI press clippings relating to suicide over 12 months (N=8101) were coded for content and assessed for quality against existing guidelines. We examined variability in relation to key characteristics (e.g. type of publication) and compared newspaper portrayal of suicide against official statistics.

Results: Reports were biased towards young, female and relatively unusual suicides (including those involving a celebrity, more than one individual and violent methods). Almost a third of reports had inappropriate headlines, but only a minority was of poor overall quality, and editors appear to be responsive to feedback. There was considerable variability in the quality of reports for different suicide methods.

Limitations: This work cannot account for the impact of reporting on suicidal behaviour. The speed of change in media trends also limits its conclusions.

Conclusion: Our findings underscore the need for sustained efforts to promote responsible reporting of suicide.

Keywords: suicide, media, newspaper, reporting, media guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Research has repeatedly shown that media reporting and portrayal of suicide can influence suicidal behaviour and lead to imitative acts (Sisask & Värnik, 2012), especially amongst particular subgroups in the population (e.g., young people and people with depression) (Cheng et al., 2007; Gould, Kleinman, & Lake, 2014; Phillips & Carstensen, 1986). The risk of imitation is accentuated when the coverage is extensive, prominent, sensationalist and/or repeated (Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis, 2007). Finally, and probably most importantly, overt description of suicide by a particular method may lead to increases in suicidal behaviour involving that method, with marked modeling effects having been documented in relation to a wide range of methods (Sisask & Värnik, 2012). To date, the evidence for this effect is strongest in relation to newspaper reporting (Hawton & Williams, 2005), as is evidence that reducing the quantity of reporting and/or improving its quality can lead to reductions in actual suicidal behaviour (Sisask & Värnik, 2012).

The strength of the evidence about media reporting of suicidal behaviour has resulted in inclusion of this issue in national suicide prevention strategies in many countries. For example, one of the six goals in the National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England (Department of Health, 2012) includes promoting responsible reporting of suicidal behaviour in the media. Similar goals are included in the strategies for other parts of the UK, Ireland and many other countries.

To support the media in delivering sensitive approaches to suicide and suicidal behaviour, specific guidelines have been developed for journalists and editors in many countries (Samaritans, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2017). The remarkable similarities of international media guidelines reflect consensus over the need to balance newsworthiness against the risk of encouraging or influencing suicidal behaviour, and the ways in which this may be achieved. Rather than censorship or ‘media blackouts’, these guidelines aim to promote accurate and ethical reporting of suicide. They highlight (1) not giving specific detail about the suicide (e.g., explicitly describing its method or location);

(2) avoiding sensationalising or glamorising suicide (e.g., glorifying the act), or giving it undue prominence (e.g., printing suicide stories on the front page in newspapers, or running them as lead items in radio and television news bulletins); (3) the importance of role models (e.g., the wide-reaching influence of suicides of celebrities); (4) taking the opportunity to educate the public (e.g., by challenging myths about suicide); and (5) providing help/support to vulnerable readers/viewers (e.g., offering help-line numbers). They also urge media professionals to consider the aftermath of suicide (e.g., taking care when interviewing the bereaved, who may be at particular risk themselves) (Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, & Skehans, 2006).

In the UK and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), despite growing awareness of the effects and dangers of media reporting and portrayal of suicide, there has been little research on the nature and quality of newspaper coverage of suicidal behaviour, except in relation to a specific cluster of youth suicide in Wales in 2007-08 (John et al., 2017). With some notable exceptions (Pirkis et al., 2009; Thom, McKenna, Edwards, O'Brien, & Nakarada-Kordic, 2012), studies involving content analyses of media reports in other countries have found that these often include specific details of the method and location of suicides (Tatum, Canetto, & Slater, 2010; Yoshida, Mochizuki, & Fukuyama, 1987), and tend to present a distorted picture of prevalence and motives when compared with official statistics and other scientific evidence, with over-reporting of suicides by women and young people, and of those involving violent, unusual and dramatic methods (Canetto et al., 2017; Cheng & Yip, 2012; Machlin, Pirkis, & Spittal, 2013; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009). A recent analysis of online media reports of suicide in the UK, whilst limited to a 28 day time period, showed that almost 90% of articles (199/229, 86.9%) were poorly compliant with available guidelines (Utterson, Daoud, & Dutta, 2017).

Replicating and expanding on research methodology developed in Australia (the country in which there has been most attention to this area), we investigated the quality of British and ROI newspaper reporting of suicide relative to recommendations in guidelines.

We also compared newspaper portrayal of suicide against official statistics to determine whether press coverage tends to be distorted and biased towards certain sorts of cases and methods of suicide. As well as analysing (over)reporting of suicides involving celebrities (which have repeatedly been associated with increases in suicides (Niederkrötenhaler et al., 2012)), we examined the nature and quality of reports relating specifically to unnamed individuals. Whilst the latter have tended to attract less concern and academic scrutiny, their newsworthiness is likely to be a direct result of the dramatic nature of the methods and circumstances involved, and thus arguably warrants separate investigation.

METHODS

News database and coding

Since April 2012, the suicide prevention charity Samaritans has been monitoring print and online news reports of suicidal behaviour (including suicide and attempted suicide) and suicide inquests in British and ROI national, regional and local publications. Electronic press clippings of items featuring the word ‘suicide’ and related key terms (e.g., ‘attempted suicide’ and ‘self-harm’, but excluding ‘suicide bombings’) are supplied to the organization’s media advisory team on a daily basis by a specialised news monitoring service, and then coded by trained staff for quality and content.

The coding frame used is modelled on previous research in Australia (Pirkis et al., 2009), and records identifying information (e.g., the name of the specific newspaper and article title), descriptive information (e.g., the date of the article, details on its content and genre), as well as quality ratings for each item, using a set of dimensions that operationalise criteria in media guidelines (e.g. whether the article includes detailed description of the method/s used, and details of support services and organisations). Each news report is rated as ‘positive’, ‘neutral’ or ‘negative’ in relation to its headline and overall tone, based on adherence to media guidelines, with specific examples and definitions provided to raters in order to enhance coding consistency and validity (see online appendix for details of the

coding frame). Where appropriate, additional comments are recorded about specific issues or concerns, and, where applicable, about any actions taken in relation a news story or report (e.g., contacting an editor to request removing key information or images from an online article) and the outcome of these. For the purposes of this study, individual media items against which specific concerns were recorded were coded as ‘concerning’, regardless of whether this resulted in any actions.

We conducted secondary analyses of this media monitoring database (including all entries between 1st May 2012 and 1st May 2013 in the UK and ROI), and carried out some additional coding of headline characteristics (including for inclusion of words such as ‘suicide’ and ‘hotspot’, method and location details, and sensational language) and article content, to determine how many individual events were reported in the news (as opposed to wider suicide-related stories, for example focusing on suicide trends and preventative initiatives), and the extent of repeat reporting of incidents involving named and unnamed individuals (including multiple version of the same article published by different media outlets on the same day and, much less frequently, corrected or updated versions of online reports being published on separate days). This information, and coding by occupational status (where reported), also enabled assessment of items focusing specifically on celebrities and high-profile individuals. Finally, following training from the Samaritans’ media advisory team, we coded the headline quality and overall tone of the first in every 100 articles in the database. As inter-rater reliability was good (Cohen’s k for headline quality=0.79, overall tone=0.60), and because of practical and resource constraints, no attempt was made to reconcile discrepancies in coding.

Data analysis

All data are presented as frequencies or percentages (e.g. of items that deviated or not from recommended standards in relation to specific aspects of reporting of suicide). Open-ended remarks about individual news stories and reports were analysed inductively for content, following the procedures recommended by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). Variations

in the nature and quality of reporting were analysed using chi-square tests (for categorical variables) and t and Mann-Whitney U tests (for continuous variables). Comparisons with suicide statistics are based on Office for National Statistics (ONS) UK suicide data for 2012 (including deaths involving both intentional and undetermined intent). Comparisons in relation to suicide methods are based on English and Welsh data for 2012 (it was not possible to obtain detailed method breakdowns in relation to Scotland, Northern Ireland and the ROI).

RESULTS

Between 1st May 2012 and 1st May 2013, 8679 news items featuring ‘suicide’ (and related key terms) were recorded in the media monitoring database. Of these, 578 items were excluded from the analysis because they were broadcast or international (other than Irish) items. A total of 8101 items were included in the final analysis (7601 from the UK and 500 from the Republic of Ireland – see Table 1).

Each month an average of 675 news stories about suicidal behaviour were recorded in the media monitoring database, with a peak of reports in December 2012 (N=941), following the death of nurse Jacintha Saldanha after a hoax call to the hospital treating the then pregnant Duchess of Cambridge (over 500 stories were recorded about her suicide in the four months that followed the incident). Most stories appeared in local or regional news, with an almost equal split between print vs. online news. A small proportion of reports were in Sunday papers/online news.

Many reports included one or more photographs (more than 1 in 10 (922) featured three or more photographs). In print media (3855), 250 reports of suicidal behaviour (6.5%) appeared on the front page, and 244 (6.3%) on page 3. Their overall length varied considerably (from 8 to 499,000 ‘column inches’, median=190, IQR=317).

Article content

The vast majority of news reports was about suicides and attempts by individuals, with a smaller, but disproportionate, number of stories focussing on murder suicides and suicidal behaviour involving two or more individuals (Table 1). Less than 1% of reports (n=70) did not focus on a specific incident (be it a suicide or attempt involving one or more people, or a murder suicide – thereafter referred to as an ‘individual suicide story or event’) and instead reported on suicide prevention initiatives (n=10), suicide trends (n=18), and other suicide-related news (e.g. an advertising campaign depicting a suicide was the subject of 32 news items).

Individual suicide stories: repeated reporting and comparison with official statistics

Many suicide events were reported in the news more than once. 5084 news items focused on specific incidents involving 785 named individuals, and an additional 2378 were reports of suicidal behaviour of 1873 unnamed persons. This was also reflected in 35% of headlines appearing in print and/or online at least twice, with almost one in five headlines appearing five or more times, and some featuring over 50 times (n=11).

In addition, of all stories about named individuals, almost 70% were about 75 specific individuals who featured in the news more than 10 times (3467/5084, 68.2%), and just under half (2,358, 46.4%) concerned 18 people who were the subject of over 50 reports each. The latter included primarily celebrities (a film director, four musicians, a writer/comedian, the former wife of a well-known US Senator, and the son a Hollywood actor), but also five relatively well-known violent criminals (one of whom had been involved in a school murder/suicide), two school pupils, a policeman who had previously been involved in a high profile case, a businessman and the aforementioned nurse.

There were some differences in the characteristics of individuals and incidents reported in anonymous and named reports, all media items (including multiple reports of the same incident), and official suicide statistics (Figures 1-3). News items were biased towards reporting of female suicides (23.2% of all UK suicides in 2012 vs. 34.8% of all news stories appearing online and in print in 2012/13), and especially young female

suicides (differences were particularly marked in relation to reports of unnamed girls under the age of 15 years – see Figure 1). Reporting of the relatively small number of suicides in women aged 60 years and over was very limited. A similar, but less pronounced, trend in relation to age was observed in relation to male suicides (figure 2).

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here]

This reporting bias towards youth suicides was also reflected in students/pupils being the most common occupational group in all reports (767/4034, 19.0%), and in individual stories reported in the news (107/520, 20.6% of named individuals whose occupation was described in news reports were students). Also disproportionate was the reporting of suicides involving criminals (315/4034, 7.8% of all media items and 52/520, 10% of named individuals in suicide reports, even though prisoners account for 1-2% of all suicides in the UK and ROI), and occupations associated with a celebrity status (1242/7933, 15.5% of all reports were about celebrities, with an additional 252 (3.2%) reports focusing on individuals with a close, often familial, link with a celebrity). In addition, of all 4034 news reports for which the suicidal person/people's occupation was known, almost a third were about individuals in high-profile jobs (13.2% were about musicians, 9.8% about film actors or directors, 3.0% about sports personalities and 2.3% about TV personalities).

Almost 90% of all news reports, and a similar percentage of individual stories reported in the news, were about fatal suicidal behaviour (as opposed to non-fatal attempts) (603/728, 82.8% of stories about named individuals and 1046/1873, 93.0% about unnamed individuals). Just over a quarter were written about, or following, a suicide inquest, but a greater proportion focused on specific incidents around the time they occurred.

Compared to official statistics, news reports were biased towards relatively more infrequent and violent methods (such as jumping/falling from a height) (Figure 3). This was especially the case in relation to stories about unnamed individuals, which focused

disproportionately on murder suicides (when all duplicate reports were removed, 205/1806 (11.4%) stories in this category were about murder suicides) and were rarely about the most common methods of suicide in official statistics (hanging/asphyxiation was the method used in 55.1% of suicides in England in 2012 and self-poisoning accounted for 22.7% of suicides). In anonymous stories of suicides, these methods comprised, respectively, 2.1% and 1% of cases reported in the news. Differences were less marked in relation to overall news items, and individual stories of named individuals (in relation to the latter, the proportion of hangings was actually higher than in official statistics (68.2%)).

[insert Figure 3 about here]

Quality of reporting

In relation to all news items, only a small proportion of articles were rated as being of poor overall quality, with no difference between reports of named and unnamed individuals (for both, the proportion of poor quality items was 4.0%), or those appearing online vs. in print. The proportion of negative reports was however higher than average for national tabloid (48/927, 5.2%) and broadsheet (18/505, 3.6%) media (vs. 83/3963, 2.1% of local/regional news), and in reports of inquests compared to stories immediately following an incident (respectively, 82/1675, 4.9% vs. 47/2335, 2.0%, OR=2.5, 95% CI 1.7-3.6, $p < 0.0001$). The small number of reports focusing on wider suicide stories (e.g. suicide trends and prevention campaigns, as opposed to specific suicide events) also included a higher proportion of poor quality items (4/33, 12.1%). Longer articles were statistically more likely to be judged as of poor quality (median column inches of negatively rated items =291.5 (IQR=343) vs. 188 (IQR=314) in positive and neutral items, $p=0.016$), but there were no differences in relation to print news circulation ($p=0.95$). Stories focusing on celebrities and on individuals with a close direct link with a high profile person were less likely to be of poor quality than other types of reports (4/1077, 0.4% vs. 148/4551, 3.3%, $p < 0.0001$), and fewer were rated as ‘concerning’ (13.1% vs. 23.2%, $p < 0.0001$). The tone of

reports in ROI media was less likely to be rated negatively than that of UK publications (5/417, 1.2% vs. 150/5290, 2.8%, $p=0.048$), and more British reports were identified as potentially concerning (22.4% vs. 15.1%, $p<0.0001$).

There were no significant differences in the quality of reports of male vs. female suicides, but one in six reports involving both a male and female (including murder suicides and 'suicide pacts') were rated as being of poor overall quality (24/156, 15.4%).

Headline quality and other concerns

Although only a minority of reports were rated negatively overall, 28.1% of headlines were rated as being of poor quality (Table 1). The proportion of poor quality headlines was highest in UK publications (29.0% vs. 14.8% in ROI papers, $p<0.0001$), tabloid media (43.0%), in relation to incidents involving two or more individuals (39.4%) and murder suicides (30.4%), and in reports following a suicide inquest (39.5%), but relatively low in news items which did not focus on specific suicide stories (15.7%). Headlines of celebrity stories were less likely to be rated negatively than those of non-high profile reports (17.1% vs. 30.9%, $p<0.0001$).

There was considerable variability in relation to headline quality, and other quality indicators, by method of suicide (Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 around here]

A considerable proportion of headlines included the word 'suicide', and details of the suicide method/s used (for example 615 reports (7.6%) included the word 'hanging' in the headline). In a small proportion of reports, the amount of method detail included in the headline was judged to be inappropriately high (123, 1.5% of all reports). Some headlines included exact or vague references to the suicide location/s, and 7.2% (578) used language rated as sensationalist.

Only 7.5% of all media reports (595/7935) included details of a suicide prevention helpline, with proportionally more overall positive reports (38/158, 24.1%) - but also more

of the poor quality items (28/154, 18.1%) - providing this information compared to news items rated as 'neutral' (440/5345, 8.2%).

Reports causing concern

Just over one in five of all reports were rated as potentially concerning (1770/8052, 22.0%), most often because of the amount of method detail provided. Of note is also the proportion of remarks about reports that may encourage or suggest a suicide cluster (by making links between multiple incidents) and about the use of graphic or inappropriate images (including of suicide method, location and deceased, but also of suicide notes, and tributes/memorials), both in stories of individual suicide events and broader suicide-related news (33/69, 47.8% of news items in the latter category were judged to be potentially concerning). Photographs included in news reports were rated for quality for a minority of items (287/5100, 5.6% of reports which included at least one image), and were mostly deemed to be inappropriate (89.2% vs. 0.3% rated as positive, and 10.85% as satisfactory).

However, not all concerns were about negative reporting per se. In some cases, the story itself was a cause for concern because of its potential implications (e.g. because it involved a very young person or celebrity, or occurred in a specific named location), regardless of, or beyond the way in which it was reported.

Feedback to editors

Newspaper editors were contacted directly by the Samaritans media advisory team to discuss these concerns regarding 4.6% (365/7922) of news items, or 20.6% (365/1770) of those causing concern. Where recorded, the outcome of these interventions was almost always positive (92/112, 82.1%).

Table 3 below shows the main comments recorded against individual articles. Please note that the numbers and percentages reported refer to individual articles, rather than news stories.

Positive reporting quality

One hundred and fifty positive remarks about individual articles were also recorded (Table 4), and a total of 161 items (/5707, 2.8%) were rated to be of good overall quality. These most often included reports of stories that were (also) associated with negative reporting, including those of two or more suicides (excluding murder suicides) (26/98, 26.5% were rated as positive), especially if involving a male and female together (28/156, 17.9% were rated positively vs. 24, 15.4% of poor quality), and reports following a coroner's inquest (64/1675, 3.8% positive vs. 59/2229, 2.5% incident reports). Items not including photos (4.0% vs. 2.5% with one of more photos) were also more likely to be judged as positive, as were those providing details of a helpline (7.5% positive vs. 2.5% of articles which did not include this information), and focusing on young people (51/1469, 3.9% of stories featuring suicides and/or attempts by 15-29 year olds were judged to be of good quality).

DISCUSSION

We analysed the content and quality of news reports of suicidal behaviour in the UK and ROI over a 12 month period, and compared these data with what is known about suicidal behaviour from official statistics. As found in other countries (Canetto et al., 2017; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009; Pirkis et al., 2007), news reports were biased towards suicides of females and events involving more dramatic methods and circumstances (including murder suicides and 'suicide pacts'). Suicides by young people were also over-reported in the news, as were those involving celebrities.

In many countries there has been concern about the reporting of suicides involving celebrities, and the increased risk of imitative behaviour by unintentionally glamorising suicide (Cheng et al., 2007; Koburger et al., 2015; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2012). Our findings suggest that, at least in the UK, news reports of suicides of non-celebrities, and especially unnamed individuals, tend to be of poorer overall quality than those of high profile individuals, and are potentially as concerning because their 'newsworthiness' is

often a direct result of the method/s and circumstances involved. Compared to official statistics, reports relating to unnamed individuals focused disproportionately on arguably more dramatic events, such as deaths involving young people, couples and more violent and unusual methods. These biases and distortions may not only lead to imitative behaviours, but also (mis)guide public opinion about suicide and suicide risk, and generate misleading agendas while overlooking real issues. Of particular concern is the over-reporting of suicides by young people, who are known to be more likely to be influenced by what they see and hear in the media (Phillips & Carstensen, 1986; Gould et al., 2014) and at increased risk of identification and imitative suicidal behaviour (Sisask & Värnik, 2012), especially when the coverage is extensive, prominent, sensationalist and/or repeated (Pirkis et al., 2007). Also of note is the relatively small proportion of news stories focusing on recovery and survival. Almost 90% of the articles we analysed were about suicide, despite this being a much rarer event than non-fatal suicidal behaviour (WHO, 2014). This could contribute to skewed public perceptions about the lethality of suicide methods.

The risks associated with detailed descriptions of suicide methods have also been repeatedly highlighted in previous literature and in international media guidelines on the responsible portrayal of suicide. Indeed, the UK's main press standards' clause on the reporting of suicide clearly stipulates that "to prevent simulative acts care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used" (IPSO, 2016). However, and despite this clause being introduced at least six years before this study was carried out, the inclusion of detailed method descriptions was by far the most common concern recorded in relation to the news items we analysed – although there was considerable variability in the quality, and quantity, of reports of different suicide methods. As well as general guidance for editors and journalist on the reporting of suicide, guidelines focusing on specific methods of suicide may therefore also be useful (an example is the Samaritans' factsheet on responsible reporting of railway suicides and attempts – see Samaritans, 2013). As highly lethal methods of suicide (such as jumping from a height and lying before a moving object)

appear to be disproportionately reported in the news, such guidance could include a recommendation to avoid mentioning the nature of specific methods, or at the very least to describe them in minimal detail. This could reduce cognitive awareness of them and therefore potentially contribute to decreases in their use. Recent research suggests that in relation to some emerging methods, such as suicide by gases, minimal detail may be enough to influence increases in use (see e.g. Gunnell et al., 2015). This also applies to highly lethal methods such as jumping in front a train or from a high bridge, where the information needed to potentially ‘replicate’ a death can be fairly minimal and often well below the ‘excessive detail’ threshold.

Our findings suggest that further areas of potential concern are reports of suicide in tabloid news, which were more often rated as being of negative quality, and those following a formal inquest, possibly as extensive details of a suicide come to light in a (mostly) public context. The relatively lack of reports which included details of a suicide prevention helpline is also arguably concerning, and somewhat surprising considering that this is a common recommendation in related media guidelines. Of note was the association between provision of helpline details and poor (as well as good) quality reporting, suggesting that in the media industry the inclusion of such information may (misleadingly) be considered necessary in relation to particularly dramatic stories, rather than being standard practice. However, as reported elsewhere, the percentage of news reports including details of support helplines appears to be increasing year on year (from 6% in 2012 to 57% in 2015) (Fraser, Marzano, & Hawton, 2017).

Nonetheless, our findings suggest that the vast majority of news reports of suicidal behaviour in the UK and, even more so the ROI, are *not* of negative quality and, importantly, that intervening in relation to potentially concerning stories and reports can yield positive results (e.g. removing potentially harmful content from online reports), without unduly affecting the freedom of the press. In line with recent research on the possible preventive effects of suicide-related media content (Niederkrötenhaler et al.,

2010), further studies could investigate the relative effectiveness of strategies to promote positive reporting of suicide, as well as to minimise its negative portrayal in the media (which has tended to be the focus of official guidelines and recommendations).

Strengths and limitations

This study is the first detailed analysis of the quality and content of general news reporting of suicide in the UK and ROI. However, the conclusions that may be drawn on the basis of descriptive studies such as this are limited by the speed at which patterns of media communication (especially ‘new media’) change, and the complex and dynamic ways in which their effects manifest themselves in relation to different audiences. These were beyond the scope of the current investigation, and would benefit from further research, including epidemiological studies and qualitative news framing analyses (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010) to increase understanding of the impact of different types of news stories, including broader suicide-related news (e.g. reports of suicide trends, ads or campaigns). Only a small number of the articles analysed fell under the latter category, but almost half were rated as potentially concerning and over 1 in 10 were deemed to be of poor quality.

Further studies could also usefully explore the roles and responsibilities that editors and journalists perceive they have in reporting suicide, including the pressures (e.g. from police, relatives of the deceased and the wider community, including via social media) and issues they face, their awareness of media guidelines, and the influence these have on their practice. In this context, the rise of so called ‘citizen journalism’, and its implications for suicide reporting and imitative effects, also warrant further investigation.

Recent evidence suggests that the proportion of suicide stories appearing online (as opposed to in traditional, printed media) is on the increase, as is the use of photographs and videos in reports of suicidal behaviour (Fraser et al., 2017). This underscores the need for ongoing research to understand the impact of these changes, if any, on actual suicidal behaviour, and to ensure that relevant guidelines and other initiatives to promote

responsible portrayal of suicide remain relevant and up-to-date. Indeed, whilst the latter have tended to focus on the content and prominence of suicide-related media, as have tools such as the one used in this study to assess the quality of newspaper reports (see also John et al., 2014), the nature and impact of suicide imagery - including those that may be 'triggering' - are less well understood. The importance of further research and evidence-based initiatives in this area extends well beyond the context of news reporting to broader forms of media and broadcast, as most recently demonstrated by the increase in Internet searches indicating suicidal ideation following a popular TV drama series about suicide (Ayers, Althouse, Leas, Dredze, & Allem, 2017).

Conclusion

Supporting the media in delivering sensitive approaches to suicide and suicidal behaviour is a key priority area of suicide prevention strategies in many countries. Our systematic analysis of the quality and content of news reports of suicidal behaviour in the UK and ROI suggests that these are of varying quality and biased towards young, female and more unusual suicides (including those involving a celebrity, more than one individual and violent methods). Although rarely of poor overall quality, less than one in ten reports included details of help and support for readers, and the proportion of articles with inappropriate headlines was relatively high, with one in five incorporating details of the method/s used. A similar proportion of news items was judged to be potentially concerning, mostly - but not exclusively - because of the type and amount of information provided about specific methods of suicide.

However, our research also suggests that most newspaper editors respond positively when approached in relation to a particular story or concern. Therefore, as well as adding support to the long-standing attention to (detailed) reporting of specific methods of suicide, this study demonstrates the benefits of careful and ongoing monitoring of suicide-related media. Amongst them is the potential to identify and respond to new reporting trends - and challenges - in a timely manner, although more research is needed to systematically

evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives to promote responsible portrayal of suicide in the media, and their impact on actual suicidal behaviour.

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Table 1. Reporting of suicidal behaviour by media type, article content and key quality indicators (N=8101)

Media type	n	%
ROI papers (vs. UK)	500	6.2
National media		
Tabloid	1332	16.4
Broadsheet	716	8.8
Local/Regional	5527	68.2
Consumer	463	5.7
Trade	63	0.8
Sunday paper (vs. daily & other)	268	3.3
Print (vs. Online)	3889/8091	48.1
Article content		
Individual suicide/attempt	7268/7972	91.2
2+ suicides/attempts	177/7972	2.2
Murder suicide	527/7972	6.6
Attempted suicide (vs. completed suicide)	774/6315	12.3
Items focusing on named individuals (Individual incidents reported)	5084 785	62.8
Items focusing on unnamed individuals (Individual incidents reported)	2378 1873	29.4
Report type (N=8035)		
Incident	3342	41.6
Inquest	2207	27.5
Other	2486	30.7
Headline characteristics		
Tone of headline (N=8077)		
Positive	192	2.4
Satisfactory	5616	69.5
Negative	2270	28.1
“Suicide” in headline	3117	38.5
Detail of method in headline	1667	20.6
Incident location in headline		
Vague reference	965	11.9
Exact reference	477	5.9
Sensationalist language in headline		
Good	5243	64.9
Medium	2261	28.0
Bad	578	7.2
Other characteristics and quality indicators		
Overall tone		
Positive	161/5707	2.8
Satisfactory	5391/5707	94.5
Negative	155/5707	2.7
Photo/s (vs. none) (N=7946)	5100	64.2
Front page (vs. body of paper)	250/3855	6.5
Concern about article or story (vs. no concern recorded)	1770/8052	22.0

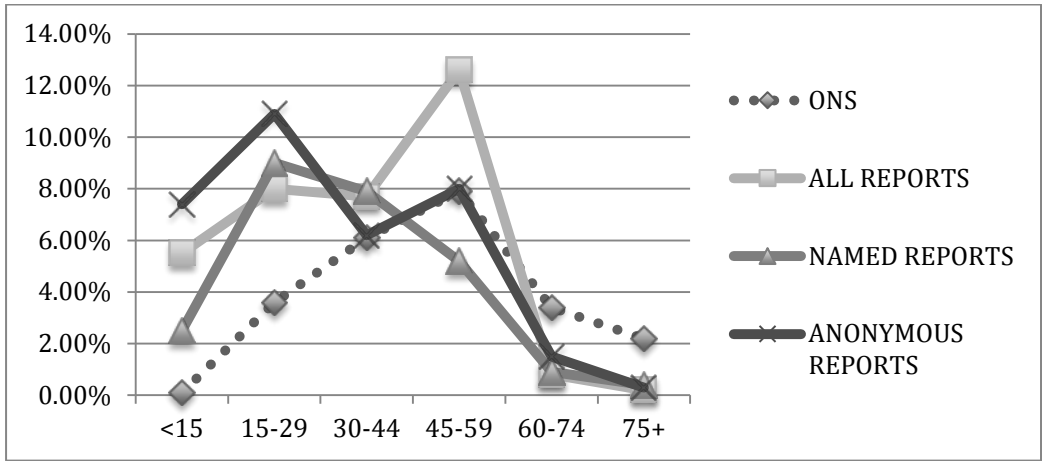


Figure 1. Percentage of female suicide news items focusing on different age groups in all recorded reports (N=6751), reports of named (N=686) and unnamed (N=1358) individuals, and official national statistics (ONS) (N=5993).

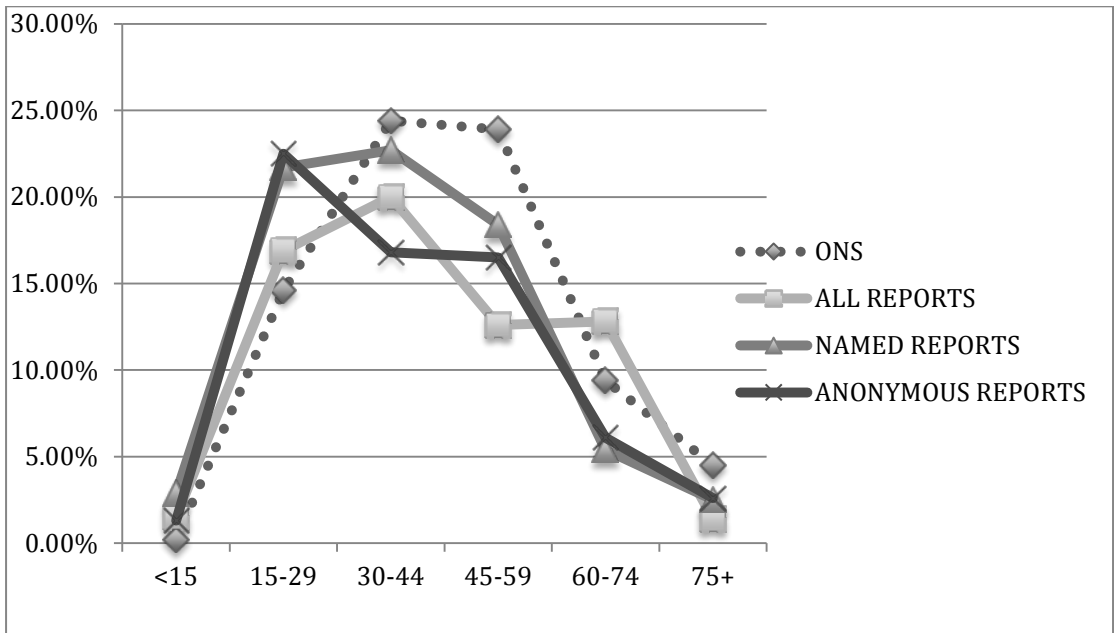


Figure 2. Percentage of male suicide news items focusing on different age groups in all recorded reports (N=6751), reports of named (N=686) and unnamed (N=1358) individuals, and official national statistics (ONS) (N=5993).

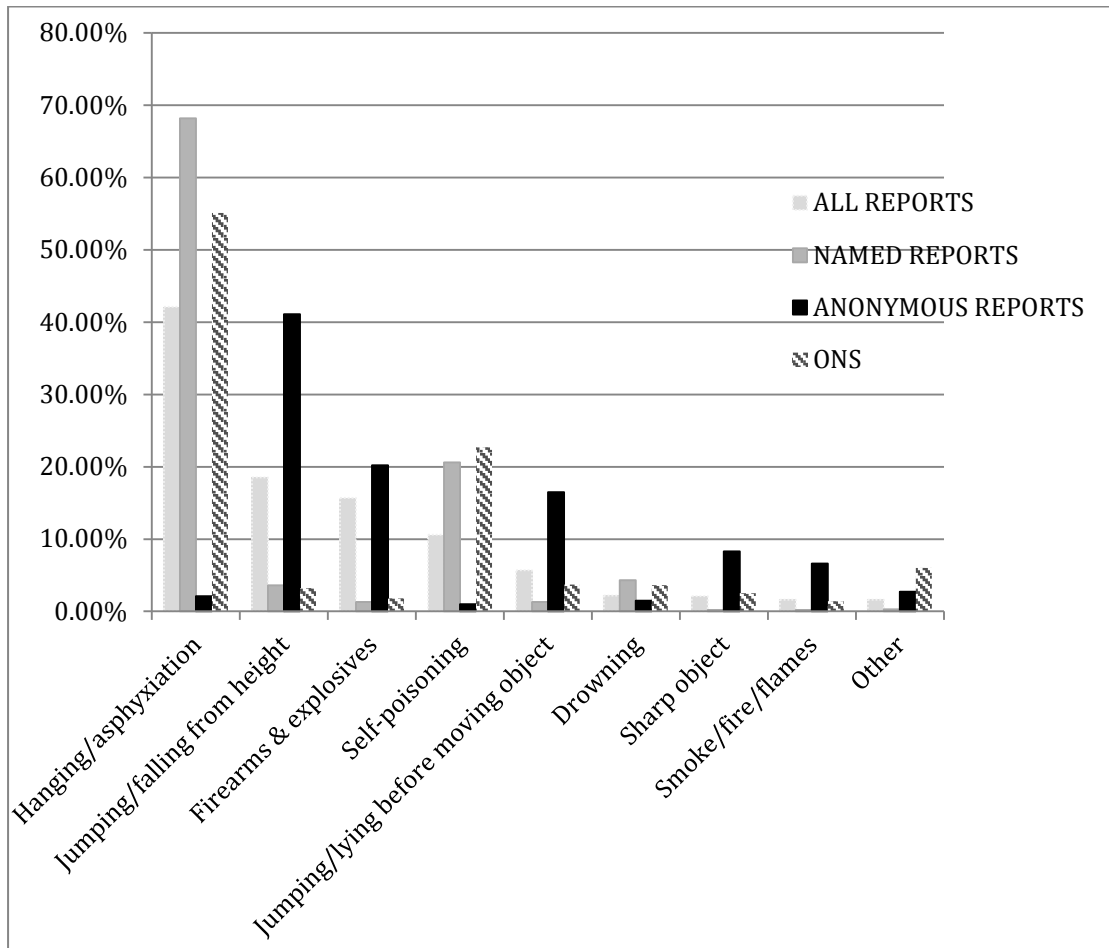


Figure 3. Percentage of individual methods of suicide in all recorded reports (N=4476), reports of named (N=603) and unnamed (N=1047) individuals, and official national statistics (ONS) (N=5993).

Table 2. Reporting of specific suicide methods by key quality indicators.

Method of (completed) suicide	Poor overall quality		‘Concerning’ event and/or reporting		Poor quality headline (HL)		Method detail in HL		Detailed method description in HL		Exact suicide location in HL	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Hanging/asphyxiation	40/1473	2.7	492/2297	21.4	844/2303	36.6	571/2304	24.8	17/2304	0.7	130/2304	5.6
Self-poisoning	36/353	10.2	219/579	37.8	188/579	32.5	124/582	21.3	24/582	4.1	19/582	3.3
Drowning	1/91	1.1	41/117	35.0	26/121	21.5	28/121	23.1	0/121	0.0	15/121	12.4
Firearms/explosives	4/598	0.7	32/857	3.7	172/858	20.0	151/858	17.6	6/858	0.7	34/858	4.0
Smoke/fire/flames	2/45	4.4	17/85	20.0	49/85	57.6	45/85	52.9	3/85	3.5	13/85	15.3
Sharp object	1/75	1.3	26/111	23.4	40/113	35.4	27/113	23.9	4/113	3.5	8/113	7.1
Jumping/falling high place	34/805	4.2	378/1011	37.4	413/1011	40.9	428/1012	42.3	47/1012	4.6	138/1012	13.6
Jumping/lying moving object	11/216	5.1	181/309	58.6	168/315	53.3	107/315	34.0	10/315	3.2	44/315	14.0
Other	2/47	4.3	14/87	16.1	27/87	31.0	51/87	58.6	0/87	0.0	4/87	4.6

Table 3. Main concerns recorded in relation to news stories and reporting (N=1770)

Nature of concern	News items	
	n	%
Detailed description of method	1129	63.8
Of which (% within specific method):		
Hanging/asphyxiation	412	17.9
Jumping/falling from a high place	223	22.0
Self-poisoning	208	35.7
Jumping/lying before moving object	131	41.6
Sharp object	17	15.0
Drowning	19	15.7
Firearms/explosive	17	2.0
Smoke/fire/flames	17	20.0
Other	5	5.7
Linking suicides	249	14.1
Nature of photograph/s included	239	13.5
Promoting/alerting to suicide method	203	11.5
Romanticising suicide	132	7.5
Naming 'hotspots'	96	5.4
Quotes from survivors/witness/bereaved	96	5.4
Pointing to online links/sites	88	5.0
Inappropriate language	79	4.5
Suicide note included	79	4.5
Unusual method	65	3.7
Focus on bullying/cyberbullying	31	1.8
Celebrity suicide/link	24	1.4
Simplistic view of suicide	20	1.1
Nature of headline	18	1.0
Young victim	12	0.7
Excessive coverage	7	0.4

Table 4. Positive remarks about individual media reports

Comment	n
Omitting or limiting detail of method	36
Highlighting mental health issues (incl. substance misuse)	33
Including information about Samaritans (incl. link to guidelines)	13
Focusing on achievements in life	9
Emphasis on recovery/resolution	8
Pointing to the ineffectiveness of suicide as a solution to problems	6
Sensitive, appropriate language	6
Encouraging support (incl. advice/help for young people)	6
Pointing to the complexity of suicide and the reasons behind it	4
Comments about suicide being permanent	4
Not (re)printing suicide note/Facebook comments	4
Not referring to an incident as a suicide/attempted suicide	3
Mentioning barriers/guards at dangerous crossing	3
Review of services	2
Other and unspecified	13