Title: Responsible journalism, imitative suicide and transgender populations: a systematic review of UK newspapers

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SUICIDE JOURNALISM & TRANSGENDER POPULATIONS

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Abstract

* Purpose: The risk of suicide is high in the transgender population. Imitative suicide occurs when excess suicidal behavior is observed following news media coverage of suicide. The purpose of this study is to evaluate how often UK newspapers adhere to suicide reporting guidelines designed to minimize imitative suicide when they report the suicides of transgender individuals.
* Methods: A newspaper archive was searched for articles about the suicides of transgender people published between 2007 and 2017. Two reviewers applied a checklist of responsible reporting practices to assess adherence to guidelines.
* Results: There were 79 articles meeting inclusion criteria. The mean number of guideline breaches was 3.9 (of a maximum 10), with the most commonly breached guidelines an inappropriate headline (70.9%) and failure to provide sources of support (60.8%). Every article breached at least one guideline. There was not a significant difference between the different newspapers in mean number of guideline breaches (p = 0.24).
* Conclusion: There is generally poor adherence to responsible reporting guidelines in UK newspapers when reporting the suicides of transgender people.

Manuscript

Introduction

The risk of attempted suicide is high in the transgender population. Although estimates vary and are often limited by the use of convenience sampling (Marshall, Claes, Bouman, Witcomb & Arcelus, 2015) the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS) (the largest known survey of transgender respondents) estimated prevalence of previous suicide attempt in this population at 40% (James et al., 2016). Measuring suicide attempts resulting in death is more difficult: routine data rarely records whether individuals are transgender, and the transgender status of individuals dying by suicide is not always known to or reported by their surviving family and friends (Tanis, 2016). Although high mortality from suicide cannot necessarily be assumed from this, especially as non-fatal suicide attempts are thought to be more frequent than fatal suicide attempts (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2015) the high attempt rate may reflect the high levels of mental health problems present in the transgender population (Klein & Golub, 2016), something which may in turn reflect the socioeconomic marginalization experienced by many transgender individuals (James et al, 2016). This is, therefore, an important public health problem and one which highlights health inequalities between transgender and cisgender populations.

News media coverage of suicide has been linked to imitative acts. This was demonstrated when a positive association was observed between the number of front-page newspaper reports of suicide and an excess in the observed number of suicides in a given month (Phillips, 1974). Since then, this finding has been explored in a variety of settings. While media attention to mental health topics including suicide may have beneficial effects by e.g. signposting to sources of help, reducing stigma or influencing health policy-makers, high volumes of news content reporting specific suicidal acts has been associated with imitative suicide: an analysis of multiple studies found that use of previously-uncommon methods of suicide has been observed to increase following media publicity surrounding the methods; that suicides of celebrities are more associated with imitative effects than suicides of non-celebrities; and that the amount of coverage of a story is positively related to the likelihood of finding an imitative effect (Stack, 2003).

A systematic review found a strong modeling effect of imitative suicide, in which people dying from suicide following media reports of suicide tended to have the same gender and similar age to the person whose death was portrayed (Sisak & Värnik, 2012). Differential identification theory seeks to explain this link by suggesting that a reader who feels they have much in common with the deceased is more susceptible to imitating their suicidal behavior—that “the impact of a suicide story… is conditioned by the degree of identification between the model and the observer” (Stack, 2005, p123) This effect of characteristic sharing is known as “horizontal identification”. The related concept of “vertical identification” suggests that a reader who views the deceased as having a social status higher than their own (due to e.g. celebrity status, respected career) may also be more susceptible to a kind of “aspirational” imitative behavior (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009).

In awareness of these associations, several organizations have produced media guidelines for suicide reporting which minimizes risk of harm (National Union of Journalists, 2015; The Samaritans, 2017; World Health Organization, 2017). In the UK, adherence is voluntary, with the only related principle of the press regulator IPSO (membership of which is also voluntary) being that “care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the [suicide] method used” (IPSO, n.d.). Other regulatory or legislative requirements relating to responsible reporting of suicide do not appear to exist in the UK. In 2016, a review of articles from UK online publications found 86.9% of articles about suicide failed to adhere to all of the guidelines produced by the Samaritans (Utterson, Daoud & Dutta, 2017).

It has been established that transgender individuals are at high risk of suicide attempts and that individuals affected by imitative suicide are likely to share characteristics with the person whose death was portrayed in news media. While the effect of sharing transgender status with the person whose death was portrayed has not been examined, it is plausible via differential identification theory that identifying with the deceased in this way could contribute to the risk of imitative suicide. It may, therefore, be of particular importance that care is taken when reporting the deaths by suicide of transgender people, to avoid harm to transgender readers. The aim of this review is to examine the extent to which UK newspaper reporting of the deaths by suicide of transgender individuals adheres to these reporting guidelines.

Methods

*Identification and selection of articles*

Nexis, a database of news and legal documents, was searched for articles appearing in UK newspapers between 15th September 2007 and 15th September 2017. The strategy identified articles with the word “suicide” in their headline and/or lead paragraphs, AND the terms “transgender” OR “transsexual” OR “gender identity” somewhere in the text. The search engine permitted a maximum of three terms to be combined with the primary search term using the OR operator, so a separate search identified articles with the word “suicide” in their headline and/or lead paragraphs, AND the terms “genderfluid” OR “genderqueer” OR “non-binary” somewhere in the text.

Inclusion criteria required that the article referred to a specific act of suicide or presumed suicide, and the act of suicide was by an individual who was transgender or otherwise gender non-binary.

Exclusion criteria were that the act of suicide was murder-suicide (as the reporting of such events warrants similar but separate media guidelines, see the Samaritans, n.d.); that the act of suicide was assisted suicide/euthanasia if legal in the country in which it occurred; or that the article described a non-fatal suicide attempt (as there is a paucity of evidence regarding whether news reporting of non-fatal suicide attempts lead to imitative suicide, and because including non-fatal attempts would have prevented the assessment of checklist items only applicable to attempts resulting in death).

No exclusions were made on the basis of any other characteristics of the newspaper, the deceased individual or the circumstances of their suicide. Near-duplicated articles, for example where they appeared in both the Sunday and weekday versions of a newspaper with no or minimal alteration between versions, were removed.

One reviewer (JB) screened the titles of all the articles resulting from the search and selected all that seemed potentially relevant. The same reviewer read all potentially relevant articles and applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

*Data extraction*

A checklist tool (see figure 1) was developed to assess the responsibility of the reporting. This was adapted from media guidelines for suicide reporting produced by the WHO (2017), the Samaritans (2017), and the Scottish National Union of Journalists (2015). Specific recommendations appearing in two or more of these were combined into a checklist of ten items (eight of which appeared in all three resources).

An extraction form was developed from the checklist. The name of the deceased, the year and month of their death, the publication name and the apparent reason that the death was “newsworthy” (e.g. the deceased was a child) were also extracted.

Two reviewers (JB and NM) double-extracted data from the articles, applying the checklist tool to each article independently of each other. Following this, disagreements between reviewers were resolved by discussion and the agreed joint conclusions were recorded. The independent conclusions of each reviewer prior to discussion were used to calculate a measure of inter-rater reliability (Cohen’s kappa) for each checklist item. Overall, Cohen’s kappa was 0.86, but for individual checklist items this varied between 0.49 and 0.98. Table 1 displays percentage prevalence and Cohen’s kappa for breaches of each checklist item.

*Analysis*

Outcomes measured in the analysis were frequency and proportion of articles failing to adhere to each checklist item; mean checklist items per article breached; number of checklist items breached across articles as a percentage frequency; number of articles included per publication appearing in the review; and mean breaches per article in each publication appearing in the review ≥5 times. For this last outcome, Kruskal Wallis testing was used to check for a statistically significant difference between the mean checklist breaches per article of the different newspapers.

Results

The search strategy generated 996 hits, 187 of which were identified by their headline as potentially relevant. Of these, 79 articles met inclusion criteria. The 79 articles related to 22 transgender individuals and their suicides and were from 19 different publications. The additional search for the words “genderfluid”, “genderqueer” and “non-binary” yielded no results. This process is summarized in Figure 2.

The characteristics of the coverage of each individual’s death are summarized in Table 2. Although it was not always obvious which features of the suicidal act or individual were considered “newsworthy” by journalists, some emphasized features included young age of the deceased individual; death of an incarcerated individual; unusual method of death; and the viral impact of a suicide note published on social media.

The mean number of checklist breaches per article was 3.9 (SD = 1.6; although data was not normally distributed so median (= 4) and interquartile range (= 2) may be more appropriate measures) out of a possible maximum of 10, with the number of breaches as few as one and as many as seven. The modal value of checklist breaches was three (25.3% of articles breached three items), followed by five breaches (20.3% of articles) and four breaches (17.7% of articles). There were no articles that breached zero checklist items.

The most common breach was presence of an inappropriate headline (for example, a headline which contains the word “suicide” or which refers to the suicide method or specific site e.g. a road/bridge), present in 70.9% of articles, followed by failure to provide links to sources of support (such as a website or telephone helpline), which occurred in 60.8% of articles. The provision of inappropriate detail or description of the suicide was the third most commonly breached item (54.4%), a guideline which would have been breached if e.g. the article referred to the suicide method, or described the appearance of the body/the process of dying. Two breaches occurred rarely or never: only one (1.3%) referenced a pro-suicide source, and none used inappropriate statistics. Table 1 provides the percentage frequency for each of the guidelines, and Figure 1 explains and gives examples of features which would signify a breach.

The publication with the most articles in this review was the Mail, with twenty articles, followed by the Independent and the Mirror, each with eleven articles. Each publication appearing five times or more within the review (the Mail, the Independent, the Mirror, the Telegraph, the Guardian and the Sun) had similar numbers of mean breaches per article (between 4.1 and 4.6), with the exception of the Guardian which had a mean of 2.6 breaches per article. The dataset did not meet the assumptions necessary for ANOVA testing, but a non-parametric Kruskal Wallis test did not find a statistically significant difference in mean breaches per article between the different newspapers appearing ≥5 times in the sample (test statistic = 6.8 ; p = 0.24).

While most individuals had one or a few articles written about their deaths, coverage of two individuals’ deaths (LA and LM) formed a large proportion of the sample articles: one with 23 articles, and one with 15.

Discussion

This review has found that UK newspapers frequently fail to adhere to guidelines designed to minimize the harms that can arise from newspaper reporting. Every article in the sample breached at least one item on our checklist, and the majority of articles had three to five breaches.

The review by Utterson, Daoud & Dutta (2017)which applied the Samaritans’ checklist to a sample of web-based articles about suicide from UK news sources had alternative findings: 86.9% of articles in their review breached at least one checklist item compared with 100% in this review, and the mean number of breaches per article was 2.2 (of a possible nine) compared with 3.9 (of a possible ten) in this review. However, that review had key differences to this review: it used a different source for locating articles; web-based articles only were included; the articles were not limited to covering the suicides of transgender individuals only; the checklist used was similar but non-identical; and the sample covered 28 consecutive days, not a 10 year period. The subjective nature of the checklist items in both reviews may explain some of the differences between their findings.

This study does not provide evidence that the effect of imitative suicide is more pronounced in transgender people, nor does it provide evidence that newspaper reporting is more or less responsible when reporting suicides of transgender people compared with suicides of cisgender people. However, we argue that these results may be particularly concerning because of the previous finding that imitative suicide is more common in individuals who share aspects of their identity with the deceased person (Sisak & Värnik, 2012).

*When breaching guidelines may be in the public interest*

It is not clear from previous literature why newspapers breach guidelines—it may be through lack of awareness, or through believing breaches are justified, or perhaps sometimes through e.g. apathy, valuing their sales above potential harm to readers. In some cases, it may be argued that good reasons exist for breaching reporting guidelines. On one hand, articles which breach these guidelines may cause people harm via imitative suicide. On the other hand, some of the suicides of transgender people are “newsworthy”: the poor mental health and the societal oppression experienced by many transgender people mean that some acts of suicide have public health and political implications. For example, the sample in this review includes articles about three suicides in transgender women, each of whom died while being held in male prisons. The contribution of these women’s environments to their suicide is clearly in question in these cases, and reporting their suicides may be considered to be important because doing so has implications for the rights of transgender people to self-identify their gender, and for their rights within the judicial system.

An important case study is that of a transgender adolescent whose suicide attracted a large amount of media attention. A feature that drove much interest was her suicide note, which she posted on social media. This note was widely shared after her death: it described the importance of accepting the wishes of transgender adolescents wanting to transition and condemned the use of “conversion therapy” (a controversial method of attempting to make a transgender person become cisgender). The note was published or its contents described in many articles. Disclosing the contents of a suicide note is a breach of responsible reporting guidelines, but in this case the note had political implications.

In some cases, it may be that breaching responsible reporting guidelines carries a short-term risk of imitative suicide, but that raising these issues may lead to social or policy changes that have a long-term impact on suicide prevention.

*Strengths of this review*

One of this study’s strengths is the double data extraction performed by two reviewers. While some items for extraction were subjective, the measure of inter-rater reliability used, Cohen’s kappa, was 0.86 across all checklist items, which may be interpreted as “nearly perfect” agreement, and even the lowest score for a checklist item (0.49) is considered “moderate” agreement (McHugh, 2012).

In addition, the extraction form has been developed from publications by several organizations concerned with suicide prevention, drawing them together to ensure we examined adherence to the most prominent guidelines.

*Limitations of this review*

However, the search engine Nexis has some limitations. While, unlike the search engine used in the comparable review by Utterson, Daoud & Dutta (2017),Nexis allows the use of multiple search terms, Boolean operators and time filters, its limitations include an inability to indicate the location of the original article within the newspaper, and a lack of retention of any images which accompanied the text. This prevented assessment of these features, both of which are addressed by reporting guidelines (which discourage prominent/front page placement of articles about suicide, as well as “glamorizing” images of the deceased). Additionally, the Nexis database does not include web journalism and social media. These sources of news are consumed and regulated differently to traditional print media, and so our results cannot be extrapolated to online news media.

The Editors’ Code of the Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO) includes gender identity as a characteristic which mention of “must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story” (IPSO, 2017; Editors’ Code, 2017). This has implications for this review: it is impossible to identify articles about suicide in transgender people whose status as transgender is not referenced. Because articles respecting the requirement not to mention gender identity “unless genuinely relevant” may tend to also respect suicide reporting guidelines, our estimate of non-adherent reporting may be exaggerated because of this.

Although data extraction was performed independently by two reviewers, the search and study selection was performed by a single reviewer.

The potential impact that two individuals may have had on the dataset could pose a limitation, as they attracted much attention and their deaths were reported in a combined 38 articles-- something that could affect the overall estimates for the sample. However, this would not necessarily be a limitation: the predominance of these two deaths in the sample reflects the content to which newspaper readers would have been exposed and therefore reflects the “real world” consumption of such reporting.

Conclusion

Further research could attempt to establish whether being transgender is a characteristic, like gender and age has each been shown to be, which may exert a differential identification effect on readers. Further research could also attempt to assess how online and social media report suicide, as the complex international reach of internet media and the difficulty of regulation is beyond the scope of this study.

This study used systematic review methods to quantify the extent of non-adherence to responsible reporting guidelines in UK newspapers when reporting the deaths by suicide of transgender people. It has found generally poor adherence, with inappropriate headlines, failure to signpost to suicide prevention resources, and inappropriate detail of the death the most common failings. While breaching guidelines may be sometimes potentially justifiable, the majority of breaches do not appear to be justifiable, at least appearing to be made due to lack of knowledge of the guidelines, lack of attention to detail, or perhaps underestimating the potential human cost of irresponsible reporting.

If newspaper editors allow guidelines to be breached, this should be done only in exceptional cases, perhaps alongside a statement which acknowledges that they do so in contravention of relevant guidelines, and which offers an explanation for this decision. While caution should be applied to reporting suicide in all populations, newspaper journalists and editors should, when covering the suicides of transgender individuals, avoid making any contribution to the high lifetime risk of suicide attempts in this population, by adhering to relevant guidelines and exercising an even greater standard of sensitivity and care.

* If you are having thoughts of suicide or self-harm, help is available. Visit <http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html> to find telephone helplines.

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Figures and tables

There are two tables:

Table 1: frequency and proportion of the articles breaching each checklist item, with a measure of inter-rater reliability for each

Table 2: Names of the individuals whose deaths were reported in the sample of articles, and details of the reporting

There are two figures:

Figure 1: the checklist items assessed by the reviewers, with examples of grounds for declaring a breach occurred

Figure 2: PRISMA flowchart for the article search and selection