

ONLINE MEDIA REPORT ON A HUNGARIAN DOUBLE SUICIDE CASE: COMPARISON OF CONSECUTIVELY PUBLISHED ARTICLES

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SUMMARY

Background: Certain types of news coverage can increase the likelihood of suicide. This study explores, how media covered a suicide case in a country, where there was no available guideline, though it was among the leading countries in suicide statistics. The specific aim was to compare the first and second waves of reporting on suicide from the same website.

Methods: In 2011, two young women committed double suicide in Budapest, Hungary. We analyzed the first and second waves of the reported articles about this double suicide case, in online daily newspapers, news portals and also the readers' comments.

Results: Provocative aspects were present in 38.9-100.0% of the articles, while preventive aspects were found in 0-22.2% of the articles. Readers commented in 49.6% "Other Aspects" (comments about all other aspects not belonging to any other category, i.e. Risk Behavior, Family Relations, Suicide Place and Methods, Prevention, Media Style Reporting) and in 25.4% "Without Content" (comments without a specific content: e.g. chatting), while "Prevention" (comments about possible safety preventive measures) was mentioned only in 1.5% of the comments. In 34.1% the emotional tonality of the comments was "Neutral" (indifferent comments: e.g. chatting). Though articles published for the second time were significantly longer than the firstly published ones, the preventive aspects of reporting were not added to the second articles either, but significantly more provocative aspects were found in them.

Conclusions: The suicide reports, both in the first and second waves of reporting, were not in line with the recommendation of the international guidelines on suicide reporting. It draws the attention of professionals to the importance of developing national guidelines on media suicide coverage.

Key words: suicide - online media report – guideline - consecutive online articles - comments

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INTRODUCTION

Suicide rates among people aged 15-29 increased recently: suicide is the second leading cause of death in this age group in Europe (World Health Organization 2012). During the last decades, there is growing evidence that certain types of news coverage might increase the likelihood of suicide in vulnerable individuals due to an imitation effect (Cheng et al. 2007, Goldney 2001, Gould 2001, Hawton et al. 1999, Phillips 1974, Pirkis & Blood 2001, Schmidtke & Schaller 2000, Stack 2005, Sudak & Sudak 2005). At the same time, media can influence vulnerable people positively, by encouraging them to seek help (Goldney 2001, Gould 2001, Pirkis & Blood 2001, Schmidtke & Schaller 2000). Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2010) conceptualized all suicide-protective impact of media reporting as a Papageno effect, based on Mozart's opera, The Magic Flute, where Papageno was influenced positively in suicidal crisis by three boys who drew his attention to alternative coping strategies. Due to these reasons, media can play an important role in suicide prevention.

With the help of the collaborations of mental health professionals, who are involved in suicide prevention, and media experts, several health organizations, including the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

(AFSP), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the WHO and the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) together and the Samaritans parallelly, developed their guidelines on media coverage of suicide to minimize the potential for suicide imitation and to encourage people to seek help, when it is necessary (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention 2011, World Health Organization 2000, World Health Organization and International Association for Suicide Prevention 2008, Samaritans 2011). These recommendations are translated to several languages and can be downloaded from the internet for free (e.g., WHO: http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/426.pdf, WHO/IASP: http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/resource_media.pdf). These guidelines, which have very similar contexts, clearly describe how media should and should not report on suicide for reducing the "copycat" effect. Many studies have supported the positive effect of introducing guidelines on the media coverage of suicide: responsible media reporting decreases suicide (Etzersdorfer et al. 1992, Michel et al. 1995, Michel et al. 2000, Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck 2007, Pirkis et al. 2006, Sonneck et al. 1994). However, Tatum et al. (2010) found that the U.S. newspaper articles on suicide did not consistently follow the media guidelines in the two years following their publication:

one-fifth of the stories included inappropriate imagery, more than half of them detailed suicide method and location, and information were provided very rarely (1-6%) about warning signs, risk factors and prevention resources. After reviewing 9 major guidelines, Pirkis et al. (2006) emphasised that recommendations, which chose an active dissemination strategy, were more likely to be effective, than those that were simply made available. Recently, Ramadas and Kuttichira (2011) have found that a one-day workshop for educating media personnel about responsible reporting of suicide has not achieved a statistically significant result.

After analyzing the spontaneous comments of readers on the internet, connected to media reports on a specific double suicide case in Estonia, Sisask et al. (2005) highlighted, that the style of media reporting on suicide behaviour might influence the content of the readers' comments.

In spite of the fact, that the suicide rate in Hungary is the second highest in the European Union and it is the fifth in the world (World Health Organization 2012), the first guideline on media coverage of suicide was only published in March 2012 in Hungarian. The only research on the Hungarian media coverage of suicide was made by Fekete et al. (2001). They analyzed 2203 suicide reports of daily newspapers from 1981 and 1991 and they compared the Hungarian data to the American, Austrian, Finnish, German (both former West and East) and Japanese ones. They found that on the basis of presented consequences, qualifications and wordings in the texts, the attitude toward suicide is more accepting in the Hungarian media, than in the mass media of the other countries.

During the last decade, with the expansion of internet usage, especially among young people, online journalism, which is still rapidly developing, has offered specific, new features (Oblak 2005). An important, but less studied feature of the online journalism is, that compared to traditional print media, internet makes it possible for journalists to inform people about an event in a fast and dynamic way: usually the first online article is published in a very short time after the event and then several articles follow each other on the same website, while print media is slower and more static.

In 2011 (before the development of the Hungarian guideline on media coverage of suicide), a 19 and a 21 year-old young women committed double suicide in Budapest, Hungary. Collective (e.g. double) suicide is a very rare act; it is 0.6-4% of all suicides (Hocauglu 2009). Therefore, this case received much attention in the media. The objective of the present study was to explore how the media covered this double suicide case and to analyze the readers' comments written in response to media reports in a country, which was among the leading countries in suicide statistics and where there was no available guideline. To our knowledge, there has not been any research carried out on how the style of the consecutively published articles

on a specific suicide case differs on the same online media portrayal. The specific objective of our study was to analyze, if there is any difference between how the media covers the above mentioned double suicide case in the online articles published in the first and second waves on the same website and to compare the readers' comments. We aimed to know, whether the longer time the media experts had until publishing the second wave of articles, was used for collecting and inserting more information on the preventive aspects of suicide into the articles, as recommended by the international guidelines.

METHODS

Media sources

We analysed the online version of the most widely read daily newspapers and news portals of Hungary. Those public newspapers were selected to the analysis from the ranking list of the GfK Hungaria market researcher company, which published articles about this particular double suicide case, in this way, economic, sport and advertisement newspapers were excluded (GfK 2011). The analyzed daily newspapers were: *Népszabadság*, *Magyar Nemzet*, *Népszava*, *Blikk*, *Metropol* and *Bors*. According to the latest data of the Masmi Hungary Piackutató Intézet (Masmi Hungary Market Researcher Institution 2009), the three most popular news portals were: *Index*, *Origo*, and *Hvg*.

In our analysis we included the articles on this particular suicide case, reported in the first and second waves. Altogether 18 articles were included. From the 9 articles, which were enrolled in the first wave, 8 articles were published on the same day, when the double suicide case occurred and 1 article was published on the next day. The second wave of articles was published on the following day after the articles published at the first time. In the case of 7 articles from the 9 ones, one article was published two days after the first wave, while one article was published on the same day, when the first wave of the articles were published.

The reaction and attitude of readers' comments in response to the above-described 18 articles were analyzed.

Aspects of analysis of media reporting

We used the method of Sisask et al. (2005) to analyze the style of media reporting on the double suicide of two Hungarian young women. Both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the articles were analysed (Table 1). Based on the WHO and AFSP guidelines Sisask et al. (2005) divided the qualitative analyses into two aspects: provocative and preventive. Those aspects, which are irrelevant in the online media (e.g. position on the front page) were excluded from the analysis. The coding was done in all cases by two independent, trained researchers.

Table 1. Qualitative and Quantitative aspects of media reporting based on Sisask et al. (2005)

Aspects of media reporting			
Provocative aspects	Qualitative aspects		Quantitative aspects
		Preventive aspects	
Sensational or dramatic headline	Discussion about possible reasons of suicidal act		Number of comments
Word “suicide” or “suicide attempt” in the headline	Risk indicators and warning signs given		% of all comments
Sensational or dramatic text	Discussion about possible prevention		Length of headline (number of words)
Word “suicide” or “suicide attempt” in the text	Alternatives to suicidal behaviour highlighted		Length of article (number of words)
Photographs of circumstances published	Comments of health professionals added		Number of pictures of the circumstances
Specific details of method and/or place described	Info on mental health services and help-lines given		-
Details of victims given (names and/or ages)		-	-

Aspects of content analysis of readers' comments

Following the method of content analysis of the readers' comments of Sisask et al. (2005), we classified the comments according to two themes, as manifest and emotional content themes. We used the definition of Sisask et al. (2005) for each theme. Manifest content themes were categorized and defined as, Risk Behavior: comments about risk taking behavior seen as a normal trait for teenagers; Family Relations: comments about family patterns as a risk factor for suicidal behavior; Suicide Place: comments about suicide location; Suicide Method: comments about means of suicide; Prevention: comments about possible safety preventive measures; Media: comments about media reporting; Other Aspects: comments about all other single aspect not belonging to any other category; Without Content: comments without a specific content: e.g. chatting. Emotional content themes were categorized and defined as, Ironic: sarcastic, joking comments; Angry: damnable, disdainful, blaming, accusing comments; Serious: sincere and concerning comments, trying to understand and discuss the reasons; Sympathetic: compassionate and regretful comments; Approving: accepting and admiring comments; Neutral: indifferent comments: e.g. chatting. The coding was done in the case of all comments by two independent, trained researchers.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics are reported in text and in the tables. T-test was applied for continuous variables (quantitative aspects), Chi-square test and Fisher's exact test were applied for categorical variables (qualitative aspects) when examining differences between the articles published in the first and second waves, and readers' comments on them. All tests of hypotheses were considered statistically significant if the two-sided p-value was <0.05, and a tendency was declared if the two-sided p-value was <0.1.

RESULTS

Qualitative and quantitative aspects of media reporting

The results of the qualitative analysis of media reporting on the double suicide of the two young Hungarian women are presented in Table 2. Except sensational or dramatic text, which characterize more than one-third of the articles, provocative aspects were present in more than half of the articles. The method and/or the place of

Table 2. Provocative and preventive aspects in the Hungarian articles (n=18)

Provocative aspects	Articles (n=18)
Sensational or dramatic headline	11 (61.1%)
Word “suicide” or “suicide attempt” in the headline	13 (72.2%)
Sensational or dramatic text	7 (38.9%)
Word “suicide” or “suicide attempt” in the text	17 (94.4%)
Photographs of circumstances published	10 (55.6%)
Specific details of method and/or place described	18 (100%)
Details of victims given (names and/or ages)	17 (94.4%)
Preventive aspects	Articles (n=18)
Discussion about possible reasons of suicidal act	4 (22.2%)
Risk indicators and warning signs given	3 (16.7%)
Discussion about possible prevention	1 (5.6%)
Alternatives to suicidal behaviour highlighted	0
Comments of health professionals added	4 (22.2%)
Info on mental health services and help-lines given	0

the suicide were described in all articles, details of victims were given in all of them, except one, and the prevalence of the word „suicide” or „suicide attempt” could be found in 72% of the headlines.

Among the preventive aspects, we could find, that in 22.2% of the articles comments of health professionals were added and there was discussion about the possible reason of the suicidal act in 22.2% of the articles as well. At the same time, there was no article, which highlighted any alternatives to suicidal behaviour or gave any information on mental health services and help-lines.

Table 3 presents the results of quantitative analysis of media coverage of the Hungarian double suicide case.

Table 3. Quantitative aspects in the Hungarian articles (n=18)

Quantitative aspects	Articles (n=18) Mean
Number of comments	23.72 (SD=35.15)
Length of headline (number of words)	25.56 (SD=14.79)
Length of article (number of words)	203.17 (SD=132.33)
Number of pictures of the circumstances	0.72 (SD=0.67)

Comparison of the articles published in the first and second waves

We found that the articles published in the second wave (average number of words: 285.78, SD=129.670) on the same double suicide case were significantly longer than the firstly published ones (average number of words: 120.56, SD=70.993) ($t(12.401)=-3.353$ $p=0.006$) from the same website.

At the same time, the articles published in the second wave, contained significantly more often the word “suicide” or “suicide attempt” in the headline than

the ones published in the first wave ($\chi^2(1)=6.923$; $p=0.029$). Furthermore, the headlines of the secondly published articles tended to have more often sensational or dramatic headline ($\chi^2(1)=5.844$; $p=0.050$) and sensational and dramatic text ($\chi^2(1)=5.844$; $p=0.050$).

We did not find any significant difference between the articles published in the first and second waves, neither in the prevalence of the discussion about possible prevention ($\chi^2(1)=1.059$; $p=1.000$), nor in the prevalence of comments of health professionals ($\chi^2(1)=1.286$; $p=0.576$): there was no discussion about possible prevention in any case of the first wave of reporting, while there was 1 case (11.1%) in the second wave of reporting. The prevalence of comments of health professionals was in 1 case (11.1%) of the first wave of reporting and 3 (33.3%) in the case of the second wave of reporting. The second wave of reporting tended to contain more discussion about the possible reasons of suicidal act ($\chi^2(1)=5.143$; $p=0.082$). Neither the first, nor the second wave of reporting highlighted any alternatives to suicide behaviour or contact information on mental health services and help-lines.

Readers' comments

Altogether half of the articles contained comments. Table 4. presents the themes of the comments of readers provoked by these 9 analysed articles. The most common themes of content were „Other Aspects” (49.6%) („The failure of society, 33 years of crisis...”), followed by „Without Content” (25.4%) and Suicide Method (13.1%), while „Suicide Place” and „Prevention” were mentioned the least often (1.2% and 1.5%, respectively). The most common emotional tonality of the comments was „Neutral” (34.1%), followed by „Angry” (31.7%) and „Sympathetic” (29.8%). Comparing the comments on the articles published in the first and second waves, we did not get any significant differences on any themes, except „Family Relation”:

Table 4. Comparison of the comments of the first and the second waved published articles

Themes of the comments	Total N=413	Articles published in the first wave N=239	Articles published in the second wave N=174	Pearson Chi-Square	P
Risk Behavior	22 (5.3%)	9 (3.8%)	13 (7.5%)	2.742	0.098
Family Relations	34 (8.2%)	7 (2.9%)	27 (15.5%)	21.121	<0.001
Suicide Place	5 (1.2%)	2 (0.8%)	3 (1.7%)	0.663	0.654
Suicide Method	54 (13.1%)	33 (13.8%)	21 (12.1%)	0.268	0.605
Prevention	6 (1.5%)	4 (1.7%)	2 (1.1%)	0.193	1.000
Media	40 (9.7%)	27 (11.3%)	13 (7.5%)	1.685	0.194
Other Aspects	205 (49.6%)	121 (60.6%)	84 (48.3%)	0.223	0.637
Without Content	105 (25.4%)	62 (25.9%)	43 (24.7%)	0.080	0.777
Ironic	56 (13.6%)	34 (14.2%)	22 (12.6%)	0.215	0.643
Angry	131 (31.7%)	76 (31.8%)	55 (31.6%)	0.002	0.967
Serious	107 (25.9%)	62 (25.9%)	45 (25.9%)	0.000	0.985
Sympathetic	123 (29.8%)	75 (31.4%)	48 (27.6%)	0.693	0.405
Approving	31 (7.5%)	14 (5.9%)	17 (9.8%)	2.220	0.136
Neutral	141 (34.1%)	85 (35.6%)	56 (32.2%)	0.512	0.474

the comments on the secondly published articles mentioned it as a preventive/or risk factor significantly more often (15.5%), than the comments on the first time published ones (2.9%) ($\chi^2(1)=21.121$; $p<0.001$). Furthermore, the comments on the second time published articles tended to mention risk behavior more often (7.5%) than the comments on the firstly published articles (3.8%) ($\chi^2(1)=2.742$; $p=0.098$).

DISCUSSION

Suicide of young people is a serious mental health problem all over the world, including Hungary as well. Based on recent research, certain type of news coverage can decrease suicide risk. In the current paper, the media coverage of a recently occurred Hungarian double suicide case of two young women was analyzed in several aspects. At the time of this suicide case, there was no Hungarian guideline on media coverage of suicide.

The results of the current study show that the Hungarian online media reporting method on this double suicide case was not in line with the recommendation of the WHO and other well-known guidelines: the media reported this double suicide case in a sensational manner. Though the guidelines clearly state that media should not report specific details or photographs on the reported suicide case (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention 2011, World Health Organization 2000, Samaritans 2011), almost all articles on the current Hungarian double suicide case gave specific details of the victims, the method and/or place of the suicide and photographs were published in more than half of the articles as well. Furthermore, almost every article text contained the word “suicide” or “suicide attempt”, and these words were also present in three-quarters of the headlines. Additionally, almost two-thirds of the articles had a dramatic headline. In spite of these, only the minority of the articles mentioned preventive aspects of suicide: one article from the eighteen discussed possible prevention efforts and a bit more than one-third of the articles wrote about the risk indicators and warning signs of suicide and around one-fourth of the articles published comments of health professionals, while there was not even one article which would have highlighted alternatives to suicide behaviour or gave concrete information on mental health services and help-lines, though it is strongly recommended according to the guidelines (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention 2011, World Health Organization 2000, Samaritans 2011).

More than a decade ago, in 2002, there was a similar double suicide case in Estonia, but with nonfatal outcome (Sisask et al. 2005). The Hungarian and the Estonian ways of news coverage were very similar in almost all of the examined aspects, however, there were considerable differences in the usage of the word “suicide” or “suicide attempt”, the Hungarian headlines

and texts contained them definitely more often, than the Estonian ones: while a little bit more than the half (4/7, 57.1%) of the Estonian article texts contained these words, they were present in almost every Hungarian article texts (17/18, 94.4%). Regarding the headlines, while none of the Estonian articles used the word “suicide” or “suicide attempt” in the headline, almost three-quarters (13/18, 72.2%) of the Hungarian headlines contained at least one of them. In spite of that, all of the Estonian headlines were evaluated as “sensational or dramatic”, while less, but still almost two-thirds (11/18, 61.1%) of the Hungarian headlines were evaluated so.

In Hungary, the majority of the readers’ comments did not show any involvement in the topic. Regarding the manifest content they commented most often, almost half of them “other aspects” of suicide and one-quarter of them gave a comment “without content”. “Prevention” was not among the most prevalent themes, it was present only in 1.5% of the comments. Regarding emotional tonality, more than one-third of the comments had neutral style. Though “Approving” tonality was the least prevalent among comments, it was still present in 7.5%. Compared to the comments on the above described Estonian double suicide case, the Hungarian comments showed less involvement and more neutral emotional tonality (Sisask et al. 2005). All of this highlights that though suicide prevention is a public health problem in Hungary, even after reading sensational news, people don’t seem to be involved in the topic, and prevention is not in the focus of the readers. Our study - based on the Hungarian readers’ spontaneous comments in response to the articles on a double suicide of young people and knowing that media has an attitude forming impact (Fekete et al. 2001) – highlights the importance of the role of news coverage in Hungary, which should positively influence readers and encourage suicide prevention.

To our knowledge this is the first study, which compared the first and second waves of reporting on a suicide case from the same website. As expected the articles published in the second wave were significantly longer than the firstly published ones. In spite of the longer text of the articles, unfortunately the preventive aspects of reporting (as discussion about possible prevention efforts, alternatives to suicidal behavior, comments of health professionals, contact information on mental health services and help-lines) – which hardly can be found in the articles published in the first wave - were not added to the second article either, but significantly more provocative aspects appeared in them, like the word “suicide” or “suicide attempt” in the headline. Based on the current Hungarian results the longer time, which media experts had until publishing the second wave of reporting, was not used for collecting more information on the preventive aspects of suicide and inserting them to the article, but journalists increased the provocative and sensational style of the

article. In spite of this, we did not get any significant differences neither on content, nor on emotional tonality themes of the comments, except that the comments on the secondly published articles mentioned family relations as a preventive/or risk factor significantly more often, than the first time published ones.

A possible limitation of the current study is that we analyzed only the first and second waves of reporting on the same website. It would be useful to extend the study to the third and fourth waves of published articles as well, if preventive aspects were added to them. Furthermore, this study focuses on online media, the comparison with the news coverage of this Hungarian double suicide case in the print media would be interesting as well. Additionally, it would be useful to compare the first and second waves of published articles in a country, where there is a national guideline on reporting of suicide.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we would like to highlight, that the way the Hungarian online media covered suicide - both in the first and second waves of reporting - was not at all in line with the recommendation of WHO and other well-known guidelines. Journalists should add more preventive information, particularly when they have more time to present the topic as in the secondly published articles.

Our study draws the attention of professionals to the importance of translating the already existing guidelines to several languages and considering the development of national recommendations, taking into account the cultural specificity as well. The good news is, that since the above mentioned double suicide case, the first Hungarian guideline on media coverage of suicide has been published. Further studies are needed to examine the effect of these national guidelines.

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