

Viewpoint

"WERTHER EFFECT"—MEDIA, A POTENTIAL PREVENTIVE TOOL FOR SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

Suicide, with all its psychosocial impacts, is a major public health problem and needs prompt preventive approaches considering its increasing magnitude. In this era of the internet, people started to rely more on data available at their fingertips than the print media. And this is the time to apply the knowledge we had gained of print media reporting on suicide (its limitations and possibilities) to online media. This article tries to bring attention to some of the recommendations for media reporting on suicide and the need for researches based on the online media platform.

Keywords: Werther effect, suicide, social media

Suicide, with its broad social, emotional and financial consequences is a major public health problem. Worldwide there are around 800 000 suicides a year, and every 40 seconds someone is taking their own life.¹ Social learning is a known cause of suicide, and these "copycat" suicides result at least in part by exposure to another person's suicide.

Media has got a significant role by either enhancing or weakening suicide prevention efforts. The media may provide useful educational information about suicide or may spread misinformation, thus may minimize or increase the risk of imitative (copycat) suicide.²

When the reporting is extensive, prominent, sensational and overtly describes the method adopted it puts the vulnerable individuals (young people, people with mental illness, past history of suicidal behaviour or those bereaved by suicide) at risk of engaging in imitative behaviours. The risk further increases when it's a celebrity, someone with higher social status or someone who can be easily identified with. Fictionalized suicide can also have a negative impact on individuals

(Philips, 1974). However, in the studies conducted, there was no significant difference with respect to the negative emotions generated after watching the censored vs uncensored suicide scenes. It was the extent to which they could identify with the character who committed suicide that caused depression, which then led to modelling the character.

The effect of media reports on increasing suicides is referred to as the "Werther effect", after the title character in Goethe's novel 'The sorrows of young Werther', who died by suicide when faced with the loss of his love which had a mass effect on the people who later committed the act. The terms suicide contagion or, suggestion and copycat suicide are common synonyms. It was first described scientifically by David Philipps in 1974 which has been considered to be a pioneer work till now; it also invites the need for further studies.^{3,4,5}

An Indian study had demonstrated that it's not just the content of the news. Its placement and prominence (defined as reporting inside special boxes, the news

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printed on the front page, and the word "suicide" in the headline) can also influence copycat suicides. They observed that when compared to foreign studies, there was an increase in the reporting of such news by Indian print media on front pages probably to enhance sales of their newspapers. After the celebrity suicide, the prominence given to the news stories were also found to have increased.⁶ Studies linked the prominence given to the suicide news with an increase in the suicidal rates within a month of publication.^{6,7}

Sensational (cited as use of catchphrases and adjectives, the photograph of the victim and the location, illustrative descriptions, blame being put on an isolated event) and trivialized reporting (suicide being projected just as one other coping mechanism)⁶ were observed to have increased after a celebrity suicide and had an impact on the suicidal rate.^{6,8}

It was also noted by the authors⁶ that the media had not at all played its role to generate awareness regarding mental illness and its strong association with suicide even though the celebrity after the suicide of whom the story was conducted suffered from mental illness.

Stories that portray an adaptive response to adverse circumstances and the reports that are resource-oriented were found to have a positive effect by reducing the suicide rate. This is called the "Papageno effect", after the character in "The Magic Flute."^{3,4,5} Reporting with a focus on suicidal ideation not followed by an attempt or completed suicide can have a protective effect. The focus on individual suicidal ideation may help in identification with that individual and thus may highlight the outcome of 'going on living'. When the articles are on individuals who refrained from suicidal gestures by adopting positive coping strategies that can promote preventive measures.⁹

In this internet era, social networking sites have become increasingly popular, and having access to them is just a basic need, especially for the youth. The social media platforms, available online such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc. are powerful resources for people seeking information and support, for a variety of problems including psychological and health challenges.¹⁰ They allow anonymous or pseudonymous participation providing individuals with a platform for communicating ideas on sensitive topics and for Vulnerable patients, as described above, can get misled

by this information, can contemplate further on their ideas of ending life and can take it up to completion. Exposure to suicide-related contents in social media can have distant effects even on those who are not directly involved, which highlights the importance of the accidental exposure on people have no intention of self-harm or maybe who are not even vulnerable.

Recommendations for proper reporting^{11,12}

Do not

1. Give precise details on the suicide method
2. Give personal information on the person who has committed suicide
3. Give some expressions such as "self-inflicted death."
4. Don't place stories about suicide prominently and don't unduly repeat such stories
5. Don't use language which sensationalizes or normalizes suicide, or presents it as a constructive solution to problems
6. Don't explicitly describe the method used
7. Don't provide details about the site/location
8. Don't use sensational headlines
9. Don't use photographs, video footage or social media links

Do's

1. Do provide accurate information about where to seek help
2. Do educate the public about the facts of suicide and suicide prevention, without spreading myths
3. Do report stories of how to cope with life stressors or suicidal thoughts, and how to get help
4. Do apply particular caution when reporting celebrity suicides
5. Do apply caution when interviewing bereaved family or friends
6. Do recognize that media professionals themselves may be affected by stories about suicide

Developing preventive strategies for suicide is complex, as the contributing factors are not fully understood. It should also consider media reporting as an important tool in this era of social networking. Researches on this aspect, particularly lack from this part of the world. Let us take it up and work on it. As professionals should we also insist on getting No objection Certificate (NOC) before matters concerning mental health and suicide are portrayed on movies, series, etc.??

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