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Suicide Contagion and Media

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Media & Youth Suicide: Best Practices for Reporting and Storytelling:

Pre Conference Symposium

Hosted by Stanford Department of Psychiatry's Center for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing

Microsoft's Sunnyvale campus

April 26, 2018

SUICIDE CONTAGION/MODELING

-Definition-

Process by which knowledge (direct or indirect) of one suicide facilitates the occurrence of a subsequent suicide.

EMOTIONAL CONTAGION

-Facebook News Feed Experiment-

- For one week in January 2012, Facebook altered the number of positive and negative posts in the news feeds of 689,003 randomly selected users to see what effect the changes had on the tone of the posts the recipients then wrote.
- The people who saw more positive posts responded by writing more positive posts. Similarly, seeing more negative content prompted the viewers to be more negative in their own posts.
- Showed emotions can be spread on social media

Kramer et al., 2014



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SUICIDE CONTAGION/ MODELING

- Sources of evidence -

- Impact of exposure to suicidal peer
- **Impact of media**
- Suicide clusters

IMPACT OF MEDIA

Research finds a greater increase in suicide when:

- Frequency of stories increases (dose-response effect)
- Higher proportion of the population is exposed
- Headlines are dramatic
- Prominence of story increases (e.g. front page)

The increase in subsequent suicides following media exposure has been termed **“The Werther Effect”**

Insel, B.J., & Gould, M.S. (2008). Impact of modeling on adolescent suicidal behavior. Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 31(2), 293-316; Pirkis J, Blood RW. (2001). Suicide and the media: Part I. Reportage in nonfictional media. Crisis, 22(4), 146-54.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Increase in suicides the months after the death of Robin Williams in the US

David S. Fink*, Julian Santaella-Tenorio, Katherine M. Keyes

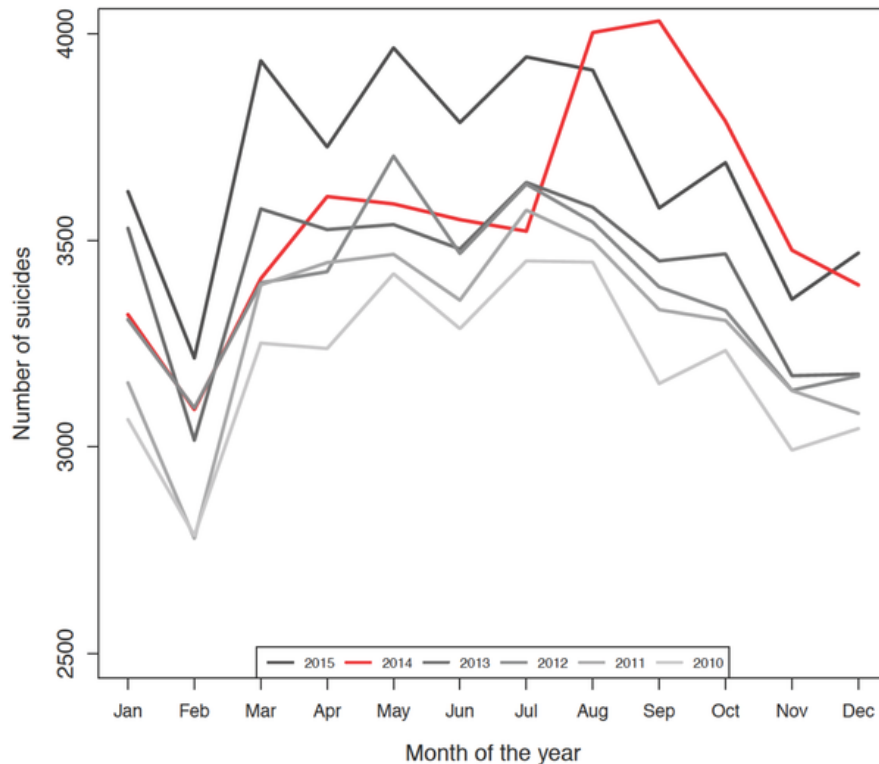
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Abstract

Investigating suicides following the death of Robin Williams, a beloved actor and comedian, on August 11th, 2014, we used time-series analysis to estimate the expected number of suicides during the months following Williams' death. Monthly suicide count data in the US (1999–2015) were from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Wide-ranging ONline Data for Epidemiologic Research (CDC WONDER). Expected suicides were calculated using a seasonal autoregressive integrated moving averages model to account for both the seasonal patterns and autoregression. Time-series models indicated that we would expect 16,849 suicides from August to December 2014; however, we observed 18,690 suicides in that period, suggesting an excess of 1,841 cases (9.85% increase). Although excess suicides were observed across gender and age groups, males and persons aged 30–44 had the greatest increase in excess suicide events. This study documents associations between Robin Williams' death and suicide deaths in the population thereafter.

Fig 2. Monthly number of suicides in the United States from January 2010 to December 2015.



Fink DS, Santaella-Tenorio J, Keyes KM (2018) Increase in suicides the months after the death of Robin Williams in the US. PLOS ONE 13(2): e0191405. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0191405>
<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0191405>

IMPACT OF MEDIA

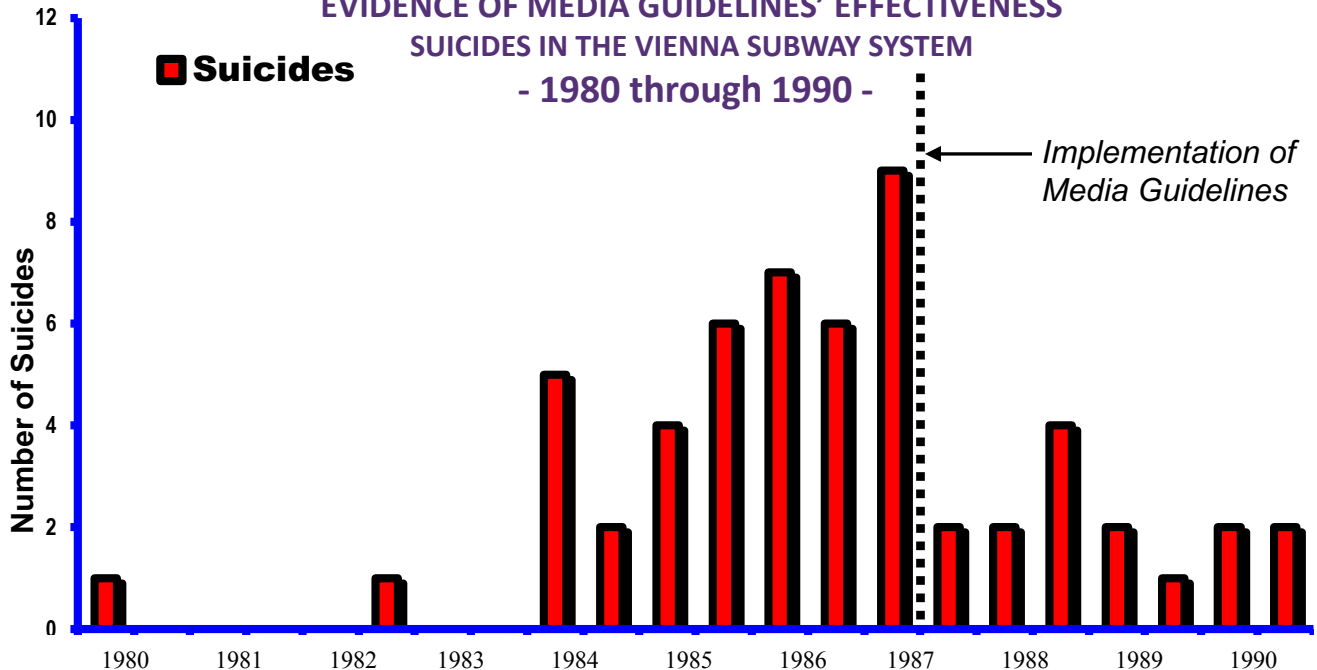
Converse effects exist also:

- ↓ suicide following release of media guidelines or during newspaper strikes
- ↓ suicide following articles on suicidal individuals who adopted positive coping strategies and refrained from suicidal behavior in adverse circumstances:
“Papageno effect”

(Motto, 1970; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010)



EVIDENCE OF MEDIA GUIDELINES' EFFECTIVENESS SUICIDES IN THE VIENNA SUBWAY SYSTEM - 1980 through 1990 -



The media guidelines of the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention went into effect in June 1987

From Etzersdorfer et al, New England Journal of Medicine, Aug. 1992



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CONTENT ANALYSES OF SUICIDE STORIES: “Papageno Effect”

Content analysis of 497 suicide-related print media reports published in Austria between January 1 and June 30 2005. Ecological study to identify associations between media item content and short-term changes in suicide rates.

- In multivariate analysis, **repetitive reporting** associated with **increases** in suicide rates.
- Media items describing suicidal individuals’ **adoption of coping strategies** other than suicidal behavior were associated with a **decrease** in suicide rates.

Niederkrötenhaller et al., (2010) role of media reports in completed and prevented suicide: Werther v. Papageno effects. The British Journal of Psychiatry, 197: 234-243.



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DOES THE MEDIA PLAY A ROLE IN TRIGGERING A CLUSTER?

Newspaper coverage of suicide and initiation of suicide clusters in teenagers in the USA, 1988–96: a retrospective, population-based, case-control study

Madelyn S Gould, Marjorie H Kleinman, Alison M Lake, Judith Forman, Jennifer Bassett Middle

Summary

Background Public health and clinical efforts to prevent suicide clusters are seriously hampered by the unanswered question of why such outbreaks occur. We aimed to establish whether an environmental factor—newspaper reports of suicide—has a role in the emergence of suicide clusters.



Lancet Psychiatry 2014

Published Online

May 2, 2014

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/>



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DESIGN AND ANALYTIC ELEMENTS

- National population-based clusters identified by statistical techniques
- Matched sample of non-cluster suicides and communities (2 for each cluster community)
- Comprehensive identification of newspapers in each community (469 newspapers)
- Reliable content analysis of newspaper stories (1,729 stories)
- Sensitivity analyses and examination of confounding factors

Content Analyses of Suicide Stories: Initiation of Clusters?

To identify specific features in media suicide reports that may contribute to the *initiation of teenage suicide clusters*, we developed a content analytic strategy of qualitative characteristics abstracted from newspaper stories. 48 youth cluster communities (648 stories) compared to 95 non-cluster communities (1,1081 stories).

↑ number of stories about any suicidal individual

↑ number of stories about the teen suicide in our study



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Results: Story Characteristics

Stories published after the index cluster suicides compared to those published after non-cluster suicides:

- ↑ front page story placement,
- ↑ size of headlines,
- ↑ headlines containing the word suicide
- ↑ headlines containing a description of the methods
- ↑ sensational headlines
- ↑ presence of picture
- ↑ detailed descriptions of the suicidal individual and act



MAGNITUDE OF THE EFFECT OF THE MEDIA

- 12% increase in suicides following Marilyn Monroe's death
- ~75% decrease in subway-suicides following implementation of media guidelines in Vienna

IMPACT OF MEDIA EXISTS

But,

- Not a monolithic effect
- Interactive factors exist

Audience

Stories

Match ► Differential Identification



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SUICIDE CONTAGION/MODELING

-Hypothesized Mechanisms*-

- Social learning theory
- Approach/Avoidance conflict: restraint reduction
- “Social multiplier” that amplifies the effects of other suicidogenic factors
- Changes in social norms

SUICIDE CONTAGION/MODELING

Social Norms - Definition:

- Implicit rules about “normal” or typical behaviors or beliefs in a group or setting
 - Concept in various behavioral theories (e.g., Social Cognitive Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior)
- Two main types:
 - What most people *do* (descriptive norms)
 - What most people *approve of* (injunctive norms)

(Borsari and Carey, 2003; Rimal and Real, 2003; Smith and Louis, 2008)



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SUICIDE CONTAGION/MODELING

Social Norms

- Research on **other health issues** finds
 - Perceived norms (descriptive and/or injunctive) are one predictor of behavior.
- Media narratives and social norms
 - Narratives may convey or reinforce inaccurate perceptions about suicidal behavior, coping, services, offering help

*(adapted from Linda Langford, Sc.D.
Suicide Prevention Resource Center)*

SUICIDE CONTAGION/MODELING

Social Norms

Suicide in Greenland, I heard over and over, is normal. People don't mean it's OK, just that it's been so common for so long that the next death almost seems inevitable.

April 21, 2016 - 5:00 AM ET

Heard on All Things Considered



"Somebody next to me in class said, 'Oh, I heard she jumped in front of the train,' and then everyone kind of nodded in agreement," Chakrapani told Action News. "We were just very sad together. But nobody was like, 'How could anyone ever do that?' because there've been so many of these at Penn."



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NEWS

Why livestreamed suicides are becoming a disturbing new norm

By Joshua Rhett Miller

January 31, 2017 | 3:10pm | Updated



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NEW YORK POST

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Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior
© 2018 The American Association of Suicidology
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The Relation between Descriptive Norms, Suicide Ideation, and Suicide Attempts among Adolescents

JAZMIN A. REYES-PORTILLO, PHD, ALISON M. LAKE, MA, MARJORIE KLEINMAN, MS,
AND MADELYN S. GOULD, PHD

This study examined the relationship between adolescents' beliefs about the prevalence of youth suicide ideation (ideation descriptive norms) and suicide attempts (attempt descriptive norms) with self-reported suicide ideation and attempts. Descriptive norms, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts as well as gender, race/ethnicity, and exposure to family, peer, and others' suicide were assessed in 2,109 students at six suburban New York State high schools. After controlling for demographic variables and exposure to suicide, elevated ideation descriptive norms and attempt descriptive norms were associated with higher rates of suicide ideation and lifetime suicide attempts among adolescents. Adolescents who believed suicide ideation and attempts to be more widespread among peers (i.e., elevated ideation and attempt descriptive norms) were more likely to endorse suicide ideation and attempts. Correcting these descriptive norms may be a worthwhile goal for school-based suicide prevention programs.



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Implications for Safe Messaging and Storytelling



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MESSAGING PARADOX

- Both negative and positive effects of messaging are observed.
- Challenge is to tip the balance of the paradox in favor of “Pagageno effect” rather than “Werther effect.”

SUICIDE MESSAGING

-Overall Recommendations -

↑ Stories that educate and shape attitudes;
Avoid misinformation

↓ Stories that promote contagion

Avoid Misinformation/Misperceptions

Avoid Misinformation/Misperceptions

Psychological autopsy studies of youth suicide show that initial reaction of friends and family may be unrealistic:

- Responses may be extreme
- Problems in deceased are minimized
- Denial of warning signs
- Simple attribution of responsibility



MISINFORMATION/MISPERCEPTIONS

Bullying example*

- Typical media message: bullying causes suicide.
- This does not tell the full story.
- Suicide risk may be substantially mediated by other factors.

*Could be any individual factor, e.g., stress



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MISINFORMATION/MISPERCEPTIONS

Suicide “Narratives” in Messages: Bases for Concern

- Social norming
- Lost opportunities

*(adapted from Linda Langford, Sc.D.
Suicide Prevention Resource Center)
2012, AAS*

LOST OPPORTUNITIES

- **Not** telling stories of positive coping, receiving help, offering help, service availability
- Does this matter?
 - Study of protective news content: stories describing adoption of **coping strategies** other than suicidal behavior in adverse circumstances.

(Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010)

MINIMIZE CONTAGION



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MINIMIZE CONTAGION

Adhere to media recommendations in the wake of a suicide

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPORTING ON SUICIDE

Developed in collaboration with American Association of Suicidology, American Association for Suicide Prevention, Australian Public Policy Center, Canterbury Suicide Project, University of Otago, Christchurch, New Zealand, Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, Cornell University, Emory University, International Association for Suicide Prevention Task Force on Media and Suicide, Medical University of Vienna, National Alliance on Mental Illness, National Institutes of Mental Health, New York State Psychiatric Institute, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, Suicide Prevention Resource Center, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UCLA School of Public Health, Community Health Sciences.

IMPORTANT POINTS FOR COVERING SUICIDE

- More than 50 research studies worldwide have found that certain types of news coverage can increase the likelihood of suicide in vulnerable individuals. The magnitude of the increase is related to the amount, duration and prominence of coverage.
- Risk of additional suicides increases when the story explicitly describes the suicide method, uses dramatic/graphic headlines or images, and repeated/extensive coverage sensationalizes or glamorizes a death.
- Covering suicide carefully, even briefly, can change public misperceptions and correct myths, which can encourage those who are vulnerable or at risk to seek help.

Suicide is a public health issue. Media and online coverage of suicide should be informed by using best practices. Some suicide deaths may be newsworthy. However, the way media cover suicide can influence behavior negatively by contributing to contagion or positively by encouraging help-seeking.

Suicide Contagion or "Copycat Suicide" occurs when one or more suicides are reported in a way that contributes to another suicide.

References and additional information can be found at: www.ReportingOnSuicide.org.

INSTEAD OF THIS: ❌

- Big or sensationalistic headlines, or prominent placement (e.g., "Kurt Cobain Used Shotgun to Commit Suicide").
- Including photos/videos of the location or method of death, grieving family, friends, memorials or funerals.
- Describing recent suicides as an "epidemic," "skyrocketing," or other strong terms.
- Describing a suicide as inexplicable or "without warning."
- "John Doe left a suicide note saying...".
- Investigating and reporting on suicide similar to reporting on crimes.
- Quoting/interviewing police or first responders about the causes of suicide.
- Referring to suicide as "successful," "unsuccessful" or a "failed attempt."

DO THIS: ✅

- Inform the audience without sensationalizing the suicide and minimize prominence (e.g., "Kurt Cobain Dead at 27").
- Use school/work or family photo; include hotline logo or local crisis phone numbers.
- Carefully investigate the most recent CDC data and use non-sensational words like "rise" or "higher."
- Most, but not all, people who die by suicide exhibit warning signs. Include the "Warning Signs" and "What to Do" sidebar (from p. 2) in your article if possible.
- "A note from the deceased was found and is being reviewed by the medical examiner."
- Report on suicide as a public health issue.
- Seek advice from suicide prevention experts.
- Describe as "died by suicide" or "completed" or "killed him/herself."

<http://reportingonsuicide.org>

SCIENCE

Mass Killings May Have Created Contagion, Feeding on Itself

By BENEDICT CAREY JULY 26, 2016

The horrifying rash of massacres during this violent summer suggests that public, widely covered rampage killings have led to a kind of contagion, prompting a small

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Reporting on Mass Shootings



ABOUT THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations address how media covers an incident where a person (or a small group) shoots multiple others in a public setting. The tragedies at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora and Orlando are examples of mass shootings. These recommendations are not intended to address gang violence or murder-suicide (i.e. intimate partner violence).

This consensus project was led by SAVE and included national and international experts from AFSP, the CDC; Columbia University; IASP Media Task Force; JED; NAMI-NH; SPRC; and multiple media industry experts.

GENERAL INFORMATION FOR REPORTING

- How you report on violence (mass violence, domestic violence, suicide) may influence and impact others.
- Minimize reporting on the perpetrators as others might identify with or be inspired by them.
- Avoid putting photos of the perpetrator side by side with a victim.
- Use the perpetrator's photo sparingly, especially

TOP 3 THINGS WE WANT YOU TO KNOW

1. Research shows that the manner in which media reports on mass shootings can contribute to contagion (copycat behavior). Responsible reporting can reduce risk.
2. The majority of people who live with a mental health condition are non-violent. Also, those who carry out mass shootings oftentimes have not been formally diagnosed with a mental health condition.
3. Responsible reporting on mass shootings can educate the public and reduce the risk of future violence.

HARMFUL MEDIA COVERAGE CAN:

- Provoke copycat incidents by people who may see the perpetrators as models or heroes.

Messaging recommendations

The Don'ts (I)

- Don't place article in prominent position (e.g., front page)
- Don't use dramatic, sensational headlines
- Don't use the word suicide prominently
- Don't focus on personal details of people who have died by suicide
- Don't present overly detailed description of a suicide victim or method

Messaging Recommendations

The Don'ts (II):

- Don't glorify people, particularly celebrities, who have died by suicide
- Don't romanticize suicide
- Don't normalize suicide by presenting it as a common event
- Don't present suicide as an inexplicable act or explain it as result of stress only; although stress may be a major contributor



WHY ARE PALO ALTO'S KIDS KILLING THEMSELVES?

A panicked town
struggles with a wave
of suicides.

By **Diana Kapp**
Photographs by **Justin Maxon**

*"It suddenly
became an
option."*

SF
Magazine
June 2015



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Messaging Recommendations

The Do's: (for stories about suicide deaths)

- Highlight that suicide is preventable and depression is treatable
- Emphasize seeking help
- Emphasize prevention
- List the warning signs/risks and protective factors of suicide
- Highlight effective treatments of underlying mental health problems
- Be sensitive about the language used (e.g., “having died by suicide” rather than “committed suicide”)

COUCH

No Longer Wanting to Die

By WILL LIPPINCOTT MAY 16, 2015 2:30 PM 394 Comments



“...depression is treatable, and suicide is preventable. Don't lose hope. You're not alone. I, too, once firmly believed that I was broken beyond repair – but I was wrong.”



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National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Framework For Successful Messaging

Messaging can be harmful by:

- ✓ Increasing suicide risk among vulnerable individuals
- ✓ Undermining prevention



www.SuicidePreventionMessaging.org