

Suicide in the Media

According to the CDC Mortality Database, in 2014 alone, 42,704 Americans committed suicide. Being the tenth-largest cause of death in the United States, suicide is an epidemic affected by individuals of all demographics. That said, only a handful of these deaths are ever reported in the media. Perhaps that is because there are too many to keep track of, but perhaps it is just because the media finds it difficult to responsibly report on suicide.

At the first annual Higher Education Suicide Prevention Conference in Philadelphia in early 2016, there was much debate over how to do this job correctly. Dr. Daniel Reidenberg, a psychologist and executive director of SAVE (Suicide Awareness Voices of Education), as well as the US representative for the International Association of Suicide Prevention, says that journalists need to be extremely cautious when reporting on suicide. His presentation at the conference containing the extensive research he has done on the subject broke down what should and should not be included in a story following someone's death, and some attendees disagreed with his views.

If Dr. Reidenberg could have journalists report on suicide the way he wanted, there would be no mention of the method used, the location, or any "unnecessary" detail that may negatively influence the audience, essentially excluding everything that would make up any other story about a death. Using the contagion of the Vienna subway suicides in the late 1980s and the aftermath of the death of Marilyn Monroe as examples, Reidenberg proposed that readers are incredibly susceptible to the power of suggestion, and that too much information in a story about suicide can cause a domino effect. Someone with suicidal thoughts or depression may read a story about another suicide, and potentially be

convinced to take the same route. He referred to various celebrity suicides and showed research reflecting an increase in suicides following the announcement of the initial death.

Based on research from the New England Journal of Medicine, strict regulations being put on how the media reports on suicide did actually make a difference. When the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention implemented media guidelines in June of 1987, subway suicides in Vienna did drastically decrease within a single year. In the first six months of 1987, nine people completed suicide by jumping on to the subway track. In the second half of the year, that number fell down to just two people. These numbers do help contribute to Dr. Reidenberg's justification behind more seriously regulating the media's dissemination of information about suicides.

On the other end of the spectrum of opinion, acclaimed journalist and author Stephen Fried thinks that journalists actually aren't reporting on suicide enough. By only reporting on the particularly dramatic pieces, such as celebrity suicides or public suicides, the media unintentionally sensationalizes the issue just by trying not to. Because of the societal stigma against the discussion and acknowledgement of mental health, it tends to be suppressed to the point of pretending it does not exist. In an interview, Fried stated that he feels that journalists are still far from even having a discussion about day-to-day reporting on suicide simply because there is no day-to-day reporting on suicide. He continues, "in most cases, there's this underlying issue that you don't talk about [suicide], unless somebody else already did, so then you have to cover it. If a student died any other way, that would be a first-day news story ... it's a very unprocessed debate that we have in the heat of the moment and rarely have outside of the heat of the moment."

Some members of the media feel that there is an urgent need to change the way suicides are covered, and have been trying to find a middle ground between withholding information to protect the audience and revealing too much and putting the audience at risk. Some people consider disclaimers like trigger warnings to be that middle ground. Fried stated that he personally would not use trigger warnings as they are designed to make people not want to read something on the off chance it will not sit well with them. There are benefits because they protect those who need to be prepared before they experience something potentially traumatic, but the last thing journalists want to do is prevent someone from getting involved. It is the duty of journalists to inform the public, and it goes against a journalist's nature to write something at the beginning of their work that might stop someone from reading. On the other hand, Temple University psychology student Danielle Pelosi said in an interview, "I think trigger warnings are necessary when writing about suicide because they alert readers to content that could be potentially graphic, and reading about suicide can be a traumatic experience for a lot of people." Similar to Dr. Reidenberg's stance, the protection and concern of the audience takes precedence for Pelosi. "I don't feel that they necessarily censor the content of articles in any way," she added.

It is clear that there is still a long, complicated discussion to be had about the proper etiquette of reporting on suicide. There are countless logical theories from both sides of the issue that all need to be taken in to consideration, and it will take journalists, psychologists, and readers on both sides to effectively determine an efficient and responsible method of reporting on suicide and mental illness.

If you or someone you know is struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts, please contact the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK. Your life matters.