

Lecture Notes: The Media and Mental Health – February 2009

The February lecture in the Aware Monthly Lecture Series looked at The Media and Mental Health. Jane Arigho, Media Project Co-ordinator with Headline gave the lecture and the following are based on notes from the event.

Headline is Ireland's national media monitoring programme for mental health and suicide, working to promote responsible and accurate coverage of mental health and suicide related issues within the Irish media. Specifically, Headline aims to highlight mental health and suicide issues and address the stigma attached to emotional distress and mental illness through the promotion of responsible media coverage. It is funded by the HSE's National Office for Suicide Prevention as part of the Reach Out strategy, and is managed by Shine – Supporting people affected by mental ill health.

The programme is guided by a steering group with representatives from Aware, Bodywhys, Grow, HSE Press Office, Irish Advocacy Network, Mental Health Ireland, National Office for Suicide Prevention and the Samaritans, as well as journalism lecturer Barry Finnegan and broadcaster Andrea Gilligan.

The media has a significant role to play in promoting positive mental health and actively reducing stigma and discrimination towards people with mental health difficulties (WHO). With 1 in 4 people experiencing mental and/or behavioural disorders during their lifetime (WHO, 2004), and everyone knowing someone who has been touched by suicide, tackling stigma is an issue for everyone.

Copycat suicides account for approx 6% of all suicides and this imitative behaviour can follow certain types of news reports and other portrayals of suicide: We wouldn't have a multi-million euro advertising market in this country if people didn't think you could influence someone else's behaviour through the media.

Copycat Suicide – Areas for Concern

- Those most affected seem to be individuals under the age of 24 and the elderly. (Ireland has the 5th highest youth suicide rate in Europe).
- The risk is greater when there is a sense of identification with the deceased. For example, a celebrity suicide or a fictional character that the vulnerable person empathises and identifies with.
- Romanticising suicide as a heroic act or an acceptable strategy for dealing with a problem.

Country	Number of deaths	Rate per 100,000 over 14 years of age
England	4191	10
Wales	300	12
Scotland	765	18
Northern Ireland	291	21
Republic of Ireland	409	12
UK total	5576	11
UK and ROI total	5985	9

Suicide trends over 10 years (1997-2006):

- 7% decrease in the UK
- 10% decrease in England
- 1% increase in Wales
- 7.5% decrease in the UK and Republic of Ireland
- 14.5% decrease in the Republic of Ireland
- 111% increase in Northern Ireland
- 12.5% decrease in Scotland

How We Do It

- ▶ Headline monitors all national and regional print media daily.
- ▶ We search the publications for a list of search words and monitor the content, tone, and imagery of the articles (approx 70 per day).
- ▶ We contact editors and journalists directly through letters, emails, meetings and phone calls.
- ▶ We action public complaints about the media directly or with the BCC (Broadcasting Complaints Commission).
- ▶ We run training sessions for working media, media communication and journalism students.

News Highlights

Headline provides weekly emailed Headline News Highlights on mental health and suicide. People find this a useful way to keep up on all the relevant coverage about Suicide and mental health. Anyone who would like to receive these should email info@headline.ie

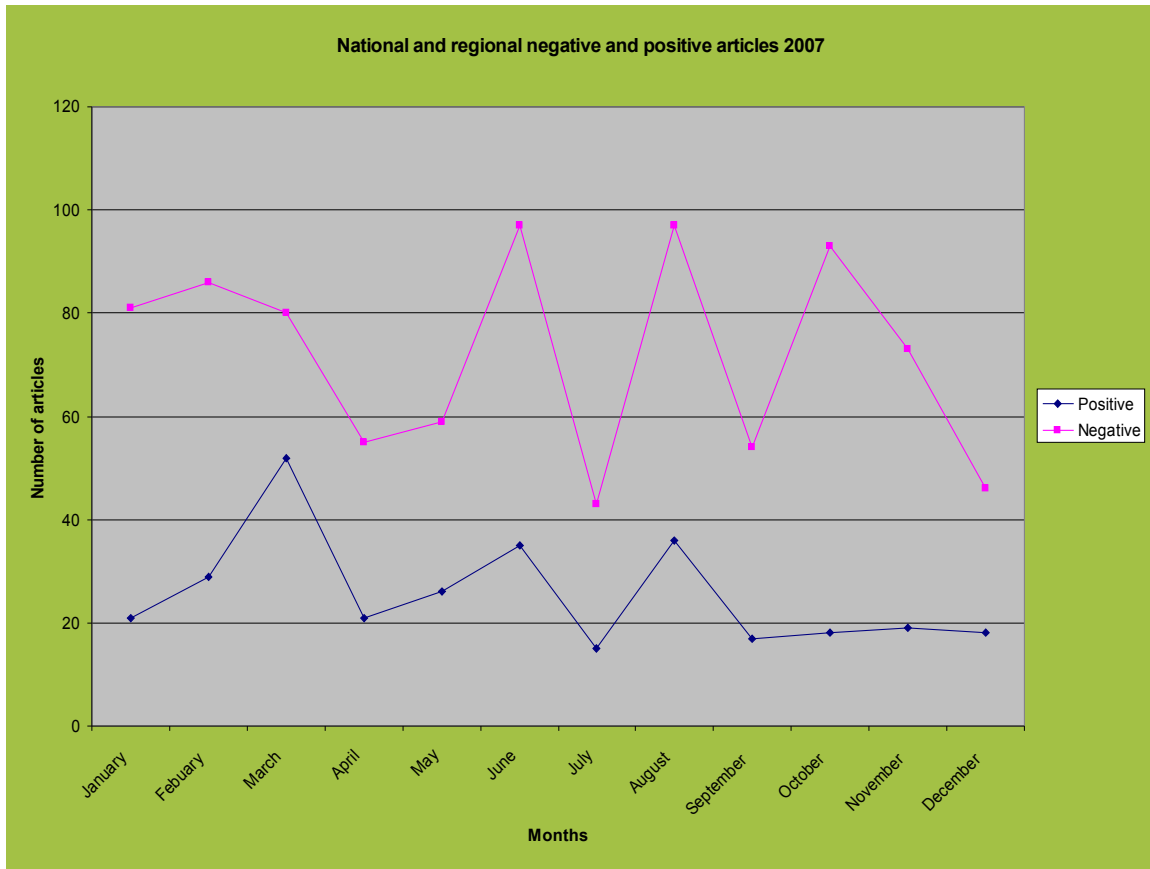
Smedia Awards

Headline sponsors an annual category in the Smedia awards (student media awards). The awards are for students studying journalism or media communications. The Headline award is given for reporting on mental health and suicide prevention.

Headline Search Terms

The following are the search terms which media is monitored for:

- ▶ Mental illness
- ▶ Mental health
- ▶ Suicide
- ▶ Suicidal
- ▶ Suicide Prevention
- ▶ Self Harm
- ▶ Bi-polar Disorder
- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Eating Disorders
- ▶ Anorexia
- ▶ Anorexic
- ▶ Bulimia
- ▶ Stress related illness
- ▶ Schizophrenia
- ▶ Schizophrenic
- ▶ Schizo
- ▶ Manic Depression
- ▶ Psychosis
- ▶ Psycho
- ▶ Maniac
- ▶ Madman
- ▶ Lunatic
- ▶ Nutter
- ▶ Crazy
- ▶ Nut



Guide for Journalists and Broadcasters Reporting on Schizophrenia

Shine and the NUJ have prepared guidelines for the media for reporting on mental health. These guidelines stress such considerations as the correct use of language and terminology e.g. Schizo; Schizophrenic weather or mood or game - Schizophrenia has nothing to do with split personality disorder and should not be used to describe being in 2 minds or changeable. The guidelines also stress the importance of giving relevant helpline information.

They also address the importance of dispelling the myths around mental health problems such as the link between violence and mental health. A new study by Dr Sally Johnson of the University of North Carolina found that People with a mental health illness are no more likely than anyone else to commit acts of violence, However mental illness when combined with substance abuse can increase the risk of future violence. 'These findings challenge the perception some people have, and which you often see reflected in media coverage, that mental illness alone makes someone more dangerous.' Details of these findings are published in the journal, *Archives of General Psychiatry*. by Dr Sally Johnson of the University of North Carolina.

How Drama Affects Suicide Rates

A German television series, *Death of a Student*, depicted the railway suicide of a man at the start of each episode. During the series the railway suicides by teenage males increased by 175%. Suicide by other fatal means did not decrease so it seems that the series created a real increase in suicide rather than simply influencing the choice of method. An episode of *Casualty* featured a storyline about a paracetamol overdose. Research showed that self-poisoning increased by 17% in the following week and 9% in the 2nd week. 20% of self-poisoning patients who had seen the programme said that it had influenced their decision to attempt suicide.

Copycat in Print

For example, in the book, *Final Exit*, a guide to suicide for terminally ill persons, asphyxiation is the recommended means of suicide. In the year that *Final Exit* was published, the number of suicides by asphyxiation in New York City rose by 313% from 8 to 33. Furthermore, a copy of *Final Exit* was found at the premises of 27% of these suicides.

Impact of Austrian Media Guidelines on Suicide

A sharp increase in the number of subway suicides in Vienna was linked to a dramatic increase in their coverage in the media. The Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention launched a media campaign to change the amount and the nature of press coverage of subway suicides. After the campaign the Austrian press either did not report the subway suicides at all, or covered them in short reports in the inside pages. During the years of sensational news coverage there were up to nine subway suicides per six months 9:6. After the sensational coverage ceased, there were between one and four subway suicides per six month intervals 1:6.

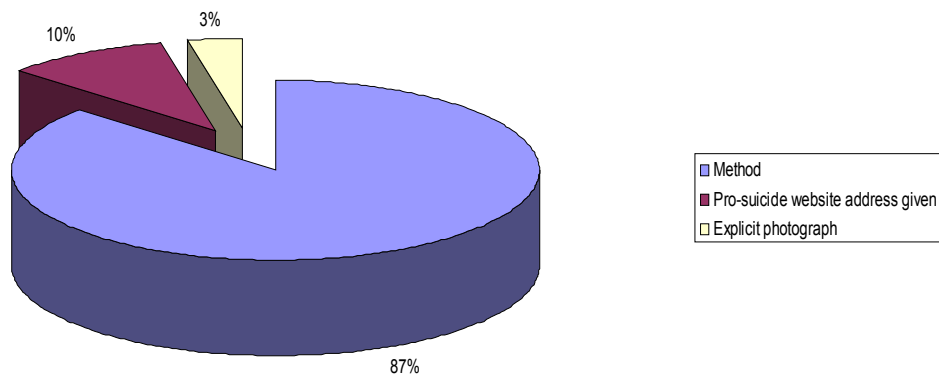
Quick guide for reporting a suicide

Avoid phrases like:

- ▶ A successful suicide
- ▶ An unsuccessful suicide
- ▶ Commit suicide
- ▶ Suicide victim
- ▶ Just a cry for help
- ▶ Suicide prone person
- ▶ Epidemic of suicide
- ▶ Use phrases like:
- ▶ A suicide
- ▶ Die by suicide
- ▶ A suicide attempt
- ▶ Take his/her life
- ▶ Kill oneself
- ▶ A completed suicide

- ▶ A person at risk of suicide
- ▶ Avoid explicit or technical details of suicide methods. (Copycat)
- ▶ Avoid simplistic explanations for suicide.
- ▶ Remember the effect on survivors of suicide.
- ▶ Look after yourself when writing about suicide.
- ▶ Don't romanticise or glorify suicide.
- ▶ Don't imply there are positive results to be gained by suicide.
- ▶ Seek expert advice. (Headline)
- ▶ Use appropriate language.
- ▶ Include contact details for sources of help and information.
- ▶ Challenge the common myths about suicide.

Breach



Headline.ie

www.headline.ie is a one stop resource for the media, and includes information such as helpful tips for writing about mental health and suicide; Irish and international media guidelines; info on mental health and suicide related issues; useful links for organisations related to media, mental health and suicide, and media contacts. The site is also used as a tool for the public to have their opinions heard.

What is the Broadcasting Complaints Commission?

The Broadcasting Complaints Commission (BCC) is an independent statutory body. Its task is to consider and adjudicate upon complaints about material broadcast, both programmes & advertisements, in relation to: -

- ▶ impartiality in news & current affairs,
- ▶ taste & decency: - Code of Programme Standards,
- ▶ law & order
- ▶ privacy of an individual,
- ▶ slander,
- ▶ published matter in relation to RTÉ and Ministerial prohibitions,
- ▶ general advertising codes,
- ▶ children's advertising code.
- ▶ Any viewer or listener can refer a complaint to the BCC if they are not happy about broadcasting content on an Irish broadcasting service under any of the above categories.

The Press Council

The Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman was established January 2008 it is an independent press complaints mechanism that is quick, fair and free. The objectives of the Press Council and Press Ombudsman are:

- ▶ to provide the public with an independent forum for resolving complaints about the press
- ▶ to resolve all complaints quickly, fairly and free of charge
- ▶ to maintain the highest standards of Irish journalism and journalistic ethics
- ▶ to defend the freedom of the press and the freedom of the public to be informed

For a complaint to be examined by the Office of the Press Ombudsman, it must breach the [Code of Practice](#) for Newspapers and Periodicals, and the person making the complaint must show that they have been directly affected by, and involved in the article or behaviour in question.

More information:

www.bcc.ie

www.pressombudsman.ie

Headline

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