

# Suicide reporting in Swiss print media

## Responsible or irresponsible?

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All articles in Swiss newspapers with suicide or attempted suicide as the main topic were collected over a time span of 8 months. The aim was the investigation of a potential imitation effect and the extent of preventive messages given. A rating scheme for an assumed imitation effect based on different items for heading, text and picture was developed. The results show that approximately two-fifths of all 151 articles were inappropriate in some aspects and were considered as bearing a high potential for imitation effect. The rating was significantly more unfavourable for the main Swiss tabloid paper than the other newspapers. A reason for suicide was specified in 41.7% of all articles, half of them in a very simple and monocausal way. Relevant preventive information was only given in 10% of cases. We conclude that media guidelines for suicide reporting are needed. A preventive strategy to influence the policy of suicide reporting in newspapers must primarily concentrate on a few papers with a high circulation (popular press).

Key words: suicide, attempted suicide, prevention, print media

The presentation of suicide in the mass media can be considered a risk factor for suicidal behaviour.<sup>1</sup> In the suicidal process, the mass media (including films) can provide both real life models as well as fictional models. Although criticized in a small number of studies, there is broad evidence of an imitation effect.<sup>2-4</sup> In a study by Stack,<sup>5</sup> using a taxonomy of celebrities based on Tarde's<sup>6</sup> laws of imitation and Pareto's<sup>7</sup> concept of elite, the greater the amount of publicity given to suicides of celebrities, the greater was the increase in the suicide rate. Switzerland is one of the Western countries with a relatively high suicide rate.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in 1992 the Swiss Medical Association, FMH, started a national prevention programme 'Crisis and Suicide'. The main purpose of the programme is the training of practitioners in the detection and treatment of persons of suicide risk.<sup>9,10</sup> A second purpose is the improvement of the collaboration between experts in suicide prevention and journalists. Before entering into a discussion with journalists we wanted to know how the topic of 'suicide' is treated in the Swiss print media.

In a first paper based on the study reported below we described quantitative aspects of media reporting of suicide (frequency of reporting, form, position and content of articles, size, position and wording of the headline and presentation of pictures). The majority of articles reported cases of completed suicide, mainly carried out through

violent methods (shooting and hanging) by ordinary young people. Attempted suicide (e.g. overdosing) was only reported when the person was a celebrity. This selection of cases does not reflect the true incidence of suicide and attempted suicide in different age groups and social classes in Switzerland. There were enormous differences between the articles in various newspapers. Newspapers with frequent suicide reporting are often those with large circulation figures. Their articles usually have a news character, are more often placed on the front page and more often describe the methods and circumstances of the (attempted) suicide.<sup>4</sup>

In the present paper qualitative aspects of media reporting of suicide are investigated. We wanted to know which explanatory models of the suicidal process are given (reasons and dynamics of the suicidal act), how much weight is given to measures of prevention and crisis intervention and whether reporting can serve as a model to persons at risk (imitation effect). Our assumptions were:

- newspapers with frequent articles about suicide often report the topic in a dangerous manner;
- articles with a high imitation effect were mainly in tabloid papers with high circulation figures;
- newspapers with unfavourable reporting (imitation effect) tend towards a static and monocausal view of the reasons for suicide and
- newspapers rarely give preventive or therapeutic advice.

The study is part of the suicide prevention programme of the Swiss Medical Association and the Swiss Federal Office of Health.

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## METHOD

Over a time span of 8 months, all daily, weekly and monthly papers (exclusive of medical and other specialized journals) printed and circulated in Switzerland were screened by a professional media monitoring service (Argus der Presse) for texts including key words such as suicide and attempted suicide. Two hundred and eight articles in German, French and Italian (the official lan-

guages of Switzerland) were finally selected for further quantitative (e.g. form and frequency) and qualitative (content) analysis. The qualitative analysis was performed with predefined-content analytical categories. Dichotomous rating scales (yes = 1, no = 0) were used for the form and frequency of the presentation (related to size and wording of the headline, position in the newspaper and repetition of the article), details of the suicide method (including the context of the suicidal act), emotional impact (sensational and dramatic presentation and glorification of the victim) and adequacy of the psychological dynamics and aetiology of suicide (e.g. over-simplification). Further composite rating scales for the heading, text and pictures were constructed based on this coding. Finally, a summary score ('risk of imitation score') of the 3 values was calculated, a high score indicating a high potential imitation effect for the article. The cut-off for a high imitation effect was  $\geq 2$  (maximum 8 points) for headings,  $\geq 3$  (maximum 8 points) for text,  $\geq 2$  (maximum 6 points) for pictures and  $\geq 6$  (maximum 22 points) for the summary score. In addition to this rating a spontaneous judgement of the article as 'harmless' or 'dubious' was made. The content of the rating scales was based on USA recommendations on the reporting of suicide.<sup>11</sup>

In a pilot phase the rating of 20 randomly selected articles was carried out independently by 2 authors (C.F. and K.M.). The inter-rater reliability was satisfactory with a Kappa of 0.74 ( $p < 0.05$ ). Later, the rating was done primarily by the first author (C.F.) and only critical articles were analysed by a conference rating procedure. This was the case in 60 articles (39.7%).

The statistical analysis used EXCEL 4.0 and the SPSS program. Descriptive statistics and non-parametric statistical tests were used (chi-square test and Mann-Whitney U-test).

## RESULTS

A qualitative analysis was performed for 151 of the 208 articles (72.6%). These were publications in which a case of suicide or attempted suicide or solid background information about suicide was the main topic. In the 57 remaining articles (27.4%) the key words were mentioned only incidentally (e.g. in an article about contemporary literature the word 'suicide' occurred by the way). The 151 suicide articles (100%) were published in 60 different newspapers or magazines. Four newspapers, 2 in German (Blick/Sonntags-Blick and Tages-Anzeiger) and 2 in French (Le Matin and La Suisse) each published more than 10 articles, in total 65 (43%, 'high-reporting'). One of them is a typical tabloid (Blick/Sonntags-Blick), whereas another is a reputable quality newspaper (Tages-Anzeiger). Eighty-six articles (57%) appeared in newspapers with infrequent reporting (1–6 articles, 'low-reporting'), 124 (82.1%) in daily newspapers, 19 (12.6%) in weeklies and 8 (5.3%) in monthly editions. Two-thirds of the articles (97, 64.2%) were news and one-quarter had a background character (35, 23.2%).

Cases of suicide (N=82) or attempted suicide (N=25) were reported in 107 articles (70.9%), mainly with a news

character. (The remaining 44 articles did not refer to a case of suicide or attempted suicide but treated the topic in a general manner.) Twenty-seven articles were devoted to cases of homicide and suicide mostly because of severe familial or relational conflicts. In 35 articles (23.2%) a person of public interest ('celebrity') was involved, whereas the others were unknown people (47.7%). The gender relation was approximately 3 males to 1 female (81 to 26). In 72 articles the age of the victim was indicated (range 2–80 years, median 35 years).

### *Assumed imitation effect (emotional impact)*

The heading in 71 suicide articles (47.0%) was considered to be sensational ('eye-catcher'). In 54 cases the text was considered sensational (35.8%). In 59 articles (39.1%) 1 or more pictures of the victim or the circumstances of the suicide were shown, at least 13 (8.6%) of which were on the front page. Reporting romanticized versions of the reason for the suicide and a text that glorifies the victim may be harmful (e.g. if the text suggests that the only reason for a suicide attempt by a girlfriend of a famous sportsman was because he failed in his comeback and she wanted to express solidarity). In 20 articles the heading (13.2%) and in 39 articles the text (25.8%) were judged in this manner.

A high imitation score for a headline was given in 62 (41.0%) articles and for the text in 47 (31.1%) articles. Inappropriate pictures were found in 30 articles (19.9%). The 'risk of imitation score' (heading, text and pictures) was high in 67 articles (44.4%, value  $\geq 6$ ). A spontaneous assessment by the raters as to whether they considered an article to be harmless or harmful (dubious or even inappropriate) gave a similar result with at least two-fifths being judged to be dubious.

A specific analysis of the suicide cases (suicide attempts excluded) shows that suicides through a violent method such as shooting were more often presented in a dramatic way (N=82, Mann-Whitney U-test,  $U=456.0$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### *Explanatory models about suicide*

A reason for the suicidal act was specified in 63 articles (41.7%). Depression (17, 27%) and relationship problems (17, 27%) were the main reasons given, followed by personal and health problems (13, 20.6%), work problems (8, 12.7%) and emotional crisis (6, 9.5%). Whereas in 33 articles (21.9%) several reasons were discussed, another 32 articles (21.2%) reflected an extremely simple and monocausal understanding of the reasons for suicide.

Even though events can trigger an impulsive act, the suicide is the result of a long-term process. However, in 16 articles (10.6%) the suicidal act was described in a very static way (not process-oriented) or as a sudden and fateful event without the possibility of intervention (23, 15.2%). In 4 articles (2.6%) the suicide act was exclusively presented as an expression of free will.

### *Preventive and therapeutic advice*

Suicide reporting not only carries the risk of imitation effects but is also a chance to give background informa-

tion about prevention and crisis intervention. General remarks about suicide prevention were found in 40 suicide articles (26.5%), approximately two-thirds of them (n=28) in articles with a background character. The topic of prevention was covered in a more detailed manner in only approximately 1 in 10 articles (16, 10.6%). The same picture is true for therapeutic advice (9.3% general advice, 6.6% specific advice).

*Differences between newspapers*

The enormous differences in the form and presentation between newspapers with frequent versus infrequent suicide reporting were also found in the qualitative analysis. The articles in newspapers with frequent suicide reporting (high-reporting) are more often written in a sensational (heading: 76.9%,  $\chi^2=38.8$ , df=1,  $p<0.0001$ ; text: 63.1%,  $\chi^2=35.0$ , df=1,  $p<0.0001$ ) and glorifying way (heading: 21.5%,  $\chi^2=5.6$ , df=1,  $p<0.02$ ; text: 36.9%,  $\chi^2=6.4$ , df=1,  $p<0.02$ ) compared with newspapers with infrequent reporting (low-reporting). They therefore carry a greater danger of unwanted imitation effects. Table 1 shows a comparison of articles from high-reporting and low-reporting newspapers with regard to several ratings for imitation effect.

Table 1 Articles with high risk of imitation scores in newspapers with frequent (high-reporting) or infrequent (low-reporting) suicide reporting<sup>a</sup>

High risk of imitation score	High-reporting N=65		Low-reporting N=86		U
	n	%	n	%	
Heading	42	64.6	20	23.3 ***	1434.0
Text	38	58.5	9	10.5 ***	961.5
Pictures	29	44.6	30	34.9 ****	2339.5
Total	46	70.8	21	24.4 ***	1098.5

a: Frequent reporting: >10 articles in the observation time  
 U: Mann-Whitney U-test  
 \*\*\*\*  $p\leq 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p\leq 0.0001$

Table 2 Differences in suicide reporting in Swiss German-language newspapers (N=109 articles)

	Tabloid <sup>a</sup> N=32		Others N=77	
	n	%	n	%
Headline on front page	15	46.9	5	6.5 ***
Headline in large print	25	78.1	24	31.2 ***
Method in headline	16	50.0	10	13.0 ***
Headline sensational	27	84.4	18	23.4 ***
Text sensational	28	87.5	9	11.7 ***
Text glorifies	19	59.4	9	11.7 ***
Name of person in text	19	59.4	15	19.5 ***
Inappropriate pictures	11	34.4	7	9.1 *
Harmless article	5	15.6	62	80.5 ***
Risk of imitation score high	28	87.5	17	22.1 ***

a: Blick/Sonntagsblick  
 $\chi^2$  test \*  $p\leq 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p\leq 0.0001$

Not all high-reporting newspapers have such unfavourable reporting. A more specific analysis in table 2 shows different results between the typical Swiss German-language tabloid paper (Blick/Sonntagsblick) compared with all other Swiss German-language newspapers.

It is evident that the main tabloid paper (Blick) has a more prominent and sensational reporting style on suicide than other newspapers. In addition, the tabloid has more multiple reporting (18.8%/5.2%,  $p<0.05$ ) and more often the reports refer to successful suicides rather than suicide attempts (68.8%/33.8%,  $p<0.001$ ). In the 'gutter press' the method used for the suicide act is usually violent, e.g. shooting (46.9%/14.3%,  $p<0.001$ ) and the person committing suicide is more often a celebrity (43.8%/15.6%,  $p<0.003$ ). No significant differences were found for the age, sex and nationality of the person. In summary, only 5 articles in the tabloid paper (15.6%) were considered as being harmless, whereas in the other Swiss German-language newspapers this number is 5 times higher (62 cases, 80.5%).

Despite the small number of suicide articles in the reputable newspaper with frequent reporting (Tages-Anzeiger, N=12) almost all the unfavourable variables listed in table 2 were rated significantly lower (Fisher's exact test).

Between the suicide articles in the tabloid (N=32) and those from the other Swiss German newspapers (N=77) significant differences regarding the explanatory models about suicide and the preventive or therapeutical advice given were found (table 3). In the tabloid papers usually an impressive but simple picture of the person and the circumstances was given and the chance to pass on some preventive messages is hardly ever taken.

DISCUSSION

The present study was carried out as part of a national suicide prevention campaign in Switzerland.<sup>9,10</sup> The aim was to gain basic facts about suicide reporting in Swiss newspapers as a starting point for a more intensive discus-

Table 3 Suicide reporting in Swiss German-language newspapers: explanatory models of suicide and preventive/therapeutic advice (N=109 articles)

	Tabloid <sup>a</sup> N=32		Others N=77	
	n	%	n	%
Explanatory models of suicide				
Detailed reasons	2	6.3	26	33.8 **
Simple/monocausal reasons	15	46.9	7	9.1 ***
Not process-oriented	10	31.3	2	2.6 ***
As a fate	7	21.9	9	11.7
Possibility of				
Prevention mentioned	2	6.3	31	40.3 ***
Therapy mentioned	0	0.0	23	29.9 ***

a: Blick/Sonntagsblick  
 $\chi^2$  test: \*\*  $p\leq 0.001$ , \*\*\*  $p\leq 0.0001$

sion and collaboration between medical professionals and journalists.

The method used was an analysis of all suicide articles in Switzerland over a time period of 8 months applying a new rating system for imitation effect. The rating scales were based on US recommendations on the reporting of suicide from a workshop in 1991.<sup>11</sup> The list contains 11 recommendations and statements such as 'Providing specific details on how the suicide occurred may be harmful'. We formulated a set of items asking whether the specific details were provided. One item was related to the method of the suicide and another item asked about the circumstances of the suicide. Individual items were related to the text, pictures and heading of the article. In this way we covered most of the recommendations. The composite scales for the heading, text and pictures and the summary score (risk of imitation score) were found to be relatively easy to rate and the inter-rater reliability was therefore good. It was not possible to design a blind study protocol, as it was unavoidable that the raters knew from which newspaper the article was taken. In addition, the main tabloid, because of its form and style of writing and presentation, would have been easy to recognize, even if the texts had been transcribed.

As reported in the first of our 2 papers, we found large differences in the frequency and the form of presentation of articles with the main topic of suicide or attempted suicide in Swiss newspapers. We also found that suicide reporting does not reflect the real incidence of suicidal acts with regard to the age and celebrity status of the person and the method used.<sup>4</sup> The majority of newspapers never write about suicide cases, while the main Swiss German-language tabloid paper covers the topic at least once a week (N=32). It is obvious that some newspapers have a clear policy for not reporting about suicide while others treat suicide as a topic of major public interest.

The aim of this paper was to analyse the articles with regard to the danger of them being used as a model for suicidal behaviour by readers at risk. We found that 40–45% of all suicide articles must be considered inappropriate globally or at least in some aspects (e.g. heading) and were potentially dangerous for an imitation effect. In particular, the headings are often inadequate and serve as eye-catchers (large print, located on front page and sensational content). With regard to the emotional impact of the articles by the heading, text and pictures, the picture presented is often sensational or thrilling (36–47%) and romanticizing or glorifying (13–26%). Both attitudes are emotionally attractive, mainly for young people and can serve as a model.

The explanatory models for the suicidal act are described insufficiently and superficially in more than half of the articles. The picture is often given that there is only 1 reason for the suicide act and that suicide is a sudden event without a prior history. Preventive and therapeutical information is rarely given in a profound manner and is mainly in background articles about suicide and seldom in a report on an actual case of suicide. The opportunity to provide relevant information about how

to deal with life crises and suicide ideation is only taken up in approximately 1 in 10 articles. Suicidal ideation is common in approximately one-quarter of adult people in Switzerland,<sup>12</sup> therefore information about this fact would break the taboo not to speak about it.

In all aspects – the potential imitation effect, explanatory models and dynamics of the suicide process and provision of relevant preventive information – the main tabloid papers (with the highest circulation figures), were assessed as significantly more unfavourable than the other newspapers. However, not all newspapers with high circulation figures treat the topic of suicide as a 'good selling object'. There are considerable differences between the 2 newspapers with the most frequent reporting (the tabloid and a reputable newspaper) in almost all rating variables. This means that it is possible to write about suicide in a harmless or even acceptable way.

Based on these results, which public health measure has the working group undertaken? As a first step we issued media guidelines based on existing recommendations (USA and Austria) in collaboration with a scientific journalist.<sup>11,13,14</sup> The guidelines describe in detail the kind of reporting which can increase the attention of the reader in a unfavourable way and the aspects which can increase the risk of imitation. Furthermore, typical warning signs for suicide (above all depressive symptoms) and advice for prevention and crisis intervention were given. Secondly, we presented our findings and the guidelines at a national press conference in June 1994. This press conference had a large and positive echo and the topic was covered in most common Swiss daily newspapers (75 articles) and by Swiss television and radio. In this context we had a meeting with the chief editor of the main Swiss tabloid paper. The dubious reporting of his newspaper was discussed and he agreed with us that at least the reporting of suicides of children and young people should be avoided and that we should meet again after a few months. Thirdly, we started a second period of analysis of suicide articles with the same rating system in order to evaluate the effect of our intervention. To avoid a bias, the rating of the new sample will be done by an independent person. For future research a European multicentre study with a standardized methodology (continuous monitoring, composite rating scales and summary score) and the development of a code of practice in several countries is under discussion (Belgium, Denmark, Italy, United Kingdom and Switzerland). This code should provide guidelines concerning the ethical aspects of the mass media professions and the presentation of suicidal behaviour in the mass media. In our view a preventive strategy to influence the newspaper reporting should concentrate on a few but important papers.

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