*News Editors Views about Suicide and Suicide Stories in Ghana*

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**Abstract**

Media reporting of suicide has attracted attention globally because it has the potential to trigger copycat suicides. The absence of a national policy on suicide prevention in Ghana has left the media landscape with uncensored publication of suicide stories. The aim of this study was to examine the views of media editors on suicide and the considerations that guide them in publishing suicide stories in the country. Fourteen media reporters and editors (10 males, 4 females) from three major media houses in Accra, the capital, between the ages of 26-48 participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the results showed that considerations for publishing suicide stories included deterrence, didacticism, celebritism, and ethics. These considerations generally reflect the doubled-edged role of the media in suicide prevention: on one hand, the media is a partner in public health education; but on the other hand, the media’s activities can be deleterious to all preventive efforts in public health education on suicide. Implications for gatekeeper training for media personnel in suicide prevention in Ghana are addressed.

**Keywords:**[suicide](http://econtent.hogrefe.com/keyword/Suicide), [media](http://econtent.hogrefe.com/keyword/Media), news editors, [Ghana](http://econtent.hogrefe.com/keyword/Australia),

**Background**

Suicidal behavior is of public health concern globally. Research evidence implicates multiple factors in suicidality including social, psychological, biological, and cultural factors (WHO, 2014). One of the established risk factors for suicide is media reporting. The influence of the media in shaping attitudes towards suicide by individuals and groups of people has been documented in the literature (e.g. Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Weaver, 2007). Numerous studies over the years have examined the impact of media reportage of suicide on suicidal behavior and have reported suicide contagion or copycat effects of suicide stories (Gould, 2001; Hamilton, Metcalfe, & Gunnell, 2011; Niederkrotenthaler, Till, Herberth, Voracek, Kapusta, Etzersdorfer, & Sonneck, 2009). Findings are however inconsistent and the link between suicide story and subsequent suicidal behaviour is not a clear causal and direct link.

Some studies have shown evidence suggesting that media reporting of suicide stories, particularly celebrity suicides, may trigger other suicides (Cheng, Chen, & Yip, 2011; Niederkrotenthaler, 2012; Stack, 2003; Yang, 2013; Yip et al., 2006). For example, there was a signiﬁcantly higher risk of suicide during the four weeks following a celebrity suicide in South Korea (Lee, Lee, Hwang & Stack, 2014). Specific factors of the suicide story, how it was reported and specific population factors all converge to create a potential vulnerability pathway that leads to suicidality. For example, a study in Australia showed that the suicide stories which get reported among other things and have the potential for copycat suicides are those in which the victim is young, involves violent methods, occurred in commercial settings and in the context of multiple fatality events (Machlin, Pirkis & Spittal, 2013).

In Japan, other characteristics of the story and methods used indicate that front page stories of suicide involving the use of hydrogen sulphide is reported to relate to copycat suicide (Hagihara, Abe, Omagari, Motoi, & Nabeshima, 2014). Other current studies are showing that population characteristics that may be a part of the media story-copycat suicide equation include age, gender, methods and suicide prone society where people are vulnerable (Cheng, Hawton, Chen, et al., 2007; Stack, 2003; Tsai et al., 2011; Ji, Lee, Noh, & Yip, 2014). Irrespective of such body of evidence, other studies have not established any such link between media reports and suicide (Cheng, Chen & Yip, 2011, Hamilton, Metcalfe & Gunnell, 2011). In general, the media report and incidence of suicide connection has been labelled as the Werther effect originally coined by American sociologist Dave Phillips in 1974 to describe the phenomenon where a celebrity suicide published in the media can influence other people to end their own lives (Luce, 2016).

These notwithstanding, the media can also play a powerful and critical role in educating the public about suicide prevention. For instance, evidence in Austria shows that media reports that focus on individuals who demonstrated mastery and coping strategies during adverse circumstances had suicide-protective effect (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010). Other studies in Hong Kong have also provided evidence indicating that when the media intensifies its preventive-reporting of suicide, it left a protective effect on student suicide (Cheng, Chen, Lee, & Yip, 2017). Such *papageno* effects of the media is echoed in the nearly 3-decade observation of Shneidman (1989) who indicated that the media is an important ally in suicide prevention. Consequently, specific standard guidelines on how to report suicide stories in the media in order to prevent or minimize copycat suicides have been developed (Gould, 2001; Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003; WHO, 2017).

Clinical and research experiences on working on suicidality in Ghana for close to a decade have showed that most media reports on suicide in Ghana are not guided by any specific guidelines, and if they are, it is possible they are not compliant and there is no monitoring from the directorate of the Mental Health Authority in the country. Following an era of political oppression from the 80’s through to 1992, the Ghanaian media has become vibrant and active in several areas of public education such as health education in the prevention of HIV/AIDS (Benefo, 2004) and chronic disease education (Aikins, Boynton, & Atanga, 2010). In recent times, the rise in suicidal behaviour brought to the fore the dynamic role of the media as unethical publications of suicide stories were splashed on front pages of various dailies and various health professionals were engaged to speak on the subject. Suicidal behaviour is generally proscribed in Ghana (Osafo, 2016) and the culture of deterrence is so widespread and established that the colonial legal proscription is still in force (Adinkrah, 2013). From police, judges and lawyers, community leaders, psychologists, nurses to physicians, attitudes have ranged from strong disapproval to expression of empathy and decriminalizing attempt survivors (Osafo et al., 2017a; Osafo et al., 2017b). Negative media reportage therefore capitalizes on these poor attitudes to accentuate the culture of deterrence against the act as observed in anecdotal reports. Sensationalism, details about the story, publication of the picture of the deceased/attempt survivor on front pages of dailies, and negative evaluations of the victim are a daily occurrence in recent times in Ghana (Osafo et al, 2015, Osafo et a., 2018). Clearly, media reports on suicide stories in Ghana do not adhere to the established guidelines of WHO (2000, 2017). The current study therefore examined the considerations that media editors observe in publishing media stories in Ghana. Findings can guide the development of context-specific recommendations on media reporting of suicide stories in the country.

**Method**

*Research setting*

The Greater Accra region (which also hosts the capital, Accra the study site) was the setting for the study. There are several media houses in operation within this region. The second quarter of 2017 report from National Communications Authority (NCA) indicates that there are 93 TV stations in Ghana and a quarter are in operations in Accra alone. Further, there are 392 active radio stations with close to 50 operating within the Greater Accra region. There are several registered newspapers also in Ghana including dailies, weeklies and others which are in larger circulation in Accra. Several cases of deaths resulting from suicides often catch the attention of both the print and electronic media and experts are often called to discuss this on national television, with some media houses publishing details and pictures of the incident.

*Population and Sample*

The population for the study was press media practitioners in Accra. For the purpose of the study, media practitioners who report on suicide cases were approached. Three main media houses (dailies) including Ghana Communications publishing the Daily Graphic, The Daily Guide Media House publishing the Daily Guide Newspaper and The Ghanaian Times Media House publishing the Ghanaian Times Newspaper were sampled for the study. A sample of fourteen (14) news reporters and editors of the media houses were selected and interviewed on the research purpose. This sample size was guided by the reflections of Baker and Edwards (2012) who indicated that a sample size of 12-60 is adequate to thoroughly explore a phenomenon qualitatively. Further we terminated the interviews when we reached saturation- where we found no additional themes from the reviewing of successive data regarding the phenomenon of interest (Ando, Cousins, & Young, 2014).

Insert table 1

*Instrument/Materials*

An interview guide was used during the interview. The interview guide was a semi-structured one which allowed the researchers to probe into further information of enquiry. The interview guide was developed from 9-year experience of investigating and reshaping attitudes toward suicide in Ghana. In one of our numerous gatekeeper training programmes for media personnel, we piloted the interview schedule and solicited the views of the participants (as experts) in shaping the development of the interview guide. The interview guide was accordingly optimized with the views of media personnel on *what* to ask participants and *how* to ask the questions. Thus the views of participants together with our knowledge of the suicide research and field experience shaped the choice of questions and the development of the interview guide. The interview guide consisted of five (5) main sections focusing on general views about suicide, personal attitudes, the law criminalizing suicide, the role of the media in suicide prevention and debriefing. Some of the questions on the guide included: *How do you feel about the way suicide is viewed in Ghana?* *What is your own principal attitude towards suicide?* *What is your view about the current criminal code against suicidal persons in Ghana?* *What considerations go into any suicide story before it comes out published?* The interview guide was examined and validated by two colleagues with expertise in suicide research. Items on the interview guide were independently validated at the pilot phase and the outcome used to revise the final guide.

*Sampling and Procedure*

The purposive and convenient sampling techniques were used for the study. Authorities of selected media houses, which have been noted for reporting on suicide stories were approached and informed about the purpose of the study and invited to participate. Media practitioners who have covered and edited stories on suicide who were willing to participate in the study were scheduled for an interview at their convenience. A trained interviewer visited the premises of the selected media houses following the introduction of the study. The chief editors in each of the selected media houses introduced the interviewer to reporters and editors of suicide cases and interviews were conducted. Media practitioners who had their private offices were interviewed in the offices while those without offices were interviewed in the guest rooms of the media houses. The study received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee for the Humanities (ECH) at the University of Ghana, Legon. Informed consent was taken before each interview was conducted. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their response, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence to them.

Interviews were audio-recorded and field notes taken. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes.

*Analysis*

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. In this analysis, first, important emerging themes that describe a phenomenon under study were identified (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). It is a flexible form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Analysis began by carefully noting and agreeing on initial codes that were relevant to the research question: *What considerations go into any suicide story before it is published*. All the authors iteratively read the transcripts independently and noted the themes related to the initial codes. All mapped out themes were linked with sufficient narratives from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Buetow, 2010; Clarke, & Braun, 2013). Extensive discussions were held over a theme until consensus was reached. Analytical connections were established between themes and supported by excerpts of the views of the participants in the transcripts. We observed four main considerations from participants who report on suicide stories in the media in Ghana: *Deterrence, Didacticism, Celebritism* and *Ethics,* which are closely examined and substantiated below:

**Findings**

**Deterrence**

Participants (n=9) mostly considered reporting suicide stories because it will deter others who may be planning to engage in similar act to desist from the thought:

*The consideration is that… somebody has died through suicide and it must be put out there for others to know that it is bad to commit suicide and then the only time, you know, lessons can be learnt is when the issue is brought out in the media and then discussions are generated in society and everyone condemns the act. Then if there maybe anybody who is harbouring the thoughts of committing suicide, the discussion, the condemnation alone would serve to deter the person so basically that’s what informs my decision to put out the story. (Male, 35).*

This participant indicates that public condemnation is the main avenue for public education on suicide. Further, he perceived that public condemnatory reactions have some deterrence utility which inform his decisions to publish suicide stories. Thus, in a nutshell, his story aims at stirring negative sentiments from the public towards the act. This can be a disservice to the fight against social stigma towards mental distress and illness in the country.

Another participant corroborates this view by indicating that consistent publication of suicide stories might heighten the intensity of the deterrence:

*... we think we want it to serve as a deterrence to people, so that it can serve as a kind of reference that maybe when they see stories it will deter them, especially the young ones* *from committing suicide. But I don’t think it is deterring enough so it is one of the reasons why we decide to keep on publishing suicide stories (Male, 48).*

As indicated explicitly above, this informant’s consideration for publishing suicide story is to achieve a threshold that is deterring enough. Until that is reached, it is plausible nothing will change this seeming established pseudo linkage between deterrence and suicide prevention. It is a moral ideology, reflecting the generalized negative attitude toward suicide in the country (Osafo 2016).

**Didacticism**

This theme serves to communicate or is intended to be instructive to teach the public something that should not be done in relation to suicide. The aim here is to educate and inform the public about suicide and this kind of education leads to divulging information that will “catch the attention” of people:

*Consideration… I think it’s one the human element, the news worthiness. Let’s put news worthiness first. It should be news worthiness, the human element, it should be educative, informative, and interesting…It should be something that people would want to read over and over again. It should be something that would catch the attention of people. It should not be a boring, long write-up or something. How you put your words together, how you write your story should be interesting. Someone should love reading what you have written (Female,32).*

The consideration as she indicates above is that the incident should be interesting or important enough to warrant reporting: newsworthy and this she refers to as the ‘*human element’*. Whatever that means, she might be referring to the human proclivity for novelty. She adds the educative and other mechanics of writing a good story as important consideration. Clearly, the preventive issues for suicidal behaviour are grossly missing in her considerations. The newsworthiness is an overarching consideration. It is problematic how she thinks that a suicide story should be *interesting* for the readers. The expression “*catch the attention*” connotes the use of techniques through words to stimulate or grab the attention of readers to repeatedly read the story. Since this is print media and can be purchased and kept, vivid description of the suicide story has the potential to provoke suicidal crisis in vulnerable persons.

In another voice, the participant did not mince words in reporting that suicide is news and shall remain so:

*The first thing is suicide is news depending on the circumstance, it is news! Suicide will always be news, which is a fact. For instance, a man jumps from Trust Towers building and kills himself, it is news. The first thing people will hear about it is the news (Male, 33*).

There are several repetitions of the word ‘news’ in the narrative. This may emphasize his interest in considering the newsworthiness of the story. It further implicitly indicates that what is important is the sensational dimensions more than the preventive lessons.

**Celebritism**

This theme presents some form of exploitation on the part of media houses in reporting suicide stories especially when a celebrity is involved. This is because it is often regarded as being of public interest. Most studies that measured stories regarding well-known entertainment and political celebrities were 14.3 times more likely to produce a copycat effect (Stack, 2003). The latent motive then in reporting such stories is for profit with little interest in the story itself, which may inadvertently lead to copycat suicide. Celebrity suicides are newsworthy, as such reports may likely influence vulnerable individuals who revere such celebrities (WHO, 2017):

*Naturally, there is a saying that when you bleed it sells, bad news sell better than good news and such is suicide. In fact, human beings will want to hear more bad news than good news; when they hear bad news, everybody is rushing to buy bad news. Recently Castro (a local musician) was feared (to have) drown with a lady and up to now people have not seen them. It will amaze you the number of people who have been following this story, they are asking ‘what is happening…?’ (Male, 45).*

The consideration for publishing suicide news as indicated in the above narrative is informed by the popular view that people have a preference for bad news. This view might be taken from the negativity dominance hypothesis, which states that negative events are more potent and salient to people than positive ones. The interest in publishing bad news as the informant indicates might be to increase the number of readership or subscribers; and popularity for audience with commercial interest as a corollary.

Some participants indicated that they carefully scan some aspects of the suicide, which could arouse intense interest and command attention with suicide stories to create curiosity. One informant gives an insight into specific demographics such as age, profession, suicide scene, the personality and whether the individual left a suicide note:

*I look at the person involved, I look at the age, I look at… err.. the gender, yeah because I feel these things are important. When the person is very young …we see it as something that is bizarre, why would the person do it? Sometimes it has to do with how young or how old the person is, age is very important. The kind of person that does it, is he a student, a pupil, is he a banker, you know because every profession has its own problems and issues… (Female, 28)*.

Clearly in the above the participant engages in a search for indications of establish assumptions about suicide. Although these assumptions are not explicit, anecdotal evidence and common myths in Ghana resonate within her narration. For example, in Ghana, people may tend to hold the view that compared to an adult a suicidal behaviour of a young person is incomprehensible. This is because it might be assumed that the young have more hope and opportunities in life. Further, poor persons’ suicide might be understandable than a rich man’s, because material lack is assumed to create distress in life more than the burden of wealth. From her narration, it seems that a suicide that violates some of these mythical assumptions escalates the oddness. This untypical aspect of the incident provides the foundation on which sensationalism thrives.

Perhaps this untypical aspect is what another refers to as shocking and thus newsworthy:

*... many of the times you know suicide stories are shocking, and for us as journalists, things that are shocking are so many.... We look at the person involved, the personality involved, and the circumstances surrounding the suicide, and sometimes the background story depending on whether there is a suicide note or whether a close relative had contact with him before, these are the things we consider (Male, 35-40).*

Noteworthy in the above narrative is that the search for newsworthiness of a suicide story begins from potentially celebrity considerations: *the person*, *the personality involved* as the participant mentioned. These considerations are selective and personal; determined by the journalist personal discretion rather than any objective ethical criteria.

Another male participant explicitly indicates such celebrity considerations in this narrative as follows:

*“I think a lot of things for instance; if a big man kills himself it’s more likely to make a big news for suicide story. For instance, last year, there was a guy in Adabraka (a suburb in Accra, Ghana), who wrote before he killed himself, he wrote a note that this man who owes him should pay the money to the wife. He apologized to the wife for killing himself and stuff like that. That will obviously make an interesting story” (Male, 33).*

The adjectival phrase ‘big man’ is figurative and stresses on the celebrity-based considerations for suicide stories. Beneath the participant’s view and reasons for celebrity, considerations for suicide stories might be the myth that famous people who may be rich should not engage in suicide. The sense of enigma that might be aroused following such person’s suicide appears to be what the participant seems to leverage on as important for publication.

**Ethics**

Of the 14 participants interviewed, only one person referred to ethics as a consideration in reporting suicide stories. This informant argues that due guidelines are to be followed in reporting suicide stories:

*“You see before you publish anything like that at least the person’s face should be covered. I mean there are certain ethics that people don’t even know they are in the Ghana Journalist Association code of ethics. There are certain things you can’t do. Someone can just display somebody’s face in your front page that’s why sometimes Daily Guide’s trace you hear the public criticizing us. Even for instance, in the Ghanaian times yesterday, people got burnt in a vehicle and the face, everything is there, that’s unethical, highly unethical. There are serious considerations attached to doing stories on suicide “(Male, 34).*

The narrative from the participant suggests that journalists should not exploit the person who is dead for commercial ends. Ethical guidelines do not allow the victim and the situation to be exploited. These considerations in reporting also includes being compassionate to the family bereaved by the suicide during coverage. Adherence to guidelines serves to bring propriety to the reporting suicide stories.

**Discussion**

The current study explored considerations of media reportage of suicide in the Ghanaian context. There were divergent views from journalists on how reporting suicide stories should be done. There were those with the intent on reporting every gruesome detail making the headlines; others may report only little detail, and only one person endeavor to act ethically. It was found that the majority of journalists interviewed published suicide stories with the aim of deterring others who may be entertaining such thoughts. Even though the purpose may be to deter, how it is published may give clues to vulnerable individuals. It is however interesting to note that such published stories in print media do not provide avenues in which help can be sought if anybody is going through crisis.

It appears celebrity suicides, particularly of an unexpected, dramatic nature provides a means to sell print media. Journalists patronize the public while publishing the story with less regard to the impact the story may have on vulnerable individuals. Other studies have found synchronization of inappropriate media reporting of suicide with increased suicide deaths during major suicide events such as celebrity death leading to copycats suicides (Yang, 2013). Gundlach and Stack (1990) have also reported that non-celebrity stories can also yield imitative suicides if their stories receive enough publicity. *Are there any examples of published celebrity suicide stories in Ghana? It would be useful to cite example in the review section (and refer here in the discussion)*

Furthermore, some journalists considered demographic data before publishing the story and the status of the person determines whether the story will either be sensational or not. Most of the factors that precipitated report of suicide of 29 suicides out of 2,161 suicides were younger individuals who had died by suicide, those using violent methods, or the suicide act occurring in commercial areas (Machlin, Pirkis, & Spittal, 2013).

The current study suggests that the improper manner of reported suicides may increase the risk of lethal imitative behaviors or serve to distort public perceptions about suicide. Evidence has shown that there is an increase in suicidal behavior after print media gives much publicity to suicide stories (Bollen & Phillips, 1982). Imitation of the suicide appears more likely when the suicide is covered in headlines, over publicized and makes the front page. Imitation then does not only happen with inappropriate reporting but also with repetition of the story, it has a potentiality for copycat suicides. Frey, Michel and Valach (1997) found that headline in 47% of the suicide stories were considered sensational. Interestingly, in 13% of the articles, the headline was judged as romanticizing the event or glorifying the person. They also found inappropriate pictures and ranked 44% of the articles to be in the high imitation risk group. It is quite interesting that only one participant mentioned ethics as a consideration in reporting suicide. It establishes the tendency that although there may be ethical guidelines in reporting suicide, it is noteworthy that there is low or no compliance. Poor quality of reporting of suicides in the media led to an increase in the rate of suicide (Hamilton, Metcalfe, & Gunnell, 2011), therefore efforts should be made to observe propriety in reporting such stories.

The findings have serious implications for gatekeeper training for media personnel in Ghana. Gatekeeper training is important in helping to prevent suicide (Clifford, Doran, & Tsey, K, 2013). The United Nations have recommended gatekeeper training as an effective strategy to prevent suicide (United Nations, 1996). Gatekeepers are people like the clergy, police officers and teachers and even media personnel who have primary contact with individuals in their routine work and are able to recognize people at risk for suicide. This type of training teaches these people to identify individuals with behaviours that put them at heightened risk for suicide and refer them for treatment or supporting services. It is possible media personnel in their line of work might come across an attempt survivor. Gatekeeper training will equip them with the priority of referral rather than the newsworthiness of the person’s situation. They may provide more educative and less sensationalistic stories on the case, thereby providing useful suicide preventive messages. The effectiveness of such gatekeeping program is demonstrated by Roškar and colleagues (2017), in Slovenia. In this study, they retrieved newspaper articles addressing suicides over 12-months periods and provided intervention via workshops with editors and journalists on suicide reporting. Media reportage in the follow-up period after intervention was less sensationalistic headlines, less reporting about specific cases of suicides and more about dealing with mental distress and hotlines. Other studies have also reported effective gatekeeper programs on suicide prevention for students, counsellors, mental health professionals, clergy, coaches, nurses, police officers among (King & Smith, 2000; Tsai, et al., 2011; Wyman et at., 2010). Gatekeeper training will be a good initiative to help in censoring suicide reports in Ghana and this may help in reducing social stigma towards attempt survivors.

The findings also have implications for reconsidering the ethical regulations of Ghana Journalists Association (GJA). Sensitive stories such as suicide need stringent censorship and the generalised indications in the study of the absence of this reality is rather unfortunate. The GJA can work with the Centre for Suicide and Violence Research (CSVR), an NGO that specialises in suicide and violence prevention research and training to provide them with continuous education and training on reporting sensitive issues. There should be a balance between the public’s right to know and privacy of the individual who engaged in suicidal behavior. Media suicide reporting is a public health issue and journalists have a social responsibility to be ethical in reporting suicide stories.

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. First, we limited our interviews to only journalists in our study. For future studies, we recommend the inclusion of radio presenters to give a much broader understanding of considerations that are made before suicide stories are published or broadcasted. We also recommend analyzing both print media, audio and audio-visual stories of suicide to find out the potentiality of such reports to influence copycat suicides.

To conclude, media reportage of suicidal behavior in Ghana is still influenced by the pervasive negative attitudes towards suicide and commercialism. This seminal study is the beginning of future studies to unravel precise characteristics of media suicide stories that may be a risk for copycat suicide. This study calls for a need to remain vigilant about how suicide news are reported in the media. It has also highlighted the need for gatekeeper training and a reconsideration of ethics for media personnel and practice. The media is an ally for suicide prevention, but it is critical to provide training in order to harness the power of the media in health-related preventive efforts in the country.

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