

# The Impact of Media Reporting of Suicide from an International and Irish Perspective

Journalism@ul symposium,  
University of Limerick

20<sup>th</sup> April 2017



Prof Ella Arensman, Mr Niall McTernan  
National Suicide Research Foundation  
WHO Collaborating Centre on Surveillance and Research in Suicide Prevention  
Department of Epidemiology and Public Health  
University College Cork, Ireland

# Increased understanding of the importance of media guidelines for reporting of suicide among journalists

*“I would be careful not to go into graphic description about the mode of the suicide because I think that’s voyeuristic and ultimately unhelpful”*

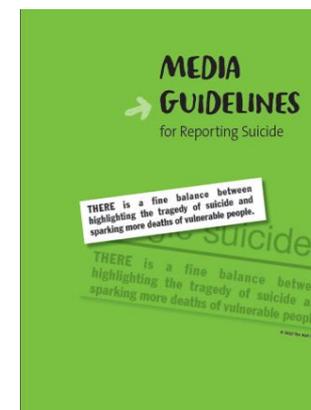
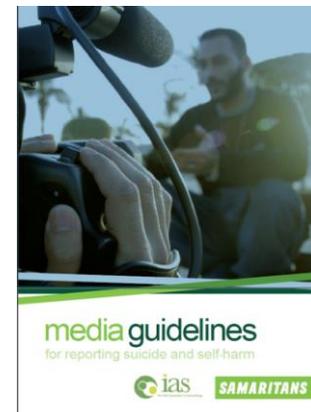
Anne Dempsey,

Freelance journalist, Ireland

*“Reporting on suicide is one of the most difficult issues facing journalists. These guidelines are here to help, by providing reporters with the information they need to cover cases of suicide or self-harm responsibly. They don’t aim to censor the media or limit its freedoms. Instead, they seek to help journalists deal with many dilemmas on reporting suicide and assist the public in understanding the complexity of the problem”*

Carl O’Brien, Social Affairs

Correspondent, The Irish Times



# Historical evidence of contagion of suicide

**1774:** *“The Sorrows of Jung Werther”* – JW Von Goethe

- Following publication of the novel, indications for imitative suicides among young men in Germany, and in Denmark and Italy – “The Werther Effect”

**1962:** *Marilyn Monroe*

- 12% increase in suicide in the month following her death by suicide.

**1988:** *TV film of railway suicide of a 19-year old male student*

- A tv film showing the railway suicide of a young men was followed by a 175% increase in railway suicides in young men over 70 days after broadcasting.



*Phillips, 1974; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988; Halgin et al, 2006*

# Outcomes of international research in terms of impact of media coverage on suicide

- Research consistently shows evidence for the impact of sensationalised media coverage on suicide (56 studies)
- The impact is greater on people with similar gender-age characteristics as the deceased, and when celebrities are involved
- Several studies show that copycat effects of media reporting are primarily found for vulnerable people, such as people with depression and those who have engaged in self-harm
- Protective effects of media coverage through newspaper blackouts, reducing the quantity of reporting, improving the quality of reporting and addressing positive mental health topics (6 studies)

*Sisask & Varnik, 2012; Niederkrotenthaler et al, 2012; Stack, 2005*



# Social Media

- Social media platforms can reach large numbers of individuals, may allow others to intervene following expression of suicidal behaviour and can provide support and information on coping strategies for vulnerable individuals
- Challenges: controlling user behaviour, possibility of contagion, accurately assessing suicide risk, issues relating to privacy and confidentiality, normalisation of self-harm, hindrance to professional help-seeking, exposure of highly lethal methods of self-harm and the facilitation of cyberbullying

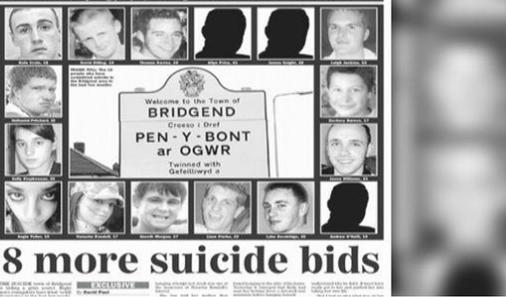
*(Robinson et al 2016 ; Daine et al 2013)*

## Media awareness campaigns

- The role of mass media in reducing stigma and increasing help seeking behaviour.
- Indications for most promising results based on multi-level suicide prevention programmes

*(Niederkrötenhaller et al, 2016)*





# The suicide cluster in Bridgend and media reporting

## Background

- In January 2008, the UK media reported a series of deaths amongst young people in Bridgend as a suicide epidemic
- The intensity of the reporting remained high for several weeks, and the numbers of cases reported in the media continued to rise

## Main Findings

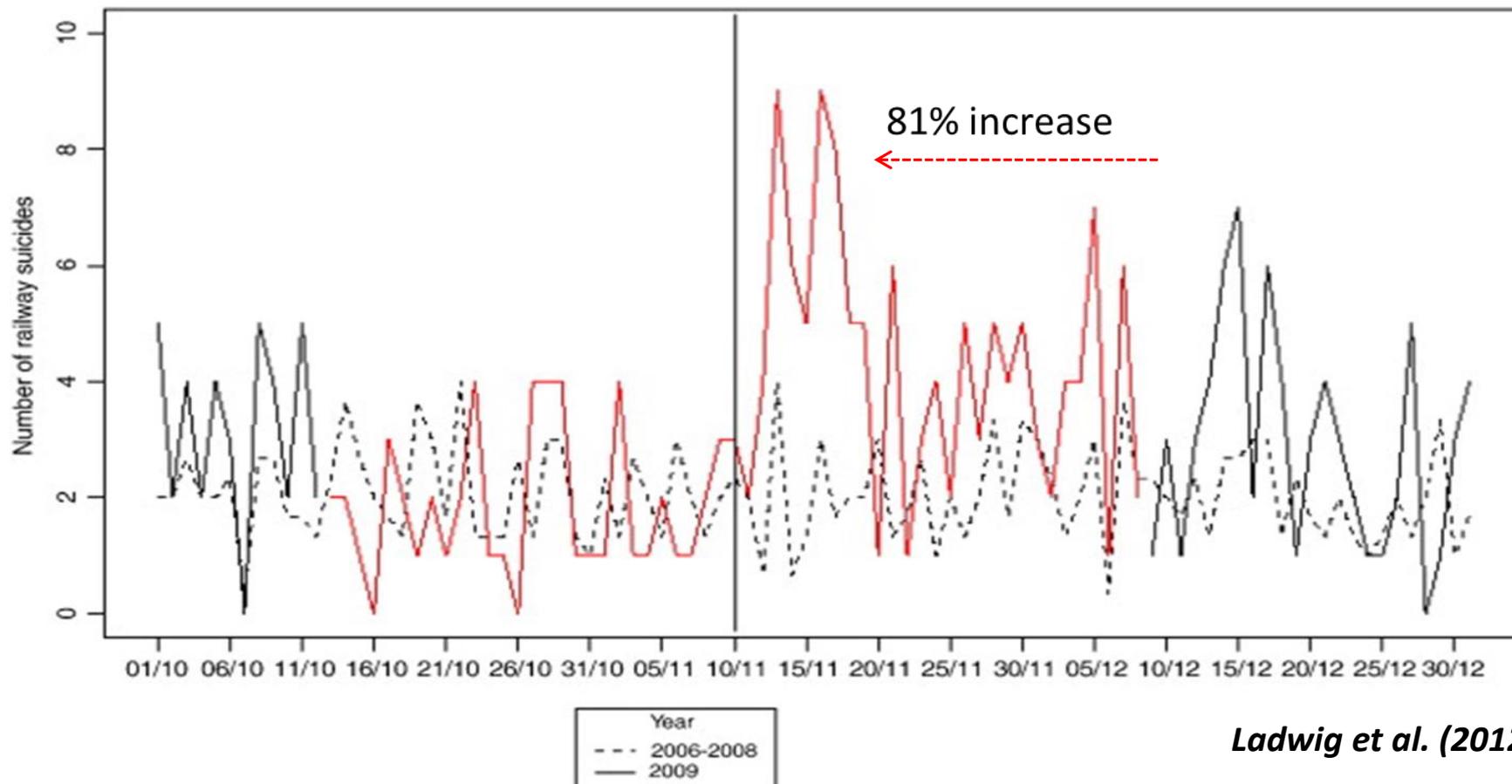
- A time-space cluster involving 10 suicide deaths amongst 15–34 year olds was identified
- This cluster was smaller and shorter in duration than the phenomenon reported in the print media.
- Most deaths in the cluster occurred **after the commencement of the attention from the print media** (much of the initial newspaper focus related to deaths in the preceding 12 months).

## Conclusions

- There was a possible suicide cluster in young people in Bridgend between December 2007 and February 2008, however, it was smaller, shorter in duration, and predominantly later than the phenomenon that was reported in national and international print media
- Further investigation of factors leading to the onset and termination of this series of deaths, in particular the role of the media, is required



# Significant increase of railway suicides after the suicide of German goal keeper, Robert Enke on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2009



*Ladwig et al. (2012)*

In addition to the short term increase in railway suicides, *Hegerl et al (2013)* identified a long-term effect: 19% increase in railway suicides in the two years after the suicide by Robert Enke

# German goalkeeper kills self by stepping in front of train, police say

November 12, 2009 1:53 p.m. EST

**Germany stunned as national goalkeeper Robert Enke commits suicide**  
By SPORTSMAIL REPORTER  
Last updated at 12:15 PM on 11th November 2009





# Connecting for Life

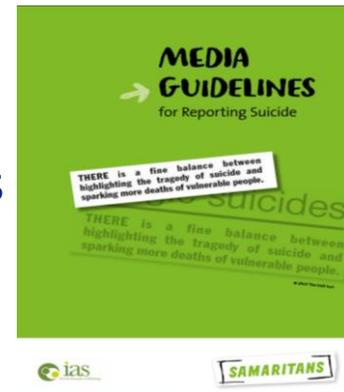
## Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide, 2015-2020

Ireland's National Strategy  
to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020

### Strategic Goals of the Strategy:

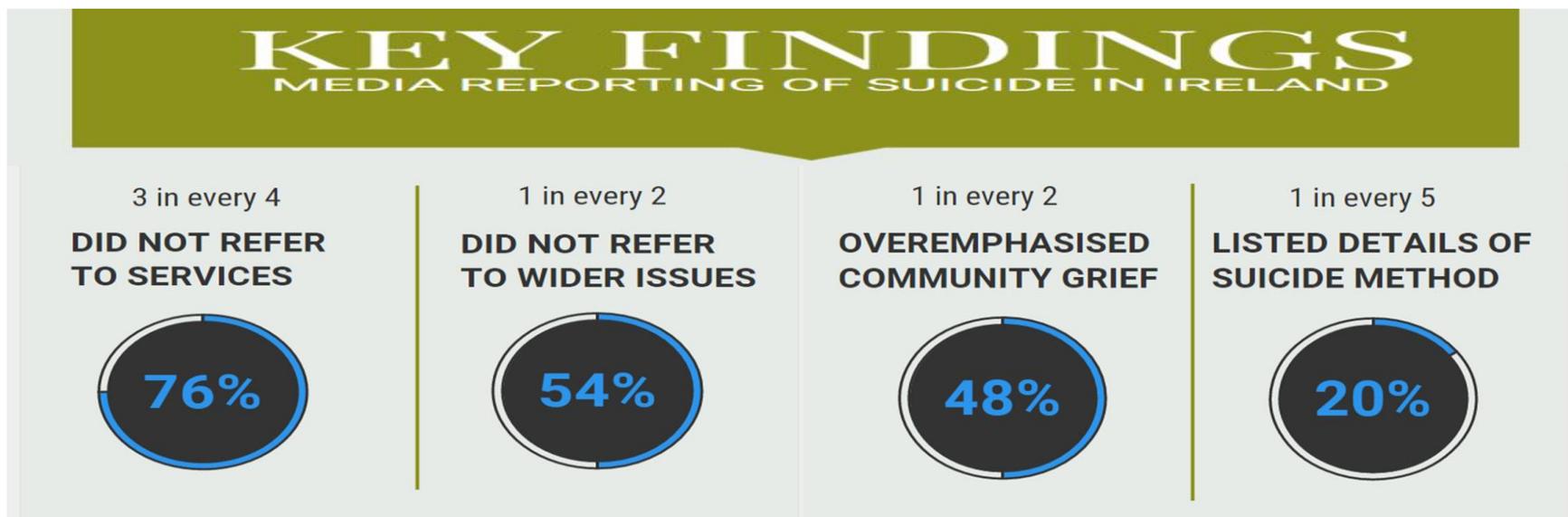
1. To improve the nation's understanding of and attitudes to suicidal behaviour, mental health and wellbeing

Action 1.4 Engage and work collaboratively with the media in relation to media guidelines, tools and training programmes to improve the reporting of suicidal behaviour within broadcast, print and online media



# Media reporting of suicide in Ireland and adherence to guidelines

- 243 media articles were screened and analysed for quality of reporting of four high profile cases of suicide that occurred between September 2009 and December 2012



- Nearly all articles (99.2%) breached at least one guideline and 58.9% of articles were found to breach three or more guidelines

*McTernan et al. (2017)*

# Examples of inappropriate media reporting

**Tributes paid to teacher couple and three children butchered in 'murder-suicide stabbing' horror at countryside home**



Police believe Alan Hawe killed his wife and three sons Ryan, 6, Liam, 13, and Niall, 11, before hanging himself

**Killed in their pyjamas by father in frenzied attack - before mother-in-law found note**

Hatchet and knife used in attack on 'normal, outwardly happy family'



**Cyber-bullies claimed lives of five teens**

**Irish Teen, Commits Suicide After Battle With 'Vicious' Cyberbullying**

# Negative impact of misinformation

In terms of media reporting, there is a need for sensitive and factual reporting in order to minimise harm and increase awareness:

- Important to verify statistics with credible source (e.g. Suicide and Self-Harm Observatory, in development NSRF, UCC)
- The graphic nature of reporting and the reporting of specific details of methods involved can trigger copycat cases: the effects of exposure on suicidal behaviour and violence are well documented
- Media professionals should consider the vulnerable reader who might be in crisis when they read the story: coverage should not be glorified or romanticised, should emphasise consequences of the event for others, and list sources of help
- The impact of these events can be devastating on families and communities and extreme caution when reporting cases of murder-suicide, in particular is required

# Example of misinformation

## Mental health and suicide crisis 'a national emergency'



Thursday, November 24, 2016



The Government is under pressure to make mental health and suicide prevention a national emergency after the Dáil heard concerns about 16 people taking their own lives in two weeks in Cork.



# How to respond to emerging suicide clusters and contagion

➤ There is a gap in evidence-based guidelines detailing appropriate response strategies to suicide clusters and the low-frequency nature of clusters makes it difficult to evaluate strategies

## Current best practice guidelines for responding to emerging clusters – the core elements

- Response team and core response plan should be available as part of a routine procedure
- Clarity on leadership/co-ordination of response team
- Multidisciplinary response team comprised of qualified representatives of all relevant agencies, incl. mental health services, suicide bereavement support services, social work, police, media
- Inter-agency protocols (if available) should be put in place in order to address referral procedures, confidentiality and information sharing
- Involvement of specialised staff of suicide prevention agencies and mental health professionals trained in dealing with severe traumatic incidents, post traumatic stress and complicated grief
- Response plan needs to address different phases:
  - Immediate aftermath: Up to 1 week
  - Reactive period: 1 week up to 1 month
  - Outreach period: weeks up to years (incl. anniversaries)



# Ongoing challenges with Social Media

## Blue Whale: Parents warned online game linked to hundreds of teen suicides may be played in Ireland

Experts have warned that kids as young as eight could be playing the game which has been associated with up to 130 deaths in Russia



340

SHARES



COMMENTS

BY SARAH SLATER  
05.30, 18 APR 2017

NEWS



## Netflix officials defend 13 Reasons Why against claims it glamorises suicide



Dylan Minnette and Katherine Langford in 13 Reasons Why

# Recommendations and Actions

- Media Guidelines achieve more compliance if they are developed by an interdisciplinary team, including mental health professionals and media specialists
- Increased monitoring by media monitoring agencies such as Headline is required
- Media guidelines need to be positively reinforced and implemented on an on-going basis (IASP/WHO guidelines are currently being updated)
- Implementation of guidelines should be conducted using a pro-active approach and as part of the curriculum of journalists and editors
- The inclusion of guidelines for reporting of suicidal behaviour in the code of conduct for journalists warrants consideration
- Further research into the role of social media in suicide and suicide prevention is needed in order to obtain greater insight into potential risks and benefits



# Thank you!



Prof. Ella Arensman, Mr Niall McTernan  
National Suicide Research Foundation

WHO Collaborating Centre for Surveillance and Research in Suicide Prevention  
Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College Cork, Ireland  
T: 00353 214205551

E-mail: [earensman@ucc.ie](mailto:earensman@ucc.ie), [niall.mcternan@ucc.ie](mailto:niall.mcternan@ucc.ie)

*The National Suicide Research Foundation is in receipt of funding  
from the National Office for Suicide Prevention*

