

# The role of the media in suicide prevention, suicide clustering and contagion

## El papel de los medios de comunicación en la prevención del suicidio: componentes y efecto contagio

Simposio – Prevención de suicidio: Desde la salud pública hasta el contexto clínico

IV Congreso Nacional de Psicología, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Álava, España

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# The role of the media

Our main means of mass communication: the internet, newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television and film

The role of the media in society was not preordained but developed as a result of how society used the media

All forms of the media seek to reach, inform, influence and/or entertain as many members of society as possible

Consequently, there is huge potential for the media to address and impact public health problems like suicidal behaviour



# The role of the media in relation to suicide

Why do all forms of the media seek to reach as many members of society as possible?

...usually, to make money

So why, or how, would the media address suicide if the aim is to reach as many people as possible in order to make money?

...by conveying accurate information responsibly in order to educate and inform with minimal risk of harm?

...by feeding our morbid curiosity with dramatic, sensational, graphic accounts of suicide cases?



# The effect of media reporting of suicide

Most studies have assessed the effect of media portrayals or reports of suicide deaths on the incidence of suicidal behaviour, the Werther effect

Most studies report an increase in suicidal behaviour (Sisask, 2012)

Some showed evidence of a dose-response relationship (Stack, 2003; Pirkis, 2006; Neiderkrotenthaler, 2010)

Some limited evidence on how the nature of the reporting impacts of the incidence of suicidal behaviour (Neiderkrotenthaler, 2010)

Findings have suggested that the copycat effect was more likely after celebrity suicides and female suicides (Stack, 2005)

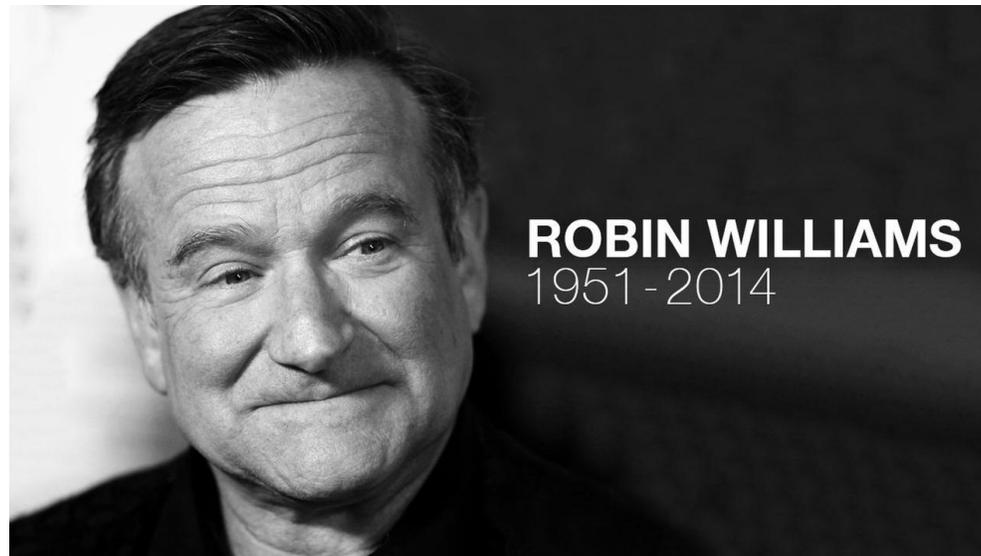


Goethe  
The Sorrows of Young Werther  
A new translation by David Constantine  
OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

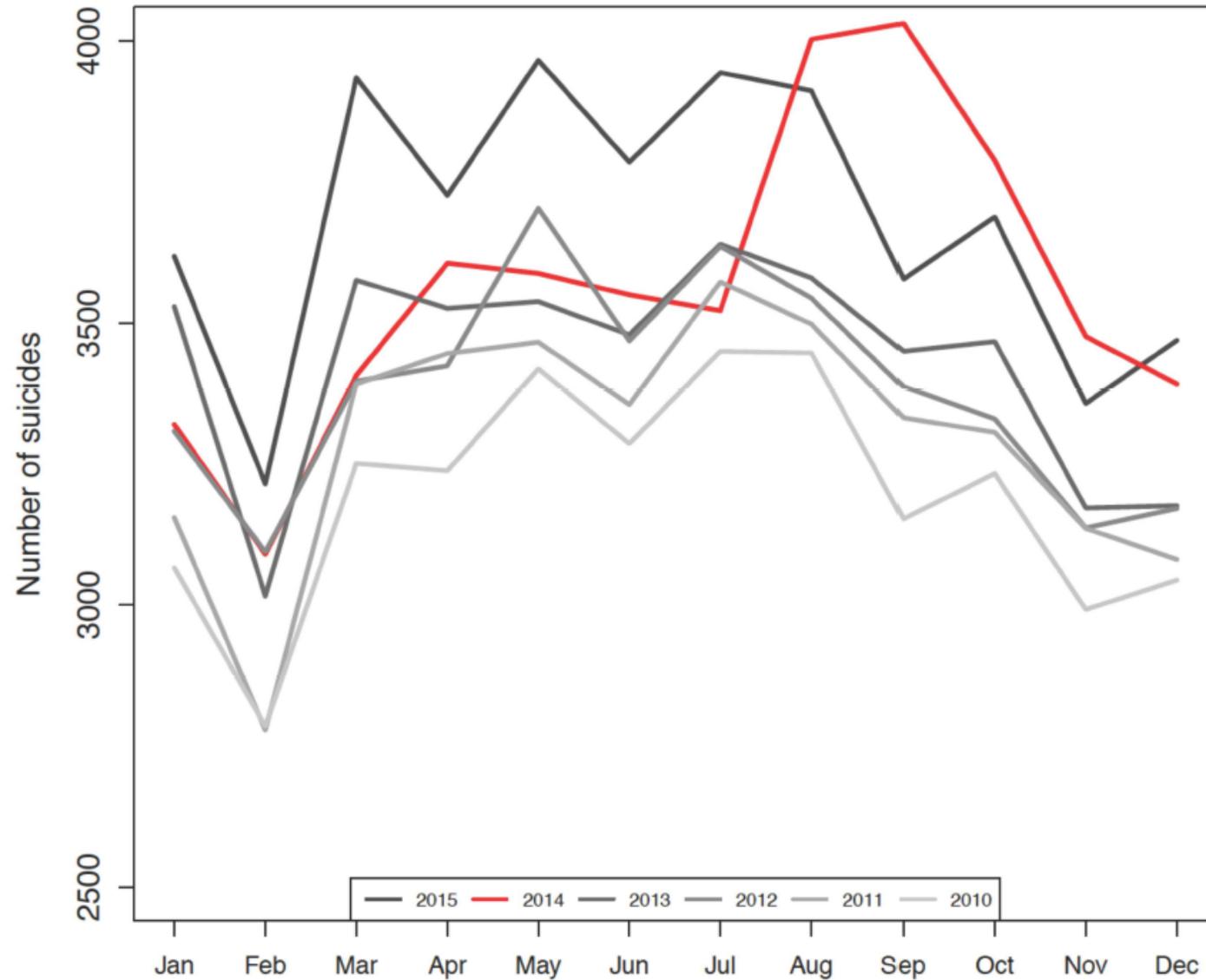
# Recent example: Robin William's death

Extensive media coverage following Robin William's suicide on 11 August 2014 at age 63 years

Reports described the circumstances of the death in detail



# Recent example: Robin William's death



# Recent example: Robin William's death

10% increase in suicides in Aug-Dec 2014

Excess of 1,841 deaths (18,690 observed vs. 16,849 expected)

1,353 (74%) involved same suicide method (hanging/suffocation), a 32% increase

Similar increase in male and female suicides

Greatest increase among 30-44 year-olds (13%)



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Increase in suicides the months after the death of Robin Williams in the US

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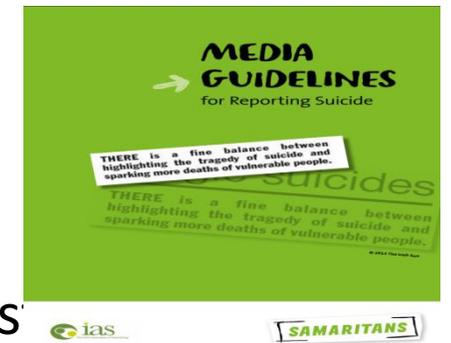
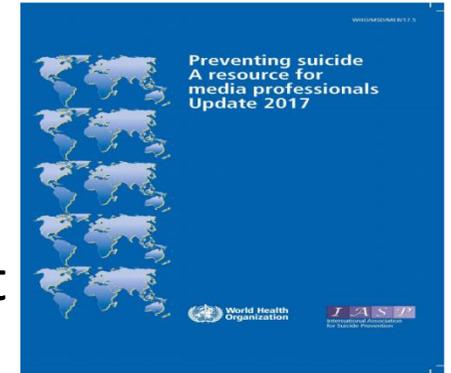
# Media guidelines for the reporting of suicide

International and national guidelines have been developed (WHO, 2017; The Samaritans, 2013)

Evidence for the guidelines impacting on suicide rates is limited but positive (Sonneck, 1994; Neiderkrotenthaler, 2009)

Several studies reported an increase in newspaper articles on suicide after guidelines (Michel, 2000; Fu, 2008; Pirkis, 2009)

Studies of adherence to guidelines report mixed findings but suggest greater adherence when guidelines were developed and implemented in collaboration with media agents (Bohanna, 2012)



# Media guidelines for the reporting of suicide

Do provide accurate information about where to seek help

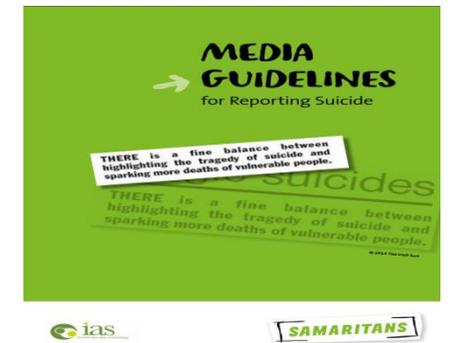
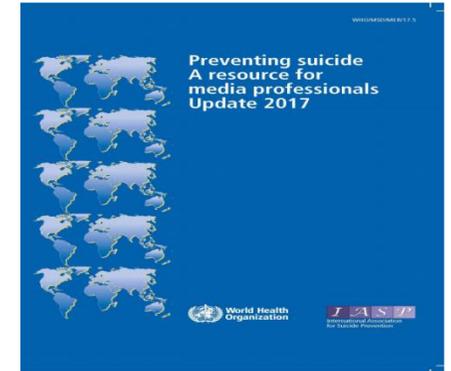
Do educate the public about the facts of suicide and prevention

Do report stories of coping with stressors and suicidal thoughts

Do apply caution when reporting celebrity suicides

Do apply caution when interviewing bereaved family or friends

Do recognise that media professionals themselves may be affected



# Media guidelines for the reporting of suicide

Don't place stories about suicide prominently

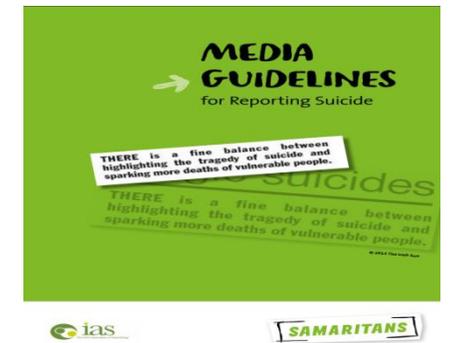
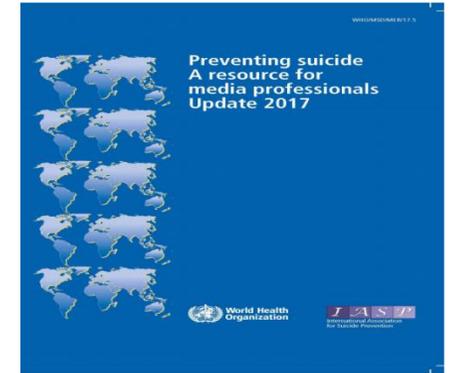
Don't unduly repeat such stories

Don't use language which sensationalises or normalises suicide, or presents it as a constructive solution to problems

Don't explicitly describe the method used

Don't provide details about the site/location

Don't use photographs, video footage or social media links



# Desired media principles in relation to suicide

The media should adhere to the five principles of journalism:

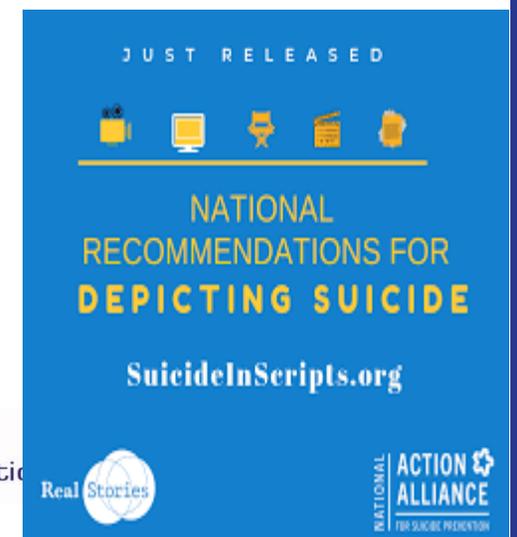
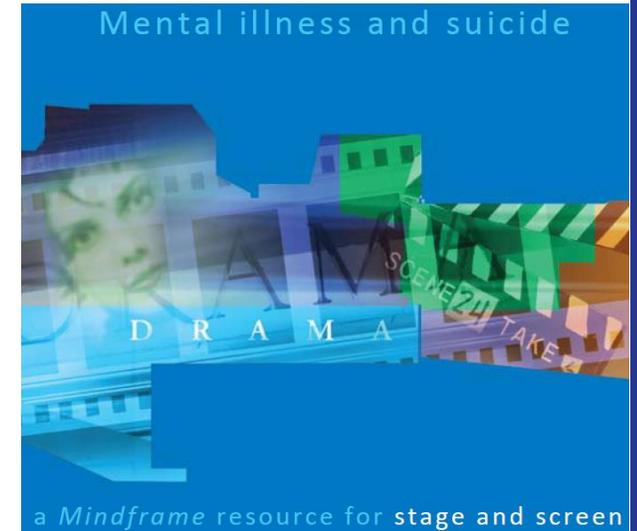
1. Truth and Accuracy - Getting the facts right
2. Independence
3. Fairness and Impartiality - Stories should be balanced and add context
4. Humanity - Do no harm, be aware of the impact
5. Accountability - Amend errors, sincerity not cynicism, listen to concerns

# Media guidelines for the portrayal of suicide

Australian resource developed in consultation with scriptwriters and people with experience of mental illness to inform safe and authentic portrayals of suicide and mental ill-health ([www.mindframe.org.au](http://www.mindframe.org.au))

US resource was informed by representatives from the entertainment industry and the suicide prevention field

The WHO media guidance is being updated with a new section on guidelines for depicting/reporting suicide in films and documentaries



# Media portrayal of suicide example: *13 Reasons Why*

13-part Netflix series released on 31 March 2017

Most popular TV show in the US for almost 2 months

Fictional story of an attractive, intelligent and funny teenage girl who left 13 tapes describing how people contributed to her ending her life

Themes include bullying, sexual assault, substance misuse....

Finale shows suicide in graphic detail over a 3-minute scene



# 13 Reasons Why suicide contagion

Cases of copycat suicidal behaviour reported by clinicians via the child psychiatry e-mail network in the US and Canada

Survey of US paediatric emergency services showed

...an increase in cases in most sites

...copycat cases in almost half the sites



## Teen Suicide: Fanning the Flames of a Public Health Crisis

Vera Feuer, MD, AND Jennifer Havens, MD

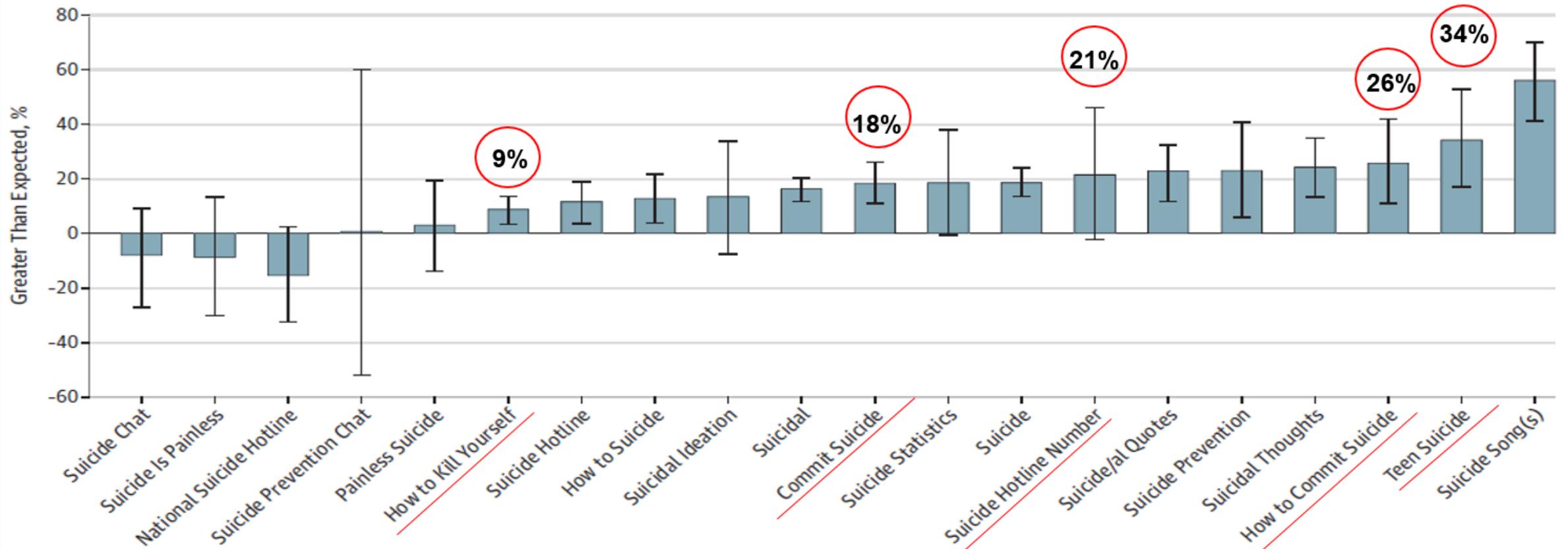
JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF CHILD & ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY  
VOLUME 56 NUMBER 9 SEPTEMBER 2017



# 13 Reasons Why suicide contagion

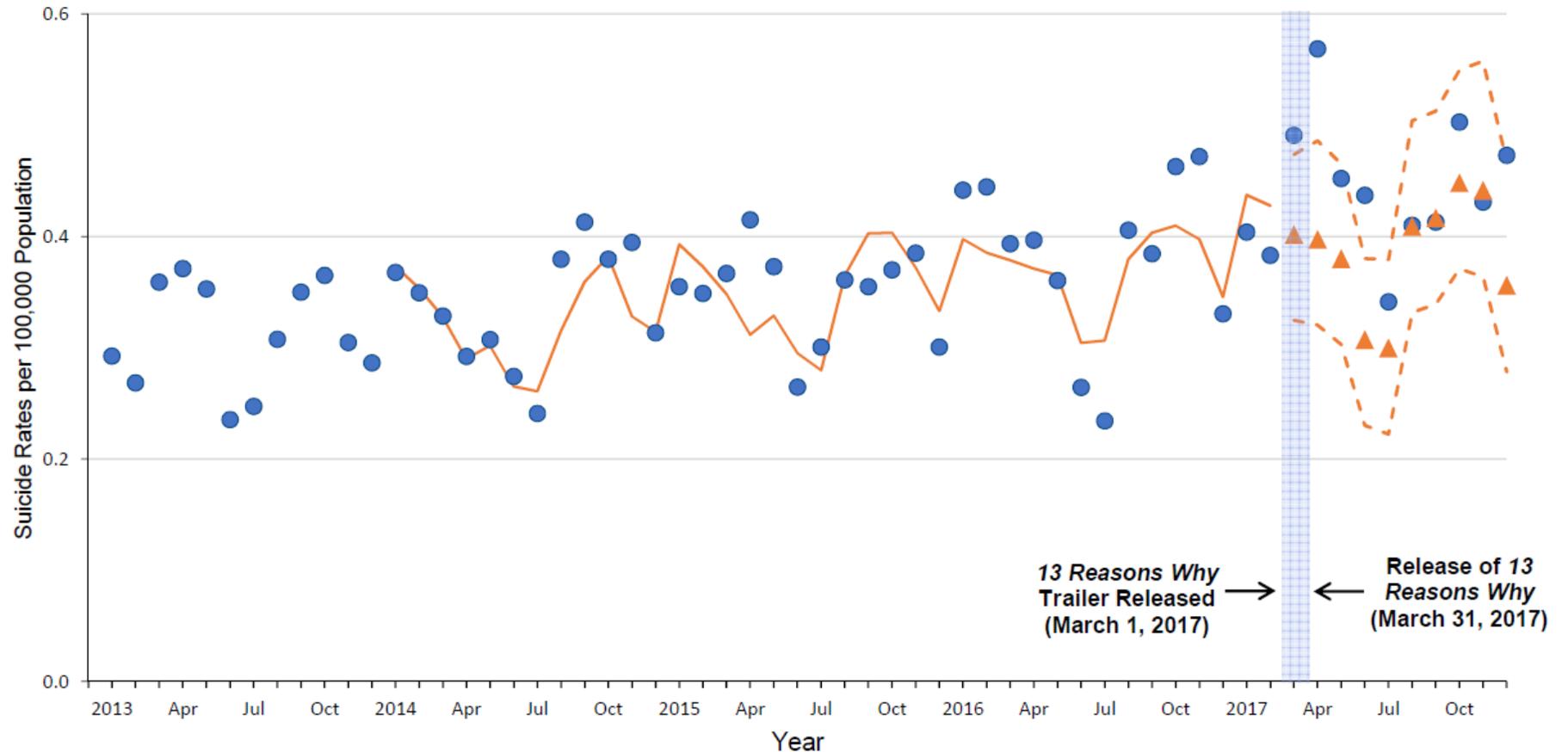
Internet searches for suicide 19% higher in the 19 days after the release of 13 Reasons Why - 900,000 to 1.5 million more searches than expected (Ayers, 2017)

C Specific suicide queries



# 13 Reasons Why suicide clustering

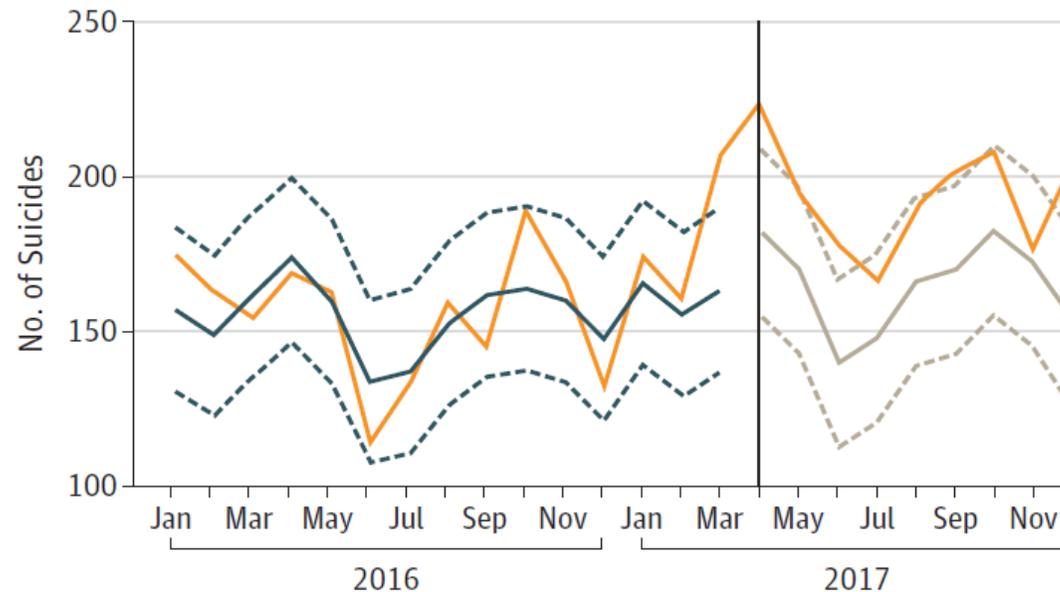
Suicide among 10-17 year-olds in the US was 29% higher in the month after the release of 13 Reasons Why – 35% higher in boys, 15% higher in girls – an excess of 195 deaths in 2017 after the release (Bridge, 2019)



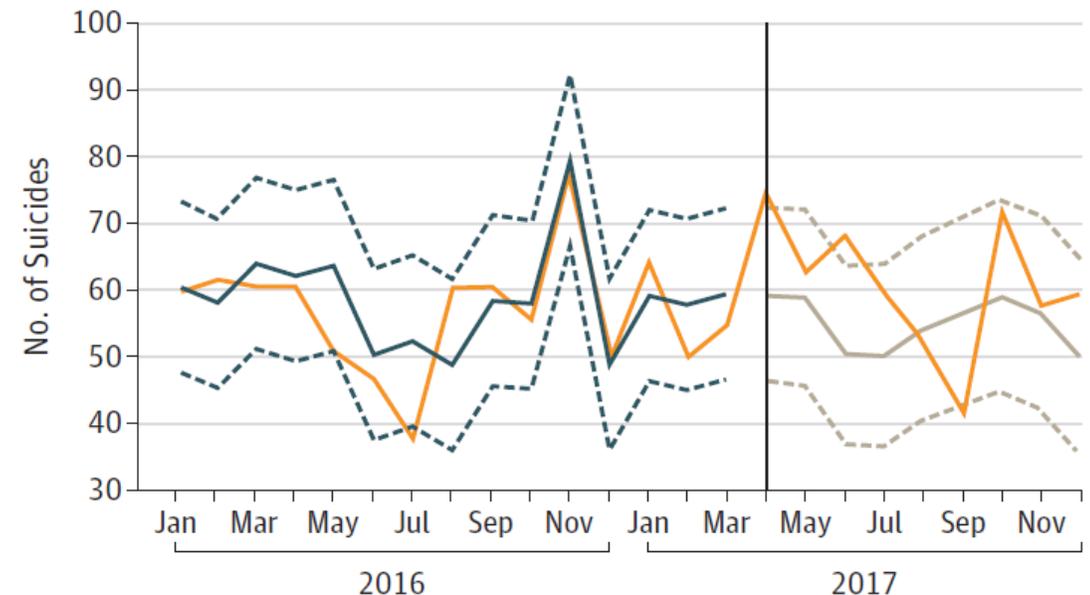
# 13 Reasons Why suicide clustering

Suicide among 10-19 year-olds in the US was 13% higher in the 3 months after the release of 13 Reasons Why – 12% higher in boys, 22% higher in girls – an excess of 103 deaths in the 3 months after the release (Neiderkrotenthaler, 2019)

**A** Suicides among males aged 10-19 y



**C** Suicides among females aged 10-19 y

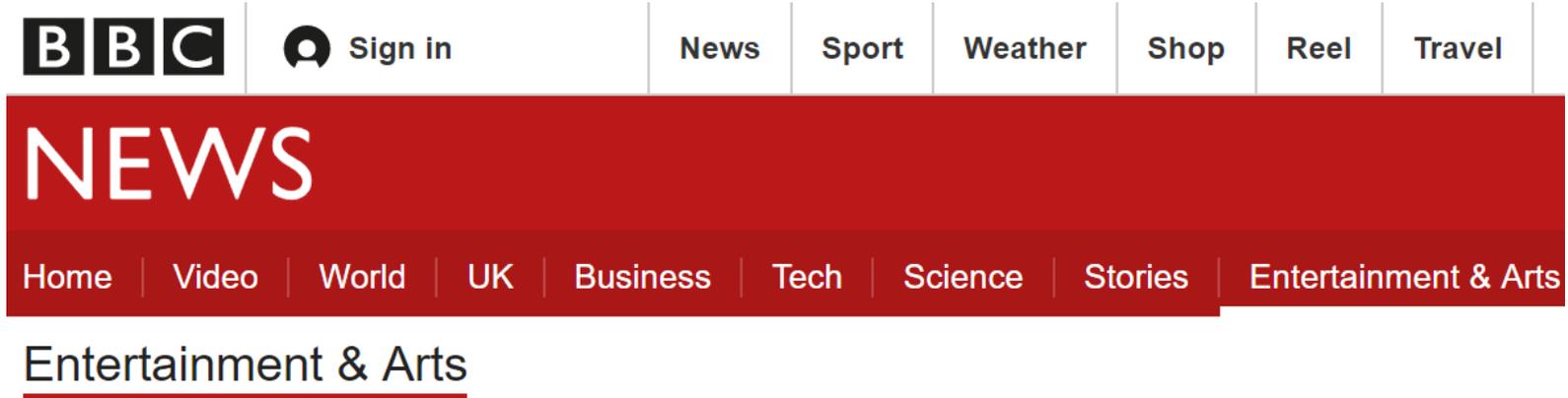


JAMA Psychiatry | [Original Investigation](#)

## Association of Increased Youth Suicides in the United States With the Release of *13 Reasons Why*

Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, MD, PhD, MMSc; Steven Stack, PhD; Benedikt Till, DSc; Mark Sinyor, MSc, MD; Jane Pirkis, PhD; David Garcia, DSc; Ian R. H. Rockett, PhD, MPH; Ulrich S. Tran, DSc

# 13 Reasons Why Netflix response



## 13 Reasons Why: Netflix removes suicide scene from season one

🕒 16 July 2019



# The role of social media in suicide prevention

Little regard for responsible reporting or portrayal of suicide

Platform for bullying and promoters of suicidal behaviour, e.g. suicide sites, suicide games, etc.

# Potential positive role of social media in suicide prevention

Monitoring suicide-related social media posts to detect persons at risk of suicide and implementing early intervention (Oexle, 2019)

Mass social media campaigns (Oexle, 2019)

Technology-enhanced interventions (Oexle, 2019)

Enforcing responsibility for content onto social media platforms, e.g. attempts in UK to define social media sites as publishers



## Emerging trends in suicide prevention research

*Nathalie Oexle<sup>a</sup>, Thomas Niederkrotenthaler<sup>b</sup>, and Diego DeLeo<sup>c</sup>*



# Potential positive role of social media in suicide prevention

Social media sites employ artificial intelligence and moderators to screen content, prioritising suicide-related live streams



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**Facebook**

This article is more than **3 months old**

## Facebook reviews live stream policy after Christchurch attack

Site says recently live streams are prioritised for review only when flagged for suicide

# Potential positive role of social media in suicide prevention

Facebook employs ~15,000 people in 20 locations around the world to decide what should be allowed stay on Facebook, what should be marked as “disturbing”, and what should be deleted

“If your kid is being bullied online, I was the one who had to take action on that. If one of your relatives is contemplating suicide or posting images of self-harm or says that they’re going to hurt themselves, I had to deal with it.”

But...will the social media giants work with professionals in mental health and suicide prevention?

# Eskerrik asko / Gracias / Thank you!



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