

Print Media and Suicide

Historical recollections and a current issue

Many of us, involved in suicide prevention and suicidology research have been by experience confronted with this dilemma.

Media have been accused of promoting suicide instead of preventing it.

News is mixed with a variety of sensorial information which can be very impressive and shocking.

The action is only postventional and that is in fact, the basic question.

But is there a difference between print media and other media? Is print media's influence the same as other media?

Radio and TV are newflashes. Print media is a tangible document that can be read, reread, duplicated and found anywhere privately or in public (offices, hotel lobbies, airport, waiting room) with text and pictures.

Other questions are: ³

1. Are they really responsible for increasing suicide?
2. What can be done to improve the relationship between suicidologists, health professionals and media?
3. Can media be educated?
4. Is it a fact of modern society or not?

1. Many studies have concluded that media could be considered responsible for the increase of suicide (Jerry MOTTO, 1970 ¹¹; David PHILLIPS, 1974 ¹²).

Jerry MOTTO, in a control study performed after his 1967 report on the role of the press ¹⁰, looking at the effects of a press strike in Detroit, concluded on the negative influence of media suicide. He declared: *"a systematic effort is called for to eliminate emphasis in the press on the sensational details of suicide behaviours."*

Later on, in 1992, David PHILLIPS went a little further in his analysis and wrote: *"Research suggests that one of the factors leading a distress individual to suicide is the publicizing of model suicides in the mass media."* ¹³

It may be difficult or adventurous to be so clear since there are many other factors such as technical factors.

There is a difference if suicide is reported on the front page or in a headline, with or without a picture, glorifying the act or being outrageously sensational.

There is also a clear fact: print media are frequently more interested in reporting suicide of celebrities' than non-celebrities, except perhaps for certain methods, extravagant or in unusual circumstances.

A French Suicidologist told me once that depending on whether the person is famous or considered a delinquent or a rogue, the way the suicide is reported is different. The first ones are presented as having put an end to their lives, died by their own hands or taking their own lives and the second to have committed suicide.

A rather ambivalent attitude is when print media reports collective suicide like the **Guyana massacre** in 1973 (913 deaths)⁵, the Heaven's Gates members in California (39 deaths) in 1997 and the Solar Temple in France, Switzerland and Quebec (69 deaths) in 1995, all equivocal suicides or deaths, which can be interpreted more as a mass homicide than a collective suicide. As a matter of fact, the impact on society is not clear.

Print media have, has said before, been accused to influence and create imitation and contagion of suicide.

Everybody knows what the Werther effect is.⁸

Usually, the press answers or protects itself behind the "principle" shelter of free press or liberty of press to inform the public of whatever happened with no specific obligation of control of what will the news produce or create.

Quite often, reporters follow their own fantasies, citing incomplete information recuperated during interviews and even in scientific meetings.

We may call this a deviation of the information, which alienate reflections on suicide phenomena based on ethics and science.

A former UNESCO report declared that the selection of information is based on a desire to disturb rather than to enlighten.

Therefore a print report can have a positive influence as well as negative one, seldom neutral or poorly informative.

An interesting study make in Turkey in 1938 by F. K. GOKAY, must be mentioned. It discusses the effect of a law voted in 1931, prohibiting any report of suicide in the press.²

The study showed a decrease in the suicide rate, which appeared to be temporary, but during a period of socio-economic turmoil from 1916 to 1936.

The author wrote: *"What is the use for society to reveal the life of an individual in despair, tortured by thousand pains, and to expose him in the newspapers in a*

column with exaggeration and emphasis.”

A summary of his conclusions could be:

“It is the duty of specialist to know and take necessary measures to prevent indiscretion using preventive and educational publications. I am utterly convinced that this is not against freedom of press. It concerns the life of a whole society.”

This question of a free press reached its peak when suicide manuals were published.

Herbert HENDIN, myself and a few others have been fighting against this production of Suicide books:

- In France: Suicide How to make it, 1982
- In the USA: Final Exit, 1991

In 1984, I was invited to present a lecture at the French national Academy of Medicine, answering this question: “Is suicide prevention still possible in France since the authorized publication of a book untitled: Suicide, how to make it – History, techniques, news?”^{14,15,16}

At the time, in France and in most countries in the world, there were no laws able to control or prohibit those publications.

It took some time, because of a political dispute, to have at last December 1987 a law against provocation to suicide, prohibiting publications promoting suicide.

It has been included into the French Penal Code.

It has been demonstrated how provocative this publication had been, influencing suicide rates in France. Following an exchange of correspondence with Editor T. MALTSBERGER in Newslink (1992), journal of AAS, about the publication of Final Exit in the USA, I suggested that:

“The American Association of Suicidology should no limit its action to gun control, it should address itself to book control as well.”

In 1994, P. MARZUK (and all)⁹ compared suicide rates in New York before and after the publication of Final Exit in the USA and studied the methods suggested in the book.

It shows an immense increase of 30,8% of suicide by asphyxiation with plastic bags but no clear effect on the suicide rates.

Print media are certainly dramatically responsible for promoting suicide when publishing such manuals available in bookstores. They are different from manuals given to members of “Dying with dignity Societies”.

I shall quote H. HENDIN (1982)⁴:

“They are not merely distributing “how to do it” information. They are the avant-garde of a larger attempt to seek social approval and institutionalisation for suicide.”

Strangely, literature never mentions suicide cartoons. It is a rather dangerous mockery. Can anyone make a joke of such a dramatic event?

It is for some more provocative than preventive and may probably produce ambivalent fantasies and disturbing thoughts.

2. Therefore, what can be done?

a. There is a need to improve relationship between mental health professionals and suicidologists with media professionals.

In 1994, the Centre for Disease Control (USA) first established recommendations, which are summarized as “Guidelines for the reporting of suicide”.¹

b. Another point:

There is an ethical dilemma with the overacting media. But there may be also an ethical issue with mental health professionals giving interviews and their opinions on suicide without even having studied or knowing the case.

In 2002, in Madrid, WPA presented a declaration on ethical standards for psychiatric practice. Point 6 concerned psychiatrists addressing the media.²⁰

3. Education of media is essential. But is it possible?

In 2000, the World health Organization with the International Network for suicide prevention published a monograph untitled “Preventing Suicide: a resource for media professionals”.¹⁹

I had the privilege to translate it into French and to include a “translator note” where I indicate the proposal to initiate a “council of ethics for media” enable to control for instance, publication, interpretation of the media which unfortunately not always report totally or clearly interviews given by mental health professionals.

I was told it was a splendid idea but impossible to put into act!⁷

4. Last interesting point – “Is it a fact of modern society?”

In a commentary published in the journal *Suicide and Life Threatening Behaviours* in 1996 (The Kurt Cobain Suicide Crisis), a journalist, Steve KNICKERMAYER, wrote:

“Back in the 1950s, journalists did not report suicides in the newspaper [...] but journalists standards have changed overtime as society has changed [...]. When speaking to a reporter one should be careful about one says. One has to be especially careful when talking about life and death situations.” ⁶

5. However, reporting suicide can help preventing future suicide.

It is a postventional task as said in my introduction.

David PHILLIPS also wrote in his study: *“Modeling processes can lead ambivalent individuals towards suicide or towards alternatives.”*

An alternative to suicide can be reported by media. The best example was given by the suicide of Kurt Cobain when the entire media network confronted by the despair and anguish of a large number of youngsters, collaborated with the suicide prevention network, not only in the area of Seattle where it happened but also all over the USA. ⁶

Print media are able and have to be encouraged to publish list of resources in suicide prevention, lists of centers and give a message for better life.

6. In conclusion

Print media can indifferently be:

- Positive for suicide prevention,
- Negative by promoting suicide,
- Neutral by giving straight controlled information. ¹⁷

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1 - Are they really responsible for increasing suicide ?

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"a systematic effort is called for to eliminate emphasis in the press on the sensational details of suicide behaviour" Jerry MOTTO (1982).
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There is also a clear fact : print media are frequently more interested in reporting suicide of celebrities than non celebrities, except perhaps for certain methods, extravagant or in unusual circumstances.
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Therefore a print report can have a positive influence as well as a negative one. An interesting study made in Turkey in 1938 by F.K.GOKAY, must be mentioned. It discusses the effect of a law voted in 1931, prohibiting any report of suicide in the press. The study showed a decrease in the suicide rate, which appeared to be temporary, but during a period of socio-economic turmoil from 1916 to 1936.
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2 - What can be done to improve the relationship between suicidologists, health professionals and media ?

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4 - Is it a fact of modern society or not ?

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Print Media and Suicide - awarded best scientific poster in 2010 at the 13th European Symposium of Suicide and Suicidal Behavior (Roma, Italy).

This poster contains various portrayals protected by copyright.

Another remark :

Internet technologies can be considered as an equivalent to print media but by providing accessibility, it adds a risk factor (cybersuicide)¹⁸.

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