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Newspaper Reporting on a Cluster of Suicides in the UK

A Study of Article Characteristics Using PRINTQUAL

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Abstract. *Background:* Media reporting may influence suicide clusters through imitation or contagion. In 2008 there was extensive national and international newspaper coverage of a cluster of suicides in young people in the Bridgend area of South Wales, UK. *Aims:* To explore the quantity and quality of newspaper reporting during the identified cluster. *Method:* Searches were conducted for articles on suicide in Bridgend for 6 months before and after the defined cluster (June 26, 2007, to September 16, 2008). Frequency, quality (using the PRINTQUAL instrument), and sensationalism were examined. *Results:* In all, 577 newspaper articles were identified. One in seven articles included the suicide method in the headline, 47.3% referred to earlier suicides, and 44% used phrases that guidelines suggest should be avoided. Only 13% included sources of information or advice. *Conclusion:* A high level of poor-quality and sensationalist reporting was found during an ongoing suicide cluster at the very time when good-quality reporting could be considered important. A broad awareness of media guidelines and expansion and adherence to press codes of practice are required by journalists to ensure ethical reporting.

Keywords: suicide cluster, newspaper reporting, guidelines

There is growing recognition that suicides may occur in clusters. Evidence suggests that mass clusters – when there is a temporary increase in the total frequency of suicides for a population relative to the time preceding and after the cluster, but with no spatial element – typically follow the reporting of actual or fictional suicides (Haw, Hawton, Niedzwiedz, & Platt, 2013). Notable examples have occurred following the fictional portrayal of suicide or self-harm in TV programs (Hawton et al., 1999) and celebrity suicides (Niederkröthaler et al., 2012). This copycat/imitation phenomenon (or Werther effect) is a modeling of suicidal behavior, with the media acting as a vehicle for contagion. Such suicides frequently involve the same method (Hawton & Williams, 2002; Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Sisask & Varnik, 2012; Stack, 2003). Currently the evidence for this effect is strongest in newspaper reporting (Hawton & Williams, 2005; Stack, 2005). The impact is most evident within the first 2 days of a report and over the next week (Bollen & Phil-

lips, 1982), although occasionally lasting longer (Fu & Yip, 2007). The prominence of the story and repetition of the reporting may be particularly influential (Niederkröthaler et al., 2010). Identification with the individual in the report or holding them in particular esteem can also influence impact (Pirkis & Nordentoft, 2011). Most importantly, particular population groups may be more vulnerable, especially younger people and those suffering from depression (Cheng et al., 2007). The effects of newspaper reporting on suicidal behavior, however, may not be entirely harmful. In a study of newspaper reporting in Austria, Niederkröthaler and colleagues (2010) showed that the reporting of suicidal ideation, not associated with subsequent attempted or completed suicide, may have a protective effect (Papageno effect).

Recent evidence using space-time models suggests that up to 2% of probable suicides may occur in *point* clusters, with an excessive number of suicides occurring in close temporal and geographical proximity (Larkin & Beautrais,

2012). Temporal-spatial suicide clusters are thought to be two to four times more common among young people (aged 15–24 years) than among other age groups (Niedzwiedz, Haw, Hawton, & Platt, 2014). There has been limited research on media influences in point clusters, although a recent case-control study (Gould, Kleiman, Lake, Forman, & Midle, 2014) of 48 suicide clusters in young people in the US showed that a variety of newspaper report characteristics were associated with the initiation of clusters. This study identified a variety of newspaper report characteristics that were associated with the initiation of the cluster (between first and second deaths), namely, front-page placement, detailed descriptions of the suicidal individual and act, and headlines containing the word *suicide*.

In light of earlier evidence that highlights the important negative associations between reporting and suicide clusters, recommendations for responsible reporting by journalists have been promoted by the World Health Organization (2005), and in many countries by suicide prevention organizations. In the UK the Samaritans have produced guidance (2008, revised 2013). Press Codes of Ethics similarly encourage ethical reporting and are able to hold organizations and journalists accountable for their actions (in the UK the *Press Complaints Commission Code of Practice* and the Independent Press Standards Organisation).

We previously conducted a study of national mortality data identifying point suicide clusters in Wales over a 10-year period, 2000–2009 (Jones et al., 2013). There was statistical evidence of a single, cluster of 10 deaths in young people aged 15–34 years (primary cluster) in Bridgend and the surrounding area for the period December 27, 2007, to February 19, 2008. This cluster was smaller, shorter in duration, and predominantly later than the phenomenon that was widely reported in national and international print media in early 2008. No other statistical clusters were identified in Wales over the study period and there was no evidence of previous clusters in the Bridgend area indicating specific community vulnerability. Five other clusters of possible suicides were identified in the temporospatial analysis in 15–34-year-olds across Wales during 2000–2009, but these were not significant at the .05 level (secondary clusters). Of these, two occurred at roughly similar time periods to the primary cluster, December 27, 2007, to March 17, 2008, and included cases from the primary cluster but related to a larger geographical area in the same locality (Jones et al., 2013). Combining the primary and secondary cases in this area for the period December 27, 2007, to March 17, 2008, extends the size of the cluster to a possible 18 cases. Given the high profile of reporting of deaths in the Bridgend locality, the objectives of our current study were to examine the quantity and quality of newspaper articles relating to the cluster, in particular in relation to guidelines on reporting.

Method

Search Strategy

Searches were conducted of two specialist news reports databases (Nexis and Newsbank), the Internet search engine Google, and individual newspaper websites (including News UK), using the terms *suicide* and *Bridgend*. Original newspaper articles were retrieved either via the Internet and individual newspaper subscription, or from local or British library archives. On-line versions can be updated after the original date of print publication or the presentation may change, particularly in relation to the photographs that were originally published in paper editions (Luce, 2010); when this was evident, the original articles were obtained from library archives. For newspapers accessed via library archives, additional hand searching was undertaken. This search included reports during a period of 6 months prior to the identified commencement of the primary cluster (first death) and 6 months following the cessation of the secondary clusters (last death), that is, June 26, 2007, to September, 16, 2008.

The newspapers included in the study were as follows:

- Local/regional: *South Wales Echo*; *Western Mail*; *Wales on Sunday*
- National broadsheets: *The Times*; *The Guardian*; *The Independent*; *The Telegraph*; *The Observer*; *The Times on Sunday*; *The Independent on Sunday*; *The Sunday Telegraph*
- National tabloids: *The Daily Mail*; *The Mirror*; *The Sun*; *The Mail on Sunday*; *The Sunday Mirror*; *Daily Express*; *The Daily Star*; *People*; *News of the World*; *The Sunday Express*; *The Star on Sunday*

All newspaper articles and editorials using the terms *suicide* and *Bridgend* were included but letters were excluded.

Quality Assessment

An instrument designed to assess the quality of reporting of newspaper articles (PRINTQUAL) was used in this study. The development and characteristics of this rating scale have been reported in detail previously (John et al., 2014). In summary, PRINTQUAL was based on the UK Samaritans guidelines for reporting suicide and self-harm (Samaritans, 2008) and on published evidence concerning the relationship between suicide and media reporting (Hagihara, Tarumi, & Abe, 2007; Hamilton, Metcalfe, & Gunnell, 2011; Hawton & Williams, 2002; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Stack, 2000, 2003; Thom, McKenna, Edwards, O'Brien, & Nakarada-Kordic, 2012). The instrument was initially developed by the research team, and

then further advice on the items to be included was sought from an international group of experts in the area of suicide, suicide reporting, and suicide clusters. PRINTQUAL comprises two subscales of quality of print media reporting on suicide: negative/poor, and positive/good. A list of each characteristic is coded (1) or (0) depending on its presence or absence. The maximum possible poor-quality individual item count is 19 and good-quality item count is 4. Cronbach's α (internal consistency) for the poor quality subscale was 0.96 (excellent) and for the good quality subscale, 0.69 (acceptable; John et al., 2014). Once training of investigators had taken place, the agreement between coders on a subset of 30 articles was acceptably high (Cohen's $\kappa \geq .75$) for most individual items (John et al., 2014) except the use of recommended phrases or phrases to be avoided in reporting, identification of suicide hotspots, and the use of explicit details of method used; although agreement for these items was still acceptable ($\kappa \geq .60$). The use of sensational language has been identified in other studies as difficult to define (Hamilton et al., 2011) which may account for the latter score. Although a weighted scoring system has been developed for PRINTQUAL (John et al., 2014), for the purposes of this study only the frequencies of non-weighted items are described.

Data Extraction

A data extraction sheet was specifically designed for the study, which, in addition to general descriptive items regarding the articles, included all the items from PRINTQUAL. Two investigators (A. M., P. J.) received training in the use of PRINTQUAL and further instruction on the rating of individual items.

Data Analysis

Newspaper Reporting

We calculated the daily frequency of published newspaper reports and plotted them against the incidence of possible suicide deaths for the primary and secondary clusters. We also calculated for each day of the study the number of newspaper reports in the preceding 2 and 7 days, highlighting the days when possible suicide deaths for the primary and secondary clusters occurred, since these would be the articles people would be exposed to immediately prior to their deaths and, according to the literature, are considered to be when the impact of reporting is most evident (Bollen & Phillips, 1982).

Items indicating sensationalist reporting or those directly and unequivocally contravening guidelines were specifically recorded. These were identified by the fol-

lowing characteristics: main headline front page with the method specifically mentioned or the word *suicide*; explicit details of method used (i.e., more detail than just stating the method) within the report; mention of a suicide hotspot; repeated reporting of earlier suicides; technical details of an unusual method that in the context of this study was any method other than hanging; and the number of photographs included in the article. Some of these items of sensationalist reporting were specified within PRINTQUAL. Other items recorded in our study were additional to those used in PRINTQUAL, for example, the number of photographs in an article was removed from the final PRINTQUAL score because of inclusion in the scale of other items relating to photographs and, although the main headline and front page are items in PRINTQUAL, they are independent of each other. We calculated counts of PRINTQUAL items by newspaper type and in total. We calculated Pearson's chi-square to explore the association between newspaper type and total poor-quality and good-quality items.

Results

Reporting Quantity and Type

We identified 577 newspaper reports concerning suicide in Bridgend during the study period June 26, 2007, to September 16, 2008. A total of 347 (60.1%) articles were in national newspapers (133 in broadsheets, 214 in tabloids), and 230 (39.9%) were in regional newspapers.

Figure 1 displays the number of newspaper articles per day for the duration of the primary and secondary clusters (December 27, 2007, to March 16, 2008). The days when deaths occurred, of those aged 15–34 years in the primary or secondary clusters, are highlighted with circles. Two deaths occurred on certain days resulting in a total of 15 circles indicating 18 deaths. Days are numbered from the start of the primary cluster (December 27, 2007) to protect the identity of individuals. Other dates included relate to actual newspaper reports or press activity. The first report in a regional newspaper describing a cluster of suicides in Bridgend appeared on the January 17, 2008. The first report in a national newspaper describing a cluster appeared on the January 23 following a story released by the Wales News Service (a wire service similar to Reuters) on January 21 and 22. There was a large increase in the volume of reporting from January 23. Figure 2 displays the number of newspaper articles per day in the previous 2 and 7 days for the duration of the primary cluster and secondary clusters, with days when the deaths of those aged 15–34 years occurred highlighted.

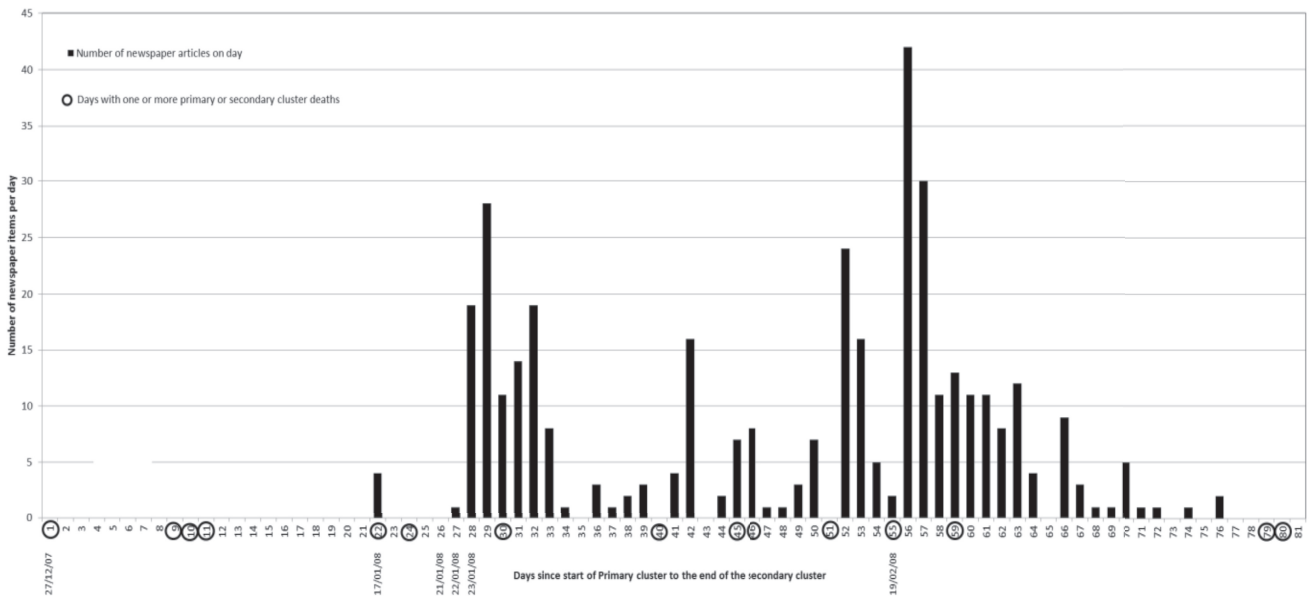


Figure 1. Number of articles per day from the start of the primary cluster with days of deaths highlighted.

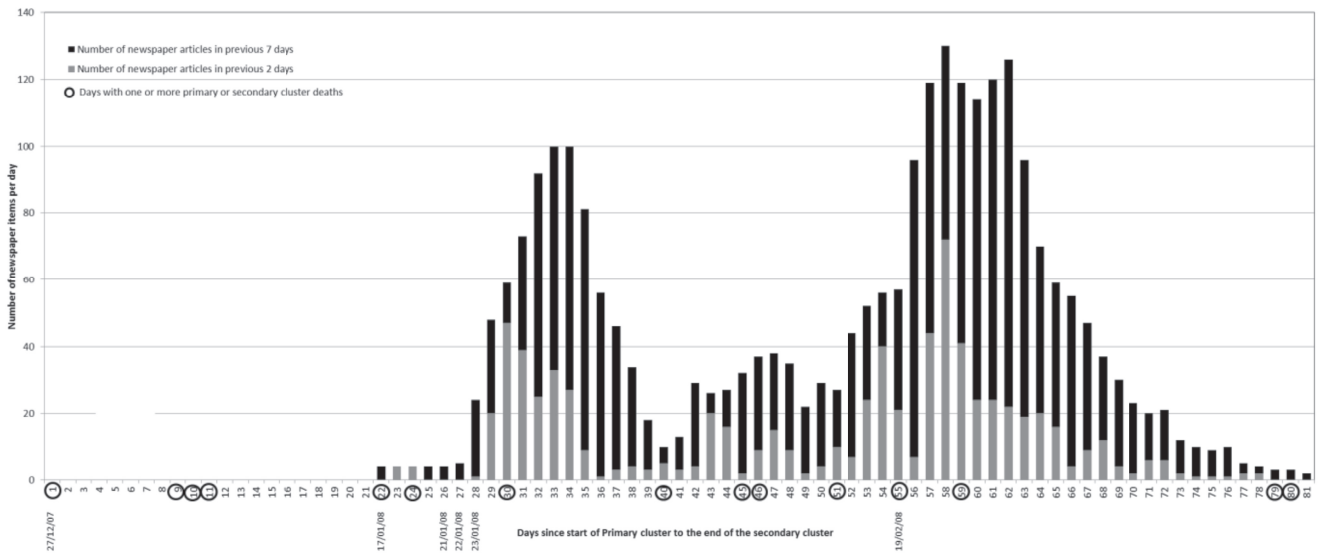


Figure 2. Number of articles in the previous 2 and 7 days with days of deaths highlighted.

Sensationalist Reporting

Table 1 shows the frequency of each poor-quality and positive-quality items in PRINTQUAL overall. A total of 92 (15.9%) articles mentioned the method in the headline on any page (12 were on the front page) and 223 (38.6%) mentioned suicide in the headline (six were on the front page). Just over a quarter of articles (155; 26.9%) referred to a suicide hotspot, including the use of terms such as *suicide town*. Nearly two thirds (350; 60.7%) of reports included photographs. The number of photographs per report ranged from one to 24; 49 (8.5% of all articles, 14.0% of articles carrying photographs) had more than

four photographs. Notably, 247 (42.8% of all articles, 70.5% of articles carrying photographs) included a photograph of the deceased. Thirteen (2.3% of all articles, 3.7% of articles carrying photographs) included photographs of the actual scene of the death (e.g., inside house, tree), 35 (6.1% of articles, 10% of articles carrying photographs) of the location (e.g., outside house, street, wood, locality), and 210 (36.4% of all articles, 60.0% of articles carrying photographs) republished photographs from earlier cases. The republishing of photographs of earlier deaths often accounted for the high number of photographs associated with an article.

Table 1. Frequency of each item in PRINTQUAL in total and by newspaper type

	Frequency present (%) All, <i>n</i> = 577	Broadsheet national (%) <i>n</i> = 133	Tabloid national (%) <i>n</i> = 214	Regional (%) <i>n</i> = 230
Poor-quality item				
Is the article on the front page?	42 (7.3)	9 (6.8)	10 (4.7)	23 (10.0)
Is it the main headline on the front page?	26 (4.5)	4 (3.0)	5 (2.3)	17 (7.4)
Is the method mentioned in the headline?	92 (15.9)	16 (12.0)	36 (16.8)	40 (17.4)
Does the article cover over 50% of the page?	195 (33.8)	47 (35.3)	74 (34.6)	74 (32.2)
Is it on Page 3?	32 (5.5)	8 (6.0)	2 (0.9)	22 (9.6)
Does the article use phrases to be avoided as listed in Samaritans guidelines?	250 (43.3)	68 (51.1)	117 (54.7)	65 (28.3)
Are explicit or technical details of the method described?	114 (19.8)	36 (27.1)	62 (29.0)	16 (7.0)
Are technical details of an unusual method for the locality described?	5 (0.9)	5 (3.8)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Are the contents of a suicide note described?	34 (5.9)	10 (7.5)	13 (6.1)	11 (4.8)
Does it mention or refer to a suicide hotspot?	155 (26.9)	41 (30.8)	102 (47.7)	12 (5.2)
Does it report positive outcomes from the death?	9 (1.6)	2 (1.5)	7 (3.3)	0 (0.0)
Is the cause of the suicide attributed to a single factor?	127 (22)	30 (22.6)	63 (29.4)	34 (14.8)
Is there repeated reporting of earlier suicides in the article?	273 (47.3)	70 (52.6)	130 (60.7)	73 (31.7)
Does the article report the person knew previous suicides or that the timing implies a link?	240 (41.6)	61 (45.9)	106 (49.5)	73 (31.7)
Does the article highlight community expressions of grief?	201 (34.8)	50 (37.6)	86 (40.2)	65 (28.3)
Does the article include interviews with the bereaved?	214 (37.1)	45 (33.8)	95 (44.4)	74 (32.2)
Does the article include photographs of the scene, location, or method?	46 (8.0)	18 (13.5)	17 (7.9)	11 (4.8)
Does the article include a photograph of the deceased?	247 (42.8)	49 (36.8)	117 (54.7)	81 (35.2)
Does the article mention a celebrity suicide?	9 (1.6)	5 (3.8)	4 (1.9)	0 (0.0)
Good-quality item				
Does the article include recommended language as based on guidelines?	210 (36.4)	60 (45.1)	44 (20.6)	106 (46.1)
Does the article describe complex or multifactorial causes of the death?	60 (10.4)	27 (20.3)	16 (7.5)	17 (7.4)
Does it include sources of information or advice?	75 (13.2)	19 (14.3)	26 (12.1)	30 (13.0)
Does it take the opportunity to educate the reader?	109 (18.9)	36 (27.1)	20 (9.3)	53 (23.0)

Reporting Quality

The range of poor-quality items per article was 0–13, with only four (0.7%) articles having no poor-quality items. The median was 3 and interquartile range (IQR) was 2–6. The range of good quality items was 0–4 (*Mdn* = 1, IQR = 0–1), with almost half of the articles (281, 48.7%) having no good-quality items and only eight (1.4%) having all four. Only 76 (13.2%) articles included sources of information or advice, 53 signposted to the Samaritans, one to the National Health Service, and a further 22 (3.8%) to other sources of advice.

A total of 347 (60.1%) articles were in national newspapers (133 in broadsheets, 214 in tabloids) and 230 (39.9%) were in regional newspapers. All broadsheet articles combined contained 574 poor-quality items out of a possible total of 2,527 (22.7%), tabloids 1,046 of 4,066 (25.7%), and regional newspapers 691 of 4,370 (15.8%). There

was a small effect but significant association between the type of newspaper and poor-quality reporting items, $\chi(2) = 130, p = .0001$, Cramer's $V = .10$. All broadsheet articles combined contained 142 good-quality items out of a possible total of 532 (26.7%), tabloids 46 of 856 (5.4%), and regional newspapers 206 of 920 (20.0%). There was a moderate effect but significant association between the type of newspaper and poor-quality reporting items, $\chi(2) = 136, p = .0001$, Cramer's $V = .24$.

Discussion

We examined the quality of newspaper reporting for the duration of a community point cluster of suicides. Importantly, we found concerning evidence of poor-quality reporting during a probable suicide cluster; this is the very time when

good-quality reporting could be considered most essential in the public health response to a cluster. In particular, nearly half of reports referred to earlier suicides, 43% displayed a photograph of the deceased, and 44% used phrases that in the light of research evidence and suicide prevention guidelines should be avoided. Conversely, only 13% included sources of information or advice. There was a high level of sensationalist reporting, indicated by approximately one in seven articles mentioning the method in the headline and extensive republishing of photos from previous suicide deaths.

Many newspapers reported on a large number of probable suicides in young people that occurred in Bridgend in 2007 although there is no statistical evidence of an excess of deaths during that time. The first regional newspaper report of an excess of suicides in Bridgend on January 17, 2008, reported on deaths unrelated to the actual identified primary or secondary cluster deaths defined in our statistical analysis (Jones et al., 2013) and that had occurred several months previously. This article coincided with the fourth primary cluster death (sixth death of primary and secondary clusters combined). The initial four deaths of the identified primary cluster were no more than would normally be expected at this stage, being in keeping with the number of suicide deaths in this age group of 15–34-year-olds for this time period in previous years (Jones et al., 2013). The subsequent six primary cluster deaths and three secondary cluster deaths were accompanied by a large increase in the volume of reporting from January 23, 2008. Only three further deaths (from the secondary cluster) followed a second and larger peak in reporting on February 20, 2008. This might argue against any possible causal link. However, this second peak in reporting could have been stimulated by an international press conference held on February 19, 2008, to highlight the potentially damaging role of the media, and the thematic content of reports in this second peak may therefore have been less likely to maintain any contagion process. We plan, in the future, to conduct a more in-depth thematic analysis of the two peaks of reporting to explore whether any differences in content had an impact on any contagion process.

There was no clear relationship between the frequency of newspaper reports and deaths when examining 2- and 7-day rolling periods preceding each suicide. However, in interpreting the influence of the volume of reporting, it is difficult to account for other factors. For example, intervention and support provided by health and voluntary agencies during the later period of the cluster may have reduced the risk of subsequent deaths. Other studies have found two waves of reporting following suicide deaths (Balazs et al., 2013).

Strengths and Limitations

The focus of this study was on newspaper articles only, rather than other types of reporting, such as radio, television, or Internet. This was for a number of reasons. Firstly, the initial reports of a possible suicide cluster among young people in Bridgend occurred in local newspapers, and the main focus of subsequent reporting was in the print media. Secondly, the evidence for possible contagion from media reporting still remains strongest for print media (Hawton & Williams, 2005; Stack, 2005). Studies suggest that television is less likely to produce a copycat effect than newspaper reports are (Hawton & Williams, 2005; Stack, 2005). This may be because of stricter regulation practices or simply because it is more difficult to study as an exposure. Studies comparing the effects of modes of reporting suggest that the impact of Internet reporting is of lower magnitude than that of print media (Hagihara et al., 2007). However, with the huge increase in use of new media since the time of the Bridgend deaths, Internet and social media influences might now be more relevant to clustering and contagion of suicide (Daine et al., 2013). There was no evidence of social media being a significant factor in the deaths associated with the Bridgend cluster following a police investigation (P. Hurley, personal communication, May 21, 2015). Robertson, Skegg, Poore, Williams, and Taylor (2012) have recently described a point cluster in adolescents when SMS text messaging and online social networking were possibly an important mode of contagion. The Internet may also be a mechanism for cyber-bullying and encourage self-harm behavior, although its influence may also be positive by encouraging positive coping and help-seeking (Daine et al., 2013).

Previous studies have been limited by lacking an appropriate quality measure. We have attempted to minimize this by using an assessment instrument (PRINTQUAL), which was developed on the basis of widely quoted guidelines and other evidence together with a consensus weighting system that was devised in collaboration with experts in the field of suicidology.

Meaning and Implications

One approach to support the media in responsible reporting of suicide has been to produce guidelines. Such guidance is an integral part of suicide prevention strategies around the world. Our findings give further emphasis to the importance of inclusion of particular items in press codes and recommendations on suicide reporting. Gould et al. (2014) found that front-page placement, detailed descriptions of the suicidal individual and act, and headlines containing the word *suicide* or a description of the method

used were frequently present in articles associated with suicide clusters. In our study of Bridgend suicide reporting, 10% of all regional papers had a report on the front page, 16% mentioned the method in the headline, and 20% included explicit details of the act. Repetitive suicide reporting and reference to suicide epidemics have also been found to influence suicide rates (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010). Over a quarter of articles concerning Bridgend deaths referred to a *suicide hotspot*, nearly half included reference to earlier suicides, over 40% made links between the suicides, and over a third reproduced photographs related to previous local deaths. There is a general consensus that information on help and support needs to be included in press codes and reporting recommendations (Maloney et al., 2013) – only 13% of articles we identified included such information.

It is difficult to demonstrate whether media guidelines improve the quality of reporting (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Hawton & Williams, 2002). In 2006 the UK Press Complaints Commission (PCC) added a clause to the Editors' Code of Practice explicitly recommending that the media avoid excessively detailed reporting of suicide methods. We found little evidence of this advice being followed in 2008, with a wide interpretation of the term *excessively detailed* as stipulated in the 2006 code. However, reporting guidelines in Australia have been generally well received, although there are difficulties in interpretation of recommendations that require subjective judgements (Machlin et al., 2012). Likewise, in New Zealand, Thom et al. (2012) found that adherence to Ministry of Health guidelines has overall resulted in good-quality reporting, although, as we have found, there was a paucity of articles referencing sources of help or people managing to overcome their suicidal ideation. Suicides by younger people (as in Bridgend), involving violent methods, or occurring in public places or medical and residential facilities are particularly likely to attract the media's attention (Machlin, Pirkis, & Spittal, 2013), and so it is particularly important that responsible reporting occurs in these circumstances.

Other countries have examined newspaper reporting of suicide by newspaper type (Cheng & Yip, 2012) but there are no studies examining this based in the UK. Our study suggests that poor-quality reporting in relation to suicide may be more of an issue for national newspapers than regional ones, which has implications for ensuring they are engaged in initiatives to improve the adoption of guidelines. This was particularly in relation to phrases to be avoided, technical details, hotspots, repeated reporting of earlier suicides, and the use of photographs. The UK 2009 edition of the *PCC Editors' Codebook* highlights the distress that can be caused by insensitive and inappropriate graphic illustrations accompanying media reports of suicide and the re-publication of photographs of people who

have died by suicide when reporting other suicide deaths in the same area. The results of our study highlight the prudence of these recommendations. They also commend the inclusion of details of local support organizations and helplines with any coverage of suicide deaths.

In future, researchers should further explore the content of newspaper reporting using qualitative methods. This could include interviewing those with near-fatal self-harm at the time of an apparent suicide cluster to explore their understanding of their own behavior, and the role of Internet reporting and social media. Finally, it is worth asking (and investigating) whether the national media reporting of the apparent cluster in Bridgend had an impact on UK national suicide rates, as arguably the volume of reporting of the method could have contributed to a mass cluster. No evidence of a mass cluster was found at a regional (South Wales) or Wales geographical level (Jones et al., 2013).

Conclusion

We have described the quantity and quality of newspaper reporting during a suicide point cluster of young people in South Wales. There were high levels of sensationalist reporting. This gives credence to suggestions that increased awareness, collaboration, training, and ownership by journalists of guidelines for reporting of suicide are required to improve the adoption of guidelines and improve the quality of reporting (Bohanna & Wang, 2012). Recommendations on the reporting of suicide should be balanced with an awareness of tackling stigma in relation to suicide and self-harm, signposting sources of help, encouraging help-seeking behavior, and educating the public both to understand the complexity of reasons why someone may take their own life and in how to respond to people in crisis.

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