

REPRESENTATIONS OF SUICIDES IN THE PRINT MEDIA

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Abstract. Around the world, there has been a sharp rise in the number of suicides in the past few decades and India has been well ahead in the suicide charts. Unfortunately, the Indian media has in the past not paid much attention to the effect of media sensationalism of suicides, with very little literature examining sensationalism in the representations of suicide in the media. This study, employing a Triangulation approach involving qualitative and quantitative content analyses, attempts to examine this research problem by studying how suicides are reported in two popular newspapers published from the Indian city of Bangalore—*Times of India* and *Deccan Herald*—and to identify areas in which the reporting of suicides can be improved to reduce the adverse effects of reporting suicides in the media. Study results indicate that while reporting such cases, there is a need for more adherence to responsible reporting.

Keywords- *Suicides, Print Media, Public Health*

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Introduction

Mass media play a major role in shaping an individual's perceptions about reality. All forms of media—be it news reporting to television soaps, dramas and films—provide us information that help enhance our ability to understand the world. Therefore, quite indirectly, our values and beliefs are formed when we engage with the media. With such a powerful mass media in our hands, public debate on media ethics on topics such as bias, manipulation, privacy intrusion, damage and distortion of the images of people and institutions and censorship seems to be on the rise.

Understanding suicide

Suicidal behaviour can range from merely “thinking about ending one’s life through developing a plan to kill oneself”, obtaining the means to do the same, attempting to end one’s own life to finally committing the act. The word *suicide* was first used in the year 1642 by Sir Thomas Browne in his ‘*Religio Medici*’. It is said to be “the action of killing oneself intentionally.” Browne based the word on the Latin *sui* (of oneself) and *caedere* (to kill). The most common definition of suicide is that which appears in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1973) quoted by Schneidman: “the human act of self-inflicting one’s own life cessation”. The intention to die is a key element in the definition of suicide (Diego et al, 2002).

Epidemiology of suicide: Global scenario

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that, annually, about one million people commit suicide—one suicide for every 40 seconds. Suicide rates have increased over 60 percent worldwide in the last four decades. Leading causes of death among youngsters in the age group of 15-44 both in male and female categories is reported to be suicide. India and China account for nearly 30 percent of all suicides that occur worldwide (WHO report as cited in Befrienders Worldwide, 2019).

Indian scenario

There have been several studies on the rates and causes of suicide in India. Two important ones have been listed below:

Accidental deaths and suicides in India (2008)

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India was created in the year 1986 to create and maintain crime and criminal records at Police stations across the country. The statistical branch of the National Crime Records Bureau was formed out of the Statistical Section of the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D). The branch annually brings out a publication on 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India.' Its most recent publication on this subject is of the year 2008 and it is the most nationally accepted publication on suicide rates as the organisation comes under the Ministry of Home Affairs, India. Some of the key findings of the study are: The number of suicides in the country over the last decade has increased by 19.4 percent. With 11.9 percent, West Bengal recorded the highest number of suicides in the country followed by Karnataka with 9.8 percent. There is not much of a difference in the male female ratio of suicide victims in the year 2008. Private Sector accounted for 8.4 percent deaths by suicide while it was 2.5 percent for the public sector. Poisoning and Hanging were the two most popular methods of suicides with 34.8 percent and 32.2 percent respectively. This was followed by Self Immolation (8.8 percent) and Drowning (6.7 percent). The four metropolitan cities – Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi have reported the highest number of suicides. Bangalore reported the highest rate of suicides (42.1 percent) among these cities”.

Review of literature

Gould and Shaffer (1986) conducted a significant study to test the imitative behaviour of Suicide in Television movies. The variation in the number of suicides by teenagers two weeks before and two weeks after four fictional films were broadcast on television in the fall and winter of 1984-1985. The findings of the study indicated that the hypothesis that some teenage suicides are imitative was found to be true.

The mean number of suicide attempts in the two week period after the broadcasts was significantly greater than the mean number of attempts before the broadcasts. There was also a significant excess in completed suicides when compared to the numbers that were predicted after three of the broadcasts. Kessler and Stipp (1984) challenge a previous research done by David Phillips according to which “fictional suicide stories on daytime television serial, “soap operas,” triggers subsequent real-life suicides and single vehicle motor vehicle fatalities”.

The study pointed out certain erroneous assumptions that Phillips made that invalidates his study. Then the researchers replicated his research by avoiding these errors. The findings did not support Phillip's claim: *"Fictional suicide stories on daytime televisions serials did not trigger subsequent real-life suicides and single vehicle motor vehicle fatalities therefore discarding"*. In fact it was found that (over the time period examined) there was an average decrease of one-half of a suicide and a decrease of seven Single Vehicular Motor Fatalities. Stack (1988) examines the influence of social contexts in the impact of publicised suicides. It focus was on the examination of Emile Durkheim's view that a context of war would lower suicide through the promotion of social integration. This implies that suicide stories during times of war should have lesser impacts than in times of peace. Data was collected on widely publicised suicide stories during the First World War.

The findings of the study indicated that publicised stories during war have "no impact on suicide". However, "peacetime suicide stories were associated with an increase of 48 stories". Thus, to a certain extent, Durkheim's idea of social integration in the time of war was validated. Bollen and Phillips (1982) made an attempt to re-examine the Werther effect that was described by David Phillips in the case of evening televisions news programs. The findings of the study indicated that the number of overt suicides rose after a publicized suicide story. The two researchers were able to establish that the rise occurred after and not before the suicide story. It was also the first systematic test that attempted to investigate how long such impacts of suggestion would last. It was found that suicide stories exert all or almost their effect within the first ten days.

Zeisenis (2002) highlights the intricacies of the crisis theory. According to this theory, suicide stories in the media play one part in a series of factors that could lead to a decision of suicide by a person in crisis. A crisis is usually resolved within 6 weeks because most people cannot maintain such a disorganised state for such a long period of time.

Weimann and Fishman (1995) tries to explain the reason for the inconsistent and confusing findings on studies of media impacts on suicides by exploring how suicides are constructed in the media to shape the reality of the public. A content analysis was conducted on more than 430 suicide cases that were published in two of the leading newspapers in Israel from 1955 to 1990 for 6 months every five years.

The findings of the study indicated that the prominent Israeli newspapers reported to have allocated increased space and prominence for suicidal stories. The study also reported that 74.6 percent of the stories were about male suicides. Based on the review of literature, this study attempts to explore how suicides are reported in two popular newspapers of Bangalore – *Times of India* and *Deccan Herald* and to identify areas in which the reporting of suicides can be improved to reduce the contagious effect of suicide reporting in the media. Different aspects of portrayals in the media will be looked into during the course of the research.

The first is if the portrayals of suicides in the media represent the reality of the situation by comparison with actual statistics of suicides in different areas. The second aspect will look into how suicide stories are portrayed in the media. The third aspect will look into how much these news reports comply with the WHO guidelines (Refer WHO (2008). *Preventing Suicide: A resource for media professionals*) of responsible reporting of suicides. Having said that, these are the basic questions that the researcher aimed to find an answer to at the end of the study:

- RQ1: *To analyse the newspaper coverage of suicides with reference to Deccan Herald and Times of India.*
- RQ2: *To what extent do newspapers in India follow the international guidelines for suicide reporting as prescribed by the World Health Organisation?*
- RQ3: *What are the areas in which each of the newspapers can improve their coverage of newspapers to minimise possible negative effects?*

Methodology

The Bangalore editions of the Times of India and Deccan Herald in the English language were chosen for the analysis as they held the top two positions for the 'Average Issue Readership (AIR) in the Indian Readership Survey (IRS) (Exchange4media, 2009). The year 2008 was chosen as the year for which newspapers are analysed for which the annual statistics of suicide are available on the website of the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB, 2008) and therefore necessary comparisons can be made based on this data. A purposive sampling was done, based on which newspapers of six alternate months of the year 2008 have been analysed i.e. January, March, May, July, September and November. This way a cross-sample for the year 2008 was

obtained. 85 news reports of suicides were obtained from Deccan Herald which recorded the suicides of 100 victims. 100 stories were obtained from the Times of India which recorded the suicides of 117 subjects. The total sample consisted of 185 news stories and 217 suicide victims.

The researcher found that a combination of both quantitative and qualitative content analysis was the most suitable method for the current study since it would look into both the qualitative and quantitative aspects giving a holistic perspective to the study. In the quantitative aspect the researcher studied the extent to which the guidelines for the media reporting of suicides given by the WHO were being followed and also the demographics of representation of suicide stories. In the qualitative aspect, the content of suicide stories were described and analysed.

Categories of quantitative content analysis

The demographics of the victim were recorded only based on the information provided by the newspaper.

1. Gender
2. Age
3. Method of suicide
4. Type of suicide

Content

1. Are there photographs accompanying the report on suicide?
2. Is the word 'suicide' mentioned in the headline?
3. Does the reporter mention the manner by which he killed himself in the headline?
4. Does the reporter mention the details of the process by which he killed himself?
5. On which page was the story found?
6. Are details of the location of suicide mentioned?
7. What are the sources that are used to find information about the story?
8. What is the suicide attributed to?
9. Was the suicide story repeated more than once in the newspaper?

Categories of qualitative content analysis

The qualitative content analysis was carried out by examining how suicides stories were written. There were five main categories of analysis: Photographs, headlines, narrative, sources and attribution and news value.

The purpose of this analysis was to analyse those aspects of a suicide report (with reference to the WHO guidelines) that couldn't be studied in the quantitative study. The following were the questions that were asked for the qualitative analysis:

1. Does the news story take the opportunity to educate the public about suicide?
2. Does the language used convey suicides as a significant public health problem?
3. What are the kinds of words used to describe suicide?

Watch out for words such as 'unsuccessful suicide' which implies that there was hope that the reader would die or 'Committed' suicide which implies criminality.

4. What are the kinds of photographs that are used? Photographs with method of suicide or location should be avoided.
5. Was the suicide note published? To what extent?
6. How were celebrity suicides reported? Were they unduly sensationalised?
7. Have quotes from grieving family members been used? What is the nature of these quotes? Does it add drama to the story?
8. Do any of the news reports provide information about where to seek help?

Findings and Analysis

The first indication from this sample is that the Times of India has more news reports on suicides than Deccan Herald. Both were taken from the same time period. The difference in the number of stories between the two is 15. The following were the other findings of the study:

To what extent did the news reports on suicide represent reality?

There was a clear over-representation of female suicides in the press and an under-representation of male suicides when the suicide rates in the newspapers were compared to the actual statistics.

The reason for this cannot be said definitively but only reinforces the belief that women are more emotional and therefore more apt to be suicidal and should be avoided. Out of the two newspapers, the *Times of India* was closer to the actual figures. In terms of age, the newspapers were found to over-represent youth (15-29yrs) and child (>14 yrs) suicides when compared to the actual statistics. All other age groups were under-represented. This shows that the two newspapers considered suicides committed by the youth and children to be more newsworthy. As a method of suicide, 'hanging' had the highest percentage readers with an over-representation of almost 15 percent than the actual statistics. Self-Immolation as a method of suicide was accurately represented with both the actual statistics and the statistics as obtained from the newspapers bordering around 8 percent.

'Jumping from Buildings' and 'Shooting' were also over-represented. While poisoning as a method of suicide was under-represented by 10 percent. This could indicate that newspapers prefer to report more violent methods of suicide such as 'hanging', 'shooting' and 'jumping of buildings' while underplaying less violent methods of suicide such as 'poisoning'.

A majority of the suicides reported were Individual suicides accounting for 78.38 percent of the stories. 16 percent of the suicide represented murder-suicides while 8.64 percent represented suicide pacts. There was found to be an over-representation of suicide pacts by about 7 percent. However since the NCRB could not obtain statistics from all cities in India it is difficult to verify this result.

How were suicides reported in the two newspapers?

The content of the newspaper was divided into four parts: Photographs, headlines, construction of news story and news value.

Photographs

A total of 14.05 percent of the news stories had photographs accompanying them. The subject of the photos accompanying the suicide stories fell into four categories: (1) Pictures of the suicide victims (2) Location of the suicide (3) Pictures of grieving relatives and friends and (4) Pictures of people who

attempt suicide in suffering. There needs to be some ethical considerations on the part of the newspapers while publishing photos of the 1st, 3rd and 4th categories as most often it involves an invasion of privacy. The picture of the second category violates the WHO guidelines, which advises people not to put picture of the location of suicide. None of the photos were in colour nor did they show bodies of dead suicide victims. There were also no pictures that indicated the method of suicide. This shows some ethical consideration on the part of the newspapers. Photographs were commonly placed along with stories of murder-suicides and suicide pacts with 14 out of the 26 stories with pictures were being about them.

This could indicate that these newspapers feel that these kinds of suicides, owing to their unusualness and rarity deserve more prominence than other stories. Some of the stories had more than one picture accompanying the story, giving all the more prominence to such stories. All these stories were of murder-suicides and suicide pacts with the exception of two of the stories. Most of the captions accompanying pictures used short and direct captions. However a handful used more suggestive captions.

Apart from the 26 photographs, several news reports had cartoons and other illustrations accompanying it. *Times*. These illustrations have the potential to cause contagion as many of them indicate the method of suicide in them. However, no research has been done on this to support the claim.

Headline

A little more than half of the newspapers used the word *suicide* in the headline. (50.27 percent) *Times of India* was more likely to use the word *suicide* in the headline. (56 percent) 21. 62 percent of the newspapers mentioned the manner of suicide in the headline. Some of the stories made use of sub-heads within the story. This sometimes may give undue prominence to the story. However a very small number of stories had sub-heads and these were mainly found in the *Times of India*

Construction of story

Leads

Out of the sample several news stories were found to be using sensational leads. Many of such leads had irrelevant information and showed disrespect to the suicide victim. Both newspapers exhibited examples of sensational leads; however *Deccan Herald* was more subtle in its representation. Some

news reports made use of excerpts from suicide notes in their leads. This is a very obvious attempt at sensationalism. In other reports an 'emotional appeal' was used to attract readers by peaking about the personal problems of the suicide victim. Such descriptions about the intentions of the victim may help other readers identify with such victims and therefore encourage suicide contagion

Narrative

While many of the reports were straightforward, neutral and followed the inverted pyramid style of reporting, an equal number were reported in a sensationalised manner in both the newspapers. The only difference was in the way each of these papers sensationalised news stories. The *Times of India* sensationalised the news stories of suicides by using more flowery and dramatic language. *Deccan Herald* also sensationalised by being gruesome and specific in their descriptions.

Quotes

Very often an attempt was made to glorify the suicide victim or romanticise the act by using quotes from family members and friends. Such quotes can also further increase the risk of suicide contagion. Sometimes newspapers were found to take quotes about dead people from social networking sites and publish it in the newspapers.

Details

Around 44 percent of the news stories made a mention of the details of the suicide within a story. This is a high percentage and has the potential to encourage suicide. *Deccan Herald* generally looked on as the less sensationalised of the two newspapers mentioned very specific details of the manner of suicide. Only 15.14 percent of the sample of newspapers indicated the location of the suicide. *Deccan Herald* indicated the location in 12 of its stories amounting to 14.11 percent, while the *Times of India* indicated the location in 16 of its stories amounting to 16 percent.

Suicide notes

There were several instances where excerpts from suicide notes were published. Publishing such notes is unnecessary and only serves to

sensationalise the story. In some cases, the suicide note is mentioned in the lead itself

Alternative approaches

Some stories used alternative approaches for covering stories such as to highlight some underlying problems or problems of a girl child or the construction of bridges. This was one of the positive traits that were found by the researcher within the sample.

Educating the public about suicides

There was rarely an attempt made by newspaper editors or reporters to educate people about suicide in any of their news stories. However, it must be considered that only news reports of suicides were taken into consideration and not news features on the subject which are more likely to have such information.

Words used to describe suicide

Most often words such as “commit” were used long with suicide which indirectly indicates the criminality associated with it in both newspapers. *Deccan Herald* used words like ‘ends life’ more often than not or used words such as ‘kills self’ to describe suicide. Words such as ‘unsuccessful’ suicide were never used within the sample.

Celebrity suicide

There was only one celebrity suicide within the given sample – that of the suicide of BJP party MLA ‘Purim Chand Yogi.’ Both the newspapers reported the suicide but in different manners. The *Times of India* report of his had the mention of the word ‘suicide’ in the headline, gave details of the method used, gave details of the location, was found in page 1 under the *News Digest* column, did not use medical sources, did not attribute the problem to a ‘mental health’ problem and was repeated the story.

The story was given prominence by virtue of its repetition and the size of the story. The narrative was in a ‘story-like’ manner where the writer talks about how everything seems ‘normal’ until he unexpectedly killed himself. The *Deccan Herald* news report was much smaller and came under the column ‘At a glance’. Not a lot of attention is drawn to it while reading the paper. The word ‘suicide’ was mentioned in the headline and details of

the method of suicide were found. Most of the other guidelines were adhered to. However no attribution was given and police sources were used.

Seeking help

None of the stories, in both newspapers, provided any information to 'seek help or counselling' in case of a suicidal tendency.

Sources and attribution

It was found that only 9.19 percent of the stories mentioned mental illness as the cause for suicide. This clearly indicates a lack of awareness amongst reporters about the role of mental illness in suicides.

This therefore misinforms the public about the cause of suicide and can increase suicide contagion. People with depression and other mental disorders will also be less likely to seek professional help in such situations. Out of the two newspapers *Deccan Herald* (15.29 percent) was more likely to mention mental illness as a cause. 7.03 percent of the time, a family member or friend was used as sources. 34.05 percent of the times, sources were not even mentioned. The perspective of a medical professional was almost never taken. Another finding worth noting is the fact that nearly 34 percent of the times, sources were not mentioned.

News value

9.19 percent of the suicide stories appeared on the first page, 2.7 percent of the stories appeared on the second page and 50.81 percent of the stories appeared on the third page amounting to approximately 62 percent of the stories in the sample appearing on the first three pages.

This is dangerous as it indicates the prominence news reports of suicide are given by the two newspapers.

To what extent do the newspapers follow the guidelines given by the WHO for the responsible reporting of suicides?

The third question that this research aimed to answer was to what extent media guidelines of suicide were being followed by the two newspapers. One of the first guidelines was to educate the public about suicides by eliminating myths about suicide. It was found that the newspapers did not make attempts to educate the people about suicide. More often than not, myth about suicides such as the cause of suicide being due to some other

problems than a mental health problem was propagated. Mental illness was attributed to less than 1/10th of the suicides and a mental health professional was never used as a source for information for the news story. It was also rarely mentioned as a public health problem. Only a few of the stories mentioned about the 'rise' in the number of suicides.

The second guideline was to avoid using language that sensationalises or normalizes suicide. There were several instances where it was found that the language used in the papers sensationalised or normalised the suicide. The sensationalism took place right from the headline of the story, through the leads and finally through the body of the story. There were also many instances where inappropriate quotes of grieving family members and friends were used to sensationalise a story.

These should be avoided to the minimum and is a clear violation of the guidelines. Some news reports had suicide notes published in their stories but this was a minority. And such news reports were found mostly in the *Times of India*. However, even this contributes to sensationalism and needs to be reduced to the minimum.

However, there were an equal number of instances where news stories were reported in a straightforward manner without any sensationalism. Another guideline emphasized the need to avoid using photographs to accompany news stories. Photographs were published 14.05 percent of the time. The method of suicide was never indicated in the headline but the location was indicated on few occasions. Photographs that mention the location should be done away with completely. Other photographs should also be used minimally. However, in this front, the news reporters have been ethical by not publishing pictures with the method of suicide or the dead body of the victim.

The word *suicide* was mentioned 50.27 percent of the times in the headline. There is a very evident violation of the guidelines and efforts need to be made to improve in this area. The method of *suicide* was mentioned 21.62 percent of the times in the headline. This is another area where improvement needs to be made. There was only one celebrity suicide within the given time period. The *Times of India* was found to have sensationalised this report, violating most of the guidelines for responsible reporting of suicides. The *Deccan Herald* report was less sensationalised.

Since one of the guidelines clearly indicated that celebrity suicides should be especially following the guidelines for responsible reporting, the

researcher concluded that guidelines were not being followed. The news stories very often made use of 'committed' to describe the nature of a suicide. This suggests criminality and may contribute to the stigma associated with suicides. 62 percent of the news stories were placed in the first and third pages of the newspapers.

This does not indicate a positive figure with regard to prevention of a suicide contagion and is a clear violation of the WHO guidelines and needs to be improved on in the future. The details of the suicide were mentioned in approximately 42 percent of the stories. Although this may not represent a majority it is a number worth reducing considerably to prevent suicide contagion. The details of the location were mentioned in 15.14 percent of the stories. This is not a high percentage but there is still room for improvement in this area. None of the news stories provided information about where to seek help. This is another area that reporters need to be informed about as this way the newspapers can actually help prevent suicides rather than increasing their occurrence.

Conclusion

Through the study it was found that neither of the two newspapers followed the guidelines for responsible reporting of suicides or practiced ethics while reporting suicides definitively. What one newspaper lacked, the other made up for. The following were the important conclusions that could be drawn out from the study: *Times of India* was more accurate with its demographic representations especially with relation to gender and age-group. With respect to method of suicide, no one newspaper was definitively more accurate. Therefore in terms of representation it is clear that *Deccan Herald* should focus on trying to portray the reality of the situation rather.

Though the *Times of India* was closer to the actual figures, there is a lot of space for improvement in this field. The use of photographs by both the newspapers was minimal and photos that indicated the method of suicide or the dead bodies of the suicide victim were never published. This is one of the positive indications of the suicide news reports of the two newspapers. The *Deccan Herald* showed a higher percentage of photographs in newspapers and needs to focus on improving in this area as well. *Times of India* however is also not far behind in this area. There continue to be photographs of the location of suicide accompanying the suicide report. Efforts should be made to minimise this. Also, there is an issue of privacy

associated with the publishing of photographs of the victim, especially pictures of them suffering on a hostel bed. It must be seen to it that photographs of suicide victims or family members of such victims are not published without consent, especially by the *Times of India*. Most importantly all efforts should be made to avoid publishing photographs on the front page. Murder-suicides and suicide pacts were considered to have greater news value and therefore were most often the stories that had photographs accompanying them. *Deccan Herald* was more likely to give prominence to such stories by the use of photographs with 8 out of 12 being of murder-suicides and suicide pacts. However this can result in an over-representation of such suicide which represents a minority in terms of the mode of suicide. There this kind of prominence should be avoided by both the newspapers, especially *Deccan Herald*.

Cartoons and illustrations were found occurring in more news reports of *Times of India*. These should be avoided in both newspapers, especially in cases where the method of suicide is indicated in it. Headlines should be worded more carefully so as to not attract the attention of vulnerable readers. The word 'suicide' was found in a little more than half of the news stories. Around 22 percent mentioned the manner of suicide in the headline. Out of the two newspapers, *Times of India* was more apt to sensationalising headlines by the use of the word 'suicide' and the method of suicide in the headline and needs considerable improvement in this area. Emphasis on the profession in the headline should be avoided by both newspapers to prevent attracting audiences of a particular group.

Both the newspapers need to make efforts to reduce the amount of sensationalism in their news stories. Both newspapers had indications of sensationalism in their news reports of suicides. There was, however, a difference in their manner of sensationalism.

Times of India used more dramatic language while *Deccan Herald* was more gruesome in its descriptions. Both newspapers need to improve in this area and should focus on carrying only the important and relevant information, especially in the leads of the story. Quotes from grieving members of the family should be avoided as it is firstly an invasion of privacy and secondly because bereaved people are themselves at a risk of suicide. Between the two newspapers however, there were greater incidences of sensationalism in the *Times of India*. Suicide notes were also found in several news stories of *Times of India*.

Such note should ideally not be published as it only serves to sensationalise the story, especially if it is in the lead. *Deccan Herald* did not publish suicide notes in its stories. Both newspapers were also found to give other unnecessary and irrelevant information about the suicide (or other suicides). This should be avoided as it may only serve to sensationalise the story. The newspapers also need to make an effort to reduce the amount of detail that is mentioned about the suicide.

Details about the method of suicide are unnecessary and highly increase the risk of contagion. Both newspapers mentioned details about the method of suicide in an equally high number. Efforts should be made to reduce this to the minimum. The newspapers were less likely to give details about the location of the suicide but even this should be made minimal. *Times of India* was however more likely to indicate the location of suicide and therefore needs to make efforts to reduce it to the minimum. One area where both the newspapers were found to be clearly violating the guidelines was in the placement of their stories. 62 percent of the news stories were found on the first three pages of the news report. *Deccan Herald* was more likely to give importance to a suicide news report by placing it in the first three pages, with almost 67 percent of the suicide news reports being placed on the first three pages. The newspaper editors, especially of *Deccan Herald* should see to it that news stories on suicides are not given so much prominence in both the newspapers. Attribution by both the newspaper should also be done accurately. None of the news stories in the sample to the perspective of a mental health professional in this matter and only a small fraction of the news stories attributed the suicide to mental illness. Therefore both newspapers should become mindful about this matter and take the pains to educate its reporters of such possibilities. The newspapers should maintain contact with medical professionals to get a holistic perspective on the cause of suicide.

Suicides of celebrities need to be reported with utmost care and it must be made sure that all the guidelines are followed while reporting such stories. *Times of India* was more like violate guidelines while reporting suicide news stories. In the one celebrity suicide that happened during the time period, *Deccan Herald* followed most of the guidelines. Therefore *Times of India* should be more vary about the guidelines while reporting celebrity suicides. Prominent placement of stories of celebrity suicides i.e. on the first, second or third pages should be avoided completely. Newspapers can

also make efforts to reduce the number of suicides instead of increasing them in many ways. Newspaper reports should provide information of where to seek help from so vulnerable individuals can seek help before it is too late. Reporting suicide stories to bring to light certain underlying issues can also prove to be beneficial to the public. Some of the news stories of *Times of India* made use of alternative approaches to their stories. However no *Deccan Herald* made use of any such alternative approach.

Further, efforts should be made to educate the public about the myths that are associated with suicide. At this point it should also be realised that journalists are themselves at a high risk of contagion. Therefore newspaper officers should constantly provide them with training on how to cope with such situations. In addition workshops should be conducted periodically for journalists to be educated about the causes of suicide and how to improve their reporting. Also media guidelines for responsible reporting of suicide should be re-drafted in consultation with newspaper reporters locally. Pirkis et al (2002) in a study found that guidelines that were made in this manner were more likely to be followed by the journalists. Also just making such guidelines are not enough. Efforts should be made to implement such guidelines effectively.

Limitations of the study

It may have been more effective to study more than two newspapers for the study to get a more holistic perspective on the situation in Bangalore.

- (i) The study was conducted only for a limited period of 6 months. Studying the effect for a longer time-period will in probability give more holistic results.

Scope for further research

- (i) Print media represents only one area of influence of the population. Further studies should be conducted on the representation of suicide on television, movies and music. The internet is fast becoming an area for people to find information about how to commit suicide and therefore should be studied extensively.
- (ii) Future researchers could work on the use of illustrations within news stories, especially ones that involve murder and suicide and analyse if they serve to normalize subjects.

- (iii) Further research can be done examining the effects of media representations of suicides on specific suicide types such as murder-suicides and suicide pacts.

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