BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Media Reporting of Suicide in the Era of “Malaysia Baru”

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Abstract

Introduction: The media can be a double-edged sword in suicide prevention with the Werther and Papageno effect as risk and protective factors respectively. Objective: This article provides a brief overview of the impact of media suicide reporting on suicidal behaviour and suicide prevention. Results: In the Malaysian context, current practices of media suicide reporting, advocacy strategies for responsible media suicide reporting as well as challenges in stakeholder awareness and engagement are highlighted. A review of the literature suggested limited implementation and adherence of media guidelines locally. Conclusions: Future research is warranted to establish the evidence base for effective strategies to improve stakeholder awareness, engagement and implementation of responsible media reporting of suicide.

Keywords: Media Reporting, Guidelines, Suicide, Prevention

Introduction

The impact of reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media has become an increasingly significant public health issue in terms of suicide prevention [1]. This is particularly relevant in the light of the extensive worldwide media coverage of recent celebrity suicides [2]. Findings from Fink et al.’s (2018) [3] time-series analysis suggest that rates of suicide in the United States increased by 9.85% during the months after the death of Robin Williams, a famous Hollywood actor and comedian. The authors argued for a possible link between the parallel in time of sensationalized media reporting of Robin Williams’s suicide and the marked increase in suicide deaths, especially in the similar demographic profile and type of suicide method in William’s case. There is accumulating evidence of the association between media suicide reporting
that emphasizes explicit details of the suicide in particular, suicide methods; and “copycat suicides” among individuals who have pre-existing vulnerabilities of suicidal behavior. This phenomenon of media suicide contagion is known as the “Werther effect”, in reference to the anecdotal reports of young people who had imitated the detailed suicide method of Werther, the protagonist in Goethe’s popular book, “The Sorrows of Young Werther” [4]. Social learning theory provides the theoretical framework to explain the mechanism of media suicide contagion [5, 6]. Over-identification of vulnerable individuals with the details of sensationalized reports of suicide in the media may increase the risk of modeling the suicidal behaviour, especially lethal methods of suicide.

The opposite of the Werther effect is known as the “Papageno effect”, named after the main character in Mozart’s opera, the Magic Flute. Papageno was rescued from an attempted suicide by 3 friends who provided him with reasons to live rather than to die by suicide. This area of research is relatively new. Nevertheless, studies have shown that responsible media reporting and portrayal of suicide can be protective against suicide [7]. Examples of Papageno effect include portrayal of positive coping skills of individuals who have overcome suicidal crisis and providing information on accessible help-seeking resources, e.g. free and confidential helplines for people in suicidal crisis such Befrienders or Samaritans [8]. These authors further highlighted that the greatest increase in student suicides occurred when the gap between negative and positive media reporting of suicide was the widest, emphasizing the importance of sustained efforts in engaging the media to increase the protective Papageno effect in order to mitigate the Werther effect.

**The Malaysian scenario**

The World Health Organization’s (WHO) guidelines for responsible media reporting of suicide include the Werther and Papageno effect [9]. Bohanna and Wang’s (2012) review demonstrated that guidelines could have an effect on changing the style of media reporting of suicide to be more positive, which in turn was associated with a reduction of suicide rates [10]. Nevertheless, this effect was highly variable across different countries and was dependent on good media collaboration and training. Implementation of media guidelines were reported to be relatively successful in countries such as Australia, Austria and Switzerland with strategic engagement between the mental health community, the media and policy-makers. However, media guidelines in New Zealand were perceived to be too restrictive towards the press [10].

In Malaysia, media guidelines for responsible reporting of suicide were developed following a 2004 media training workshop. This was a collaboration between media journalists and mental health professionals (MHPs) from the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Education (MOE). However, the effectiveness of surveillance and implementation efforts in terms of suicide prevention related to media reporting in Malaysia has yet to be determined. Suicide rates of 1.18 per 100000 population in 2009 according to the National Suicide Registry of Malaysia (NSRM, currently inactive due to lack of funding) [11] are likely to be underreported [12]. Other studies have reported rates of 8-13 per 100000 [13] and 6-8 per 1000000 [14].

Local Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) i.e. the I-Life Suicide Prevention Campaign (ISPC) in Penang and MHPs have actively engaged the local media in suicide prevention activities. These include
featuring regular articles with expert opinions by MHPs, and publicising activities on suicide prevention especially surrounding World Suicide Prevention Day on 10th September. Press conferences were organised to publicise community level suicide prevention activities, however, these were attended by only approximately half of invited members of the press, of which few were from the mainstream media. During the press conferences, the importance of responsible reporting of suicide news was emphasised. However, the tangible impact of such efforts on local media practice is unclear. Journalists’ feedback included the press prioritising news, especially headlines (editors’ prerogative) that could attract public attention and boost newspaper sales. Social media platforms are currently being utilised by NGOs and MHPs to disseminate information related to suicide prevention activities and advocate for responsible media reporting of suicides. For example, ISPC published factsheets on depression and suicide which contained local helplines (https://www.facebook.com/SPC.Penang/), while a Facebook page run by Malaysian early career psychiatrists, posted infographics on responsible media reporting on Facebook. Both pages support work by the International Association for Suicide Prevention.
Figure 1. Infograph on responsible media reporting of suicide
Currently, there is limited published data in terms of the level of adherence to media guidelines in Malaysia. One study by Johari et al (2017) [15] concluded that the media portrayal of suicide in local newspapers from March 2016 to November 2016 was more harmful rather than productive. Graphic photographs were included. Out of a total of 45 photographs related to suicide in Malaysia that were identified; 17 (37%) depicted actual suicidal acts and 55% revealed real photographs of the suicidal persons. In contrast, only twelve (15%) of the 81 identified suicide-related articles discussed early treatment for psychiatric disorders or specific suicide prevention strategies. Another recent preliminary survey performed by CLF and NAR of 7 local English and Malay online newspapers from January 2017 to April 2018, showed that all identified 256 articles on local or international reported cases of suicide or suicide attempt had explicitly stated methods of suicide while merely 15 articles (6.1%) provided information on helplines for a suicidal crisis.

There have been ongoing efforts to improve the interdisciplinary collaboration of involved stakeholders and engagement between the media as well as to improve awareness of the importance of implementing our local media guidelines. For example, a symposium entitled ‘Suicide Prevention and the Media: Engagement and Partnership’, organized by the Malaysian Psychiatric Association was held on 19 July 2018 during the 22nd Malaysian Conference of Psychological Medicine in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Speakers and forum panellists included MHPs from the MOH and MOE, a representative of Mindframe, an Australian governmental organization with a specific focus on media and suicide prevention, as well as a journalist of a local newspaper with lived experience of mood disorder. Participants included MHPs, NGOs and representatives from the media industry (newspapers) as well as social media. Topics that were discussed included the impact of media reporting of suicide on suicide prevention, the Malaysian public health perspective on suicide rates and implementation of responsible media reporting on suicide, local experience of engagement and collaboration with the media on general mental health advocacy from an academician’s perspective, as well as the media’s perspective on priorities and challenges in terms of reporting of suicide. Mindframe presented their extensive engagement with the media and sectors that influence the media i.e. universities delivering journalism and public relations, media, the Australian mental health and suicide prevention sector, police and courts, stage and screen. Such work has translated into implementing behaviour change for responsible reporting of suicide in Australia. The challenge in containing the ubiquity of unregulated dissemination of suicide news on social media by the general public at large was also discussed.

Future recommendations

Despite the challenges in the implementation and adherence of responsible media reporting of suicide media guidelines in Malaysia, there are potential windows of opportunities to engaging all stakeholders in targeting specific suicide preventive strategies in this area of collaboration with the media. Firstly, a robust database needs to be established in terms of accurate reporting and surveillance of suicide rates in Malaysia. This is essential in order to measure interventional outcomes and to examine the level of evidence for suicide preventive strategies. Thus, increased intersectoral and inter-ministral efforts need to be stepped up with the
support of required resources and funding from governmental policy-makers and NGOs. The level of awareness of the importance of responsible media reporting of suicide also needs to be increased not only among the mental health community, policy-makers and the media, but also in the general public. Strategies like forum discussions, media training workshops and various other awareness campaigns should be carried out, not just short-term but long-term for sustained effectiveness. The role of legislature and regulatory bodies to oversee adherence to guidelines for responsible reporting and portrayal of suicide is also an issue to consider in terms of the balance between benefits (stricter adherence) versus drawbacks (counterproductive restriction of freedom of press). Future translational research is warranted to establish the evidence base for effective implementation and sustainability of strategies to ensure responsible media reporting of suicide in Malaysia.

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