

The Most Difficult Story: Covering Suicide on College Campuses

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Abstract

Student journalists and their faculty advisers face particular challenges when confronted with covering suicide on their campuses. We examine these challenges by analyzing coverage and interviewing student journalists and their advisers about their editorial decisions. The interviews are designed to assess how often college media outlets comply with recommended professional guidelines for covering suicide and to shed light on the decision-making process. The results point to the need to better educate student journalists and advisers about the interpretation and use of these guidelines and to help them navigate pressures to minimize even coverage that conforms with them.

Introduction

When suicide strikes college campuses, student journalists wrestle with challenges unlike those faced by newsroom professionals. Professional journalists generally cover suicides that occur in public places (including identifying the deceased by name) or involve particularly well-known people. For student journalists, who work in close communities where it is not uncommon for readers to know the victim, privacy and sensitivity are not abstract concerns. When these journalists turn to their faculty advisers for guidance, the advisers may face pressure from family members of the deceased and/or campus administrators to minimize even reporting that follows widely accepted news media suicide coverage guidelines. In this paper, we analyze coverage at public and private campuses and interview the student journalists and faculty advisers involved to better understand the challenges they faced covering a suicide, a story that lights up social media sites and invites distortions and pressures as the news breaks. Results show inconsistent familiarity with the media coverage guidelines and a tendency to under-report or vaguely report suicide in college communities. We conclude by discussing the need for greater support and education of both student journalists and faculty advisers in this area.

Suicide is estimated to be the third leading cause of death among 15-24-year-olds, accounting for 20 percent of all deaths annually, and the second leading cause of death among college students, after accidents (CDC 2012). Several key questions arise from this research: How do student journalists balance their concerns about/loyalty to a fellow student's memory against their journalistic obligation to report with thoroughness, accuracy and neutrality? What role should the faculty adviser play in helping students sort through

these considerations? Finally, guidelines endorsed by journalism organizations and mental health professionals have existed for more than two decades to help journalists cover suicide. Why are campus media outlets following them inconsistently, if at all? Suicide among college students is not officially tracked at the state or national level, so the numbers we have about its frequency are estimates. Accurate reporting by campus-based sources, including student media, is crucial to a full understanding of how frequently suicide occurs and to the development of effective interventions.

Though much has been written about how the news media covers suicide, there is a lack of direct research in the area of student media. This paper provides an initial snapshot. Because this sample size is not large enough to draw representative conclusions, further research, in the form of a survey of the full membership of the College Media Association and editors-in-chief at CMA's member campus news outlets, is planned.

Suicide Coverage Guidelines

As far back as November 1989, a national workshop of suicidologists, public health officials, researchers, psychiatrists, psychologists and news media professionals met to address concerns about the so-called contagion effect of certain types of media coverage of suicide. The panel released specific recommendations for coverage of suicide. Subsequent guidelines for media have largely mirrored them (CDC 1994). The CDC's April 22, 1994, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report makes clear that research supports the idea of a cause and effect between certain types of news coverage on vulnerable individuals, especially young people. Subsequent research has reinforced this conclusion.

"In particular, nonfictional newspaper and television coverage of suicide has been associated with a statistically significant excess of suicides. The effect of contagion appears to be strongest among adolescents, and several well publicized 'clusters' among young persons have occurred."

The panel went on to say, "suicide is often newsworthy, and will probably be reported," and that, "some characteristics of news coverage of suicide may contribute to contagion and other characteristics may help prevent suicide." The guidelines are clear: "Health professionals or other public officials should not try to tell reporters what to report or how to write the news regarding suicide."

These 1994 guidelines, along with others promulgated in 2001 by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Association of Suicidology, and the Annenberg Public Policy Center, among other organizations, and reiterated in later years, have come to be accepted as standard in professional newsrooms. The World Health Organization also has published a set of guidelines. These experts all caution journalists against sensationalizing suicide, exhorting them to minimize the prominence of such stories, omit details about the method of suicide and frame stories in a mental health context, among other recommendations. The guidelines are readily available to working journalists via resources such as the Poynter Institute and the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma at Columbia University, which has a specific tip sheet devoted to covering suicide on college campuses (see list of Resources at the end of this article).

Literature Review

Multiple studies examine the impact of media coverage on suicide rates. More than 50 studies worldwide conclude that certain types of media coverage can have a contagion effect, especially on young people. No studies were found that focus exclusively on how college media covers suicide and there is little research on the impact of suicide coverage guidelines on professional media coverage in the United States. The following studies were relevant to the findings discussed in this paper

A 2003 regression analysis of 42 studies on the impact of publicized suicide stories in the media found that reducing the amount of suicide coverage may lower suicide rates, but there were caveats with a number of the findings discussed (Stack 2003).

A July 2006 study offers context in understanding the liability concerns campus administrators face when a student commits suicide (Applebaum 2006).

A 2009 survey of more than 26,000 undergraduate and graduate students at 70 colleges and universities explored the frequency of suicidal thought and ideation (Drum et. al 2009) The study did not focus on how student media coverage of suicide might impact suicide rates. This study noted that two-thirds of those who disclosed suicidal ideation first chose to tell a peer. "Almost no undergraduates and not a single graduate student confided in a professor," according to these researchers. This reliance on peer-to-peer communication raises interesting questions about the role student journalists can play in promulgating accurate, thorough and non-sensationalized information to their peers.

More recently, one study published in 2010 and another in 2012 evaluated whether news media adhere to suicide coverage guidelines. The 2010 study evaluated 968 local and national U.S. newspapers in 2002 and 2003 and found that they were inconsistently adhering to the guidelines released in 2001 (Tatum, Canetto & Slater 2010). The 2012 study addressed guidelines and media in a variety of countries and also found that suicide coverage guidelines were being inconsistently followed by professional news media (Bohanna & Wang 2012). These researchers urged that, "consultation, collaboration, media ownership, and training are likely to achieve the greatest success."

Methodology

This analysis is based on an examination of 46 articles published in college news outlets in the United States between 2008-13 and subsequent interviews with the student journalists and faculty advisers who handled the stories. These outlets were based at 17 public and seven private colleges and universities with enrollment ranging from 2,000 to 52,000 students. The articles include breaking news about campus suicides and follow-up stories and were obtained after querying the College Media Association listserv and through additional research. Links to the articles were loaded into a spreadsheet and identified by news outlet name, campus and enrollment. Each article was then analyzed and the sample narrowed to 34 incidences, i.e. student deaths reported as suicides, probable suicide or where the cause of death was suspected to be suicide but the news outlet did not report it. The articles were not coded or masked as the goal was to later interview the journalists and faculty advisers involved in the coverage, thus making their feedback directly relevant to this study. Reporters, editors and faculty advisers directly involved in producing each story in the database were contacted. Those who responded favorably to participating were interviewed.

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Student editors and faculty advisers were then contacted for interviews. Four student editors and six advisers/journalism faculty members agreed to be interviewed and were asked the following questions. Each answer was recorded in the spreadsheet for later analysis:

- Was the cause of death reported? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Did the article(s) reporting the death adhere to five of the eight major “Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide” guidelines?

The five guidelines:

- Inform the audience without sensationalizing the suicide and minimize prominence (avoid big or sensationalistic headlines, or prominent placement);
- Use school/work or family photo; include hotline logo or local crisis phone numbers (avoid using photos/videos of the location or method of death; grieving family, friends, memorials or funerals);
- Minimize reporting on suicide notes, e.g. “A note from the deceased was found and is being reviewed by the medical examiner” (avoid: “John Doe left a note saying...”);
- Report on suicide as a public health issue (avoid investigating and reporting on suicide similar to reporting on crimes);
- Seek advice from suicide prevention experts (avoid quoting/interviewing police or first responders about the causes of suicide).

In the interviews, each editor and faculty adviser was asked if he/she was aware of any or all of the guidelines. They were also asked about the circumstances of each student suicide covered by the news outlet. Questions included but were not limited to:

- Did the suicide happen in a public place?
- How did the student journalists/faculty advisers learn about the suicide?
- What was the role of the faculty adviser, if any, in considering coverage decisions?
- What was the role of administrators, campus mental health professionals and/or campus police in the coverage, if any?

Findings

These findings offer insight into how student journalists and, when involved, faculty advisers, approach coverage and how aware they are of the media guidelines. A patchwork of approaches and a tendency to downplay, obscure or entirely omit detail emerged. In 10 cases, the cause of death was omitted. Of the 34 articles analyzed,

- Twenty-four reported a cause of death;
- Ten reported no cause of death and one, an editorial, explained the student newspaper’s intention not to cover a public suicide at all;
- Nine played the stories prominently (on the front page and/or home page) though coverage was not determined to be sensational;
- Seventeen included photographs. Of those, nine were from the scene of the incident or from a memorial service or vigil;
- Four mentioned suicide notes, including those posted on social media;
- Nine treated the suicide as a public health issue and 12 included resources about who to talk to if one is feeling depressed/suicidal.

Key questions that arose from interviews:

- How do student journalists balance their concerns about/loyalty to a fellow student's memory against their journalistic obligation to report with thoroughness, accuracy and neutrality?
- What role should the faculty adviser (who may face pressure from administrators to discourage students from covering even public suicides), play in helping students sort through these considerations?
- Why are media coverage guidelines for suicide being unevenly followed?

Interviews with student editors

The editors interviewed represented public and private campuses. One of the four editors worked at a news outlet with no faculty adviser; one reported having no faculty adviser at the time of the two suicide stories analyzed for this paper; two reported working with advisers, formally or informally, who they said played virtually no role in guiding students during the coverage of the suicide stories. The publications without faculty advisers were described as independent of the university. In one case, the news outlet received no financial support from the university. In the second case, student media, now a 501(c)(3), has a contractual arrangement with the university and Student Government and receives 60 percent of its funding from the university, according to the editor and a faculty member who is president of the 501(c)(3) and has acted as adviser.

Coverage of suicide in these four news outlets ranged from complete (defined as cause of death reported without detail about the suicide method or location), to incomplete (defined as no cause of death reported). In one case, the 501(c)(3) news outlet, the Editorial Board published an editorial explaining its decision not to cover the public suicide of a student at all.

Regardless of their coverage decisions, the editors all reported feeling discomfort with reporting and writing about suicide in a way that was inconsistent with their feelings about other difficult topics. One editor at a small, private university said she felt comfortable covering "obituaries," saying her paper had written two, in addition to the story she was being interviewed about. Asked to elaborate, she said that when one student died over the summer and one her sophomore year, the paper wrote about their deaths, but the editors did not know and had not pursued reporting to confirm the cause of death. She said about one of these cases, "We questioned if it was suicide or not, That was kind of one where people weren't sure of the circumstances. And, then, this happened off campus. But a student also died under mysterious circumstances in the spring semester of my sophomore year."

This editor also reported that mental health professionals at the campus counseling center contacted the newspaper staff to ask for a meeting just after a student committed suicide on campus and as the staff was making decisions about coverage.

"They wanted to make sure we weren't going to discuss the manner in which the death happened. They wanted to kind of reiterate everything we know about covering obituaries and make sure it was covered in a sensitive manner."

The editors decided not to make an effort to confirm the cause of death.

The editor at a large state university whose paper has covered major controversy,

including a child sex abuse scandal, reported feeling confident when it came to handling suicide stories, even when the paper faced criticism for the decision to cover the suicide of a student who jumped from a parking garage.

“Every reporter that I’ve had that has helped cover an issue like this, whether that be a public death or a sexual assault case, has come back later and talked to me about it and said that they’ve grown and learned from it. We covered someone’s death very publicly and, at this point, it’s our job to make sure we cover his life in the same manner that we covered his death...It does create an interesting disconnect sometimes with students because we got some backlash. Why would you cover a suicide? Why would you name him? Because some people don’t understand the reasoning behind it.”

The editors reported that the following concerns influenced their decisions:

- Fear of causing copycat suicides:
 - “We heard about the suicide and our trepidations were that we didn’t want to cause copycat suicides... we weren’t really feeling that great about writing an article about a student who had committed suicide in fear that it would cause copycat suicides.”
- Lack of experience, guidance:
 - “For the most part we’re pretty proud of the fact that we don’t have an adviser and that the university doesn’t have any input but in this case...it was pretty stressful because none of us had ever reported on a suicide at that time, so we were kind of playing it by ear. It would have been nice to have an adviser.”
 - “He’s [the adviser] kind of uninvolved...in this case he kind of didn’t want to be as involved...he tries to really let us make the decisions unless it’s something that he thinks will affect us legally.”
 - “It was the hardest time I’ve ever been in the newsroom. I’m 21 years old. There’s a limit to what I know about journalism.”
 - “This was a very public case on campus. Everyone knew about it. It occurred on campus. Out of respect for his friends and family, try to keep it a little private for them, I think.” – about the paper’s decision to report that a student had died, but not to report that it was suicide.
 - “I don’t think we did at the time [think to include info about mental health resources]. It seems like it would be a good thing to add but we just never have I don’t think.”
 - “Honestly, I don’t think it was something that we actively thought about at the time [including information about mental health resources, information]. A lot of times we will put in sexual assault articles, ‘Here are some resources’, but no actually there wasn’t much of a conversation about that. Providing suicide resources is the one thing now that I think would have really benefitted our coverage.”
- Worry about offending the loved ones of the deceased:
 - “The staff was uncomfortable about having to go up to people right after their friend had died and ask them questions. But when we started getting real pushback, from parents and other members of the community as well... We didn’t really see the value in covering a student’s life when (loved ones didn’t want us to)... there’s nothing like looking at your colleagues and seeing the fear in their faces at the thought of making the wrong decisions.” (the paper that chose to publish the editorial explaining its decision not to cover the public suicide.)

Interviews with Faculty Advisers

Interviews were conducted with six faculty advisers at public and private institutions, ranging from small enrollments (under 5,000) to large (over 5,000). One university staff member did not hold the title of faculty adviser, but acts as de-facto adviser. Their level of experience in advising ranged from a handful of years of university experience to more than two decades. They reported varying job structures and degrees of involvement with student journalists. One of the advisers reported offering students information about the media coverage guidelines for suicide; one other adviser reported being familiar with the guidelines. One adviser reported a consistent policy at his university's student publication of always reporting campus deaths, including the cause of death. The policy may be changed by the editorial staff, but has held from staff to staff over a number of years and includes reporting "private" suicides, i.e. those that occur in dormitory rooms. This adviser was the only one of the six interviewed who reported such a policy at a student publication. Most said the publications they advise report student death, particularly suicide, on a case-by-case basis.

"We had one earlier this year. The guy died in a car crash and we could well have reported that he died in an automobile accident, but the coroner ruled suicide because there was a suicide note," the adviser said. The students were criticized, asked how they knew it was a suicide. "The implication was that the students had done something wrong. They simply pointed out that it was in the public record."

Asked if editors had ever expressed ambivalence about covering a suicide, this adviser, who was a professional journalist for nine years before joining his faculty 16 years ago, said:

"Mixed feelings, sure, but they've always finally decided to do it. We've had a run of editors-in-chief who are going into journalism... They have the journalistic chops, so they think that way."

This adviser reported experiencing no negative feedback from administration about the publication's coverage of suicide. As an example, he said that when a student committed suicide in a dormitory, the newspaper staff was alerted first by administration.

Other advisers reported direct input from administration and/or mental health professionals on campus before publication of suicide-related stories. An adviser at a large public university said he brought with him suicide coverage policies in place in the major news-rooms where he had worked for 35 years, i.e. cover suicides that happen in public and/or involve well-known people. A campus mental health professional contacted him when he arrived on the job a semester after the newspaper staff reported the 2009 suicide of a student who jumped from a parking garage on campus. The garage was across from the student newspaper office.

"They saw immediately the police on the scene and rushed out and covered it and they put it on the front page. There was a lot of reaction from the administration about the way that story was handled... They were very concerned about the potential for copycat things."

The adviser agreed that the staff would attend a meeting with this professional, who subsequently arrived at all newspaper staff pre-semester orientation sessions to discuss suicide coverage. He said he explained to the professional that the student editors made all publication decisions:

“They control the content and I’m not going to tell them not to cover things and I don’t think you’re going to be in a position to tell them not to cover things,” he reported telling the mental health professional. “Basically, she started coming to every pre-semester orientation to try to talk about this to the students. When that didn’t happen, we would have a meeting in the office.”

The university’s mental health center estimates the suicide rate at 2.5 students/year (total enrollment, approximately 50,000). The adviser said the paper continued to cover suicides.

“They wound up being briefs, not page one stories, because the circumstances were generally private and the people were not noteworthy.”

A university staff member who acts as de facto faculty adviser to the student newspaper said her student publication adheres to university policy (enrollment, approximately 9,000) not to identify students unless the family has agreed.

“This just happened to us last week. We had three deaths: one accident, two unexpected. Two students were named by the university and those names were released in the article. The third was not named, as the name was not released. The university policy is not to name any student unless permission is granted by the family. The family of the third had not responded to calls from the university. All deaths were off campus. Our staff did not name the third student out of respect for the family. I believe they do know the name from [a] Facebook post and still decided against it.”

Student reluctance is also a factor in suicide coverage, three of the advisers reported. One, who works at a small, private university, said he does not reach out to student editors to ask if they have questions in such situations, echoing other advisers by emphasizing that he respects the students’ independence.

“Our understanding is that I can’t be surprised. If there is going to be something in the paper that is going to be controversial to get in touch with me and let’s talk it through and I’ll present the choices to them.”

He said he disagreed with the editors’ decision not to confirm the cause of death in a recent suicide, but did not share his thoughts with them. The students reported that their peer had died, with no cause of death in the article. He stressed that the staff had covered other, difficult stories. He said suicide is different.

“I think they are shocked and, in some ways, ambivalent about their own mortality. Oh my goodness, that’s scary. We realize that we can actually die. You can have distance from people who drink themselves into a passing-out situation. You can interview them after they sober up, but holy shit, if that kid killed himself... You bring who you are to every story. It affects how you cover it and edit it. They are bringing their own uneasiness to that story.”

An adviser at a public university (enrollment, approximately 15,000), said student journalists decided not to report the cause of death in a public suicide that happened on campus. They also chose not to try to interview the student’s family. Interviewed by local media, the family refuted assertions posted on social media that the suicide was the result of bullying because their son was gay.

“I think they were afraid that maybe I was going to be annoyed. And I probably did say something like, ‘Look you guys, they did talk to other people.’ But, you know, I can only push them so far. I don’t feel comfortable haranguing them into doing this. I don’t want to

push them out of their comfort level. They'll probably screw up. I think they did a good job of covering it from other angles. What to do for help, the candlelight vigil, that sort of thing."

Student editors at an approximately 25,000-enrollment public university with a large, 501(c)(3) student media operation (five-day-a week newspaper/website, radio and TV stations) struggled with how to cover the public suicide of a student last year. The faculty member acting as their adviser shared the suicide media coverage guidelines with the editors. He also conferred with the Student Press Law Center in Washington, D.C. and shared that information. The students decided not to cover the suicide at all and published an editorial explaining their decision.

"If I were the student editors, I would have treated that differently, but I'm not the student editors," the faculty member said. "I just help them make good, sound, journalistic decisions. If it is a public death, I think you're bound to have to cover it, is what I think. And that was the same advice they received from the Student Press Law Center."

According to the faculty member, reporting on an earlier death became difficult when the journalist covering the story repeatedly called the grieving family for comment, despite their decision not to talk. That incident resulted in a change to the student media organization's Code of Ethics, urging students to be sensitive and use restraint. The provision says, in part: "In all cases, the journalist should not contact either family or friends more than once and, if the source or sources decline comment, the journalist must respectfully disengage from further conversations, emails, or other forms of contact in order to avoid the perception of undue pressure or insensitivity at a time of tragedy for family and friends."

The faculty member, who has been in his position for more than two decades, said he's seen increased attention from campus mental health professionals and public relations staffers when deaths occur on campus.

"One of the other things I've noticed is the phenomenon of campus mental health counselors and public relations [staffers'] influence on the students themselves. I think it's very pervasive, that there's more focus on college campuses among those folks...I've seen it more in recent years that this has grown substantially."

Conclusion

Last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published new statistics showing a sharp rise in the suicide rate in the U.S. More people die of suicide now than in car accidents, and the spike among middle-aged people was dramatic (CDC 2013).

A May 2, 2013, New York Times article about the statistics quoted Julie Phillips, an associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University who has published research on suicide.

It's vastly underreported," she said. "We know we're not counting all suicides."

It is not clear what effect, if any, media suicide coverage guidelines have had on suicide rates. Would they be higher if the guidelines didn't exist? Are the rates lower because they do? Additional research will explore this question. In the meantime, this paper's findings indicate the following:

- Coverage of suicide remains a patchwork at college media outlets with little in-depth

or follow-up reporting on suicide in the context of mental illness;

- Suicide is under-reported. Though suicide coverage guidelines for media do not call on reporters and editors to neglect reporting cause of death, for instance, nearly one-third of the articles analyzed did so. Editors made these decisions despite the fact that assertions, at times incorrect, were publicly posted on social media about the suicides;

- Student editors need and want guidance in this area;
- Faculty media advisers need support helping students make well-informed, independent, journalistic decisions.

The International Association for Suicide Prevention lists stigma as a major barrier to suicide prevention. Clear and accurate reporting about suicide conforms with the media coverage guidelines and may help quell rumor and inaccurate assumptions about what triggers it. A journalism instructor at one of the campuses included in this study discussed concerns about rumors with a class after a student death on campus. The student newspaper did not report the cause of death, but because the campus community was small, many knew the death was a suicide and speculation was rampant.

“I tried to make the point that there was a lot of public interest in the story and that it was a public health issue. I also talked about when there’s not information all that’s left is rumor and how dangerous rumor can be. The students weren’t that comfortable speaking about it.”

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List of Resources

1. The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, Columbia University, Columbia University <http://dartcenter.org/content/new-recommendations-for-reporting-suicide-include-social-media-journalists%E2%80%99-input#.VDS-L-cyCcU>
2. The Poynter Institute <http://www.poynter.org/uncategorized/18183/reporting-on-suicide/>
3. The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/aci/recommendations-for-media-coverage-of-suicide/>
4. National Institute of Mental Health <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/recommendations-for-reporting-on-suicide.shtml>
5. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention <https://www.afsp.org/news-events/for-the-media>
6. Suicide Prevention Resource Center http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/at_a_glance.pdf

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Jena Heath, assistant professor of English Writing & Rhetoric-Journalism, joined the faculty at St. Edward's University in 2008. She teaches Introduction to Journalism, Online Journalism, Advanced Newswriting and Media Standards & Practices, among other courses. She also coordinates the journalism program and serves as Faculty Adviser to Hilltop Views, the student newspaper and website. Before becoming a journalism editor, Heath spent nearly two decades in newsrooms as a reporter and editor. She covered cops, courts, local and state government and the White House. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from Smith College and a master's degree in journalism from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. She wishes to thank former Hilltop Views Editor Claire Cella for additional help with research for this article.

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