

Reporting Suicide in the Media
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Report by Anna Siegel

Polis hosted a seminar in partnership with the PCC with a panel of experts who addressed concerns associated with suicide reporting in the media. The recent death of 25 youths by suicide in and around the town of Bridgend has highlighted the need for such a deliberate discussion.

The Director of the PCC, Tim Toulmin encouraged journalists to find a balance in way they report on suicide. He said that finding the balance between the public's right to know and the protection and privacy of the subject could lead to saving lives. This is in light of the Oxford University 2005 research findings, which show a direct link to copycat suicides after news reports on suicide methods used are published or broadcasted. Toulmin explained the range of opinions on reporting suicide as consisting of those who believe that suicide should never be reported in the media, those that feel it can be done with an emphasis on sensitivity and restriction and those who believe there should be no restrictions. The PCC positions itself with line 5 of the Editor's Code of Practice, which urges for discretion during times of grief or shock and the avoidance of excessive detail of methods used when reporting suicide.

Anthony Langan, the Public Affairs Manager of the suicide prevention group The Samaritans said that the reporting of suicide should not be restricted completely but that a balance must be reached to ensure the prevention of copycat suicides. As suicide has not been illegal for many years the reporting of suicide needs to, according to Mr. Langan, avoid being framed in a way that would "dramatize the events" or normalize the decision of the individual who has committed suicide. The Samaritans believe the situation in Bridgend involved a media that provided misleading information and too much detail. He discussed the importance for media professionals of using the media guidelines for reporting on suicide that have been published by The Samaritans and other groups.

Trevor Barnes, the Senior Standards Manager of OFCOM, also gave praise to the media guidelines and the huge impact they have made thus far. He explained the OFCOM position as one that pushed journalists to report suicide cases and details only if the information is a necessary part of the editorial. If it is necessary information then there should be no graphic content and no mention or tips on how to commit suicide. Their code was up-dated in 2005 and will be reviewed again in 2009. They did look into the international reports of Bridgend in retrospect and found no violations of the British code. Mr. Barnes concluded by commending most broadcasters for being responsible with the reporting of suicide but urged for focus to be shifted towards the Internet where there is new and dangerous information emerging that could lead to the increase of suicide.

Odd Insungset, Chairman of the Norwegian Press Complaints Commission discussed his experience with severe restrictions on suicide reporting. For many years Norway had a ban on reporting suicide in the media. He explained that 15 years ago the Norwegian Prime Minister's son committed suicide and it was not reported. In addition the Norwegian Health Minister's son committed suicide and it was not reported. These brought about concern as being two cases that are undeniably linked to public interest and in turn Norway re-wrote the editorial code. The Norwegian code now allows reporting but urges caution when reporting suicides and to avoid detail of the methods used. He showed several examples of suicide in the news and gave reasons why or why not the article in question was a breach of the code. In one instance a woman was shown on the front page of a paper standing on the side of a bridge where she was not able to jump from as a result of a fence that had been built to prevent suicides. They concluded this article did in fact violate the code because of a breach of privacy and the

manner in which it was presented. When evaluating a documentary on suicides committed from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, where there were clear images of people jumping from the bridge, they did not see this as a breach of the code because it included sensitive narrative from family members of the deceased. Mr. Insunget feels that Norway is in need of a new code with a stronger sensitivity to copycat suicides. He also feels that although they have the code, the media is not handling the reporting properly and they receive too many complaints.

Bob Satchwell highlighted the fact that the debate about suicide reporting has been going on for over 15 years and has led the UK into a somewhat ambivalent position on the practice of reporting suicide. As the Executive Director of the Society of Editors he urged the panel to consider the important right for journalists to investigate unusual and sudden deaths and to take great care in any attempt to control the media. His concerns with restrictions on reporting are that they may "sanitize events" and lead to an ignored larger issue that then becomes unusual in the minds of the public. He concluded that the problem in reports on Bridgend was due to the lazy reporting of individual cases and a lack of investigative journalism around larger issue as a story in itself. He concluded that a full restriction is a bad idea and that careful reporting needed to be the done in all cases of suicide.

Professor Sonia Livingstone, from the London School of Economics offered a response by drawing on academic research on audience reactions to media. She posed the question of whether the information presented in the reports is as important as the manner in which they are presented. She explained that there is strong evidence that ways in which stories are told and the framing of news have a strong effect on audience responses. She included the idea that repetition can legitimize issues for the public and that vulnerable audiences need to be considered when deciding the manner in which to report these stories. She drew on the discussion of the internet as a new and strong tool for those that are at risk of committing suicide as something that gives access to methods and links to others suffering from mental illness and depression. When asked whether the Internet as a largely free and un-regulated medium should be regulated, she responded by explaining that the internet is already "quietly regulated" but should probably be regulated out-rightly with cases such as these.

The question and answer period revealed an audience of professionals with strong links to the issue. The MP from Bridgend Madeline Moon explained her insight into the situation of reporting on the Bridgend suicides. She called for respect and privacy for the left over family members and explained the long-term effect these reports can have on the family of someone who has committed suicide. Training of journalists in early and mid career stages, reporting on the complexities of mental illness, a lack of information and sources for reports on suicide, new media guidelines and re-writing the editors code were all comments raised for debate. Others urged for examples of appropriate reports on suicide from those that are handling complaints. While the idea of balance dominated the expert's discussions conscious action was brought about in the question and answer period. As Mr. Toulmin said towards the end of the discussion we need to "keep talking". The debate is far from resolved but the attention towards the problem and the discussion of those involved will lead the industry closer to some real progress and resolutions.

Anna Sigel