



Sensationalism or sensitivity: Reporting suicide cases in the news media[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the nature of sensitivity in reporting the news in cases of suicide. We examine the boundaries of privacy and the appropriate guidelines for reporting as outlined in the Society of Professional Journalists, the 9 Principles of Journalism as noted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, and CDC. Suicide contagion and the susceptibility of the audience are explored. Specifically, we will look at two cases where the suicides were well-documented in the media: the *Dateline's To Catch a Predator* suicide of Louis William Conradt, Jr. and the Rutgers University first-year student, Tyler Clementi.

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1. Introduction

The news media reports on a myriad of stories evoking a range of emotional responses from their audience. Celebrations for a victorious sports team, devastation in war-torn areas, the frenzy of political campaigns, crime violence, and suicide could all headline as front-page stories in any newspaper across the globe. The assortment of headlines provides a breadth of content for media consumers; news is packaged for the audience to view an array of topics. There are rare occasions when headlines are shared around the globe, such as the opening of the Olympic Games. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*, *Toronto Star*, and *The Guardian* (UK) (*Today's front pages: July 28, 2012, 2013*) captured the splendid opening ceremony of the London Olympic Games on the July 28, 2012.

When tragedy strikes, however, media professionals report on the unfolding events and create the narrative for an emotionally charged story. A tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut killed 26 people on Friday, December 14, 2012. News outlets covered this breaking news event with limited information and abundant speculation about the gunman and the deceased. The front pages of *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Toronto Star* and *The Guardian* documented

this somber occurrence with prominence on Saturday, December 15, 2012 (*Today's front pages: December 15 2012, 2013*). All of the five newspapers referred to the murder/suicide case where the lives of twenty children were brutally taken by gunfire. Four of the five newspapers feature a photo of first responders leading students to safety. The children are seen walking in an orderly line, linked together by one hand on the shoulder of the classmate in front of them. The aftermath of the massacre is the prominent focus on the front pages of the United States and United Kingdom newspapers however, other news stories appear on at least two non-Sandy Hook stories on the front page.

Media consumers gain insight as they attempt to contextualize the events and people as presented by the news media. The professional news media has guidelines established by the Society for Professional Journalist to follow when reporting on sensitive or fragile topics such as suicide. Furthermore, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has also published guidelines for media members covering suicide in order to minimize suicide contagion and to emphasize preventative measures (Carroll et al., 1994).

2. Suicide statistics in the United States

The CDC documented a total of 34,598 suicides in the United States in 2007 (Crosby, Han, Ortega, Parks, & Gfroerer, 2011). The suicide rate for men was four times greater than for females across all ethnic and age groups and 83.5% of suicides were committed by whites (Crosby et al., 2011). The prominent age group of suicides varied among ethnic groups, "rates among American Indian/Alaskan Natives, blacks, and Hispanics, tended to be highest

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among adolescents and young adults, then declined or leveled off with increasing age” (Crosby et al., 2011, p. 2). The researchers stated the highest suicide rate for whites occurred between ages 40 and 54 while Asians and Pacific Islanders rates were highest for those 65 years of age or older. Overall, the CDC report noted that suicide was the 11th leading cause of death in 2007.

The growing concern for suicide coincides with the war on terror the poor economy. “According to the Pentagon, 239 military deaths in 2012 have been confirmed as suicides and another 110 are being investigated as probable suicides. The number of suicides in 2011 reach 301; there were 298 the year before” (Starr, 2013, p. 1). Starr notes the four branches of the American military each report an increase in suicides. The concern for other political suicides such as suicide bombing is also a concern in areas of the world susceptible to this form murder/suicide.

The unemployment rate and economy also impact the suicide rate. Ceccherini-Nelli and Priebe (2011) found a correlation between unemployment and suicide rates for men and women. They reference Durkheim’s theory, “that suicide rates are expected to increase during periods of rapid economic change and decrease during periods of economic stability” (Ceccherini-Nelli & Priebe, 2011, p. 976).

3. The media’s role in covering non-fictional suicide

This paper will address the concerns and criteria the media use to evaluate their coverage of suicide incidents. The media, in essence, provides the public with what they determine is newsworthy. The “desire to know” versus “need to know” about events in our communities provide great debate among news professionals. The public desires to know intimate details of another person’s life even during times of personal tragedy and loss – times when the family may crave privacy the most.

Perhaps there is no greater sense of loss and desire for privacy from loved ones than in the aftermath of a suicide or a murder. Yet, in their desire to tell the story, the media pursues the story and attempts to interview those who are left behind. Narda Zacchino, formerly of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times*, suggests a story about suicide is newsworthy if it is relevant to the audience. “But we also have to pay extra attention to the extreme sensitivity of the subject matter” (Miller, 2002, p. 44).

This article seeks to explore the nature of sensitivity in reporting the news in cases of suicide. We will examine the boundaries of privacy and the appropriate “code” for reporting as outlined in the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the 9 Principles of Journalism as noted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ). Specifically, we will look at two cases where the suicides were well-documented in the media: the *Dateline’s To Catch a Predator* suicide of Louis William Conratt, Jr. and the Rutgers University first-year student, Tyler Clementi. These cases best represent the suicide of a public figure (Conratt) and a suicide in a public space (Clementi,) thus fulfilling the criteria for media coverage according to Jamieson, Hall Jamieson, and Romer (2003). We will discuss other cases in different parts of the paper to provide robust examples of editorial decision-making.

News stories surrounding cases of self-harm require sensitive decision-making skills for the media professionals who cover “real-time” events. Events such as suicide or murder-suicide are catastrophic, yet they may be newsworthy nonetheless. Suicide is a terribly complex issue that can be studied with expertise from health and social science perspectives. The purpose of this paper is to provide a narrow perspective on the media coverage of this multi-layered phenomenon. Our goal is to understand the challenges of news professionals as they experience decision-making on the job. This perspective is not intended to criticize the

media for its past coverage, nor is it to suggest that suicide should be reduced to “media event.” We recognize the severity of pain involved with the victim and the family and friends who are left behind.

4. Lights, camera, but no action vs. hidden web cams: comparative cases

Journalists and editors determine the content covered in their news medium as they deem what is newsworthy and notable from the day’s events. Framing theory provides insight on the media’s organizational strategies for news events and an individual’s frame to process the information (Scheufele, 1999). News coverage may transmit violent, depressing and even disturbing topics. News stories that focus on individuals during trying times may have a sensitive boundary between the public’s right to know versus the individual’s (or those closely associated with the subject’s) need for privacy. When media professionals determine the “newsworthiness” of suicides they should precede with caution. Jamieson et al. (2003) study posits private suicides do not warrant news coverage whereas suicides committed in public or by a public figure typically necessitate reporting (p. 1649). The two cases presented in this article gained media momentum based on the notoriety of one victim and the public implementation of the other.

4.1. *Dateline’s debacle in Murphy, Texas*

The suicides of Assistant District Attorney Louis William Conratt and Rutgers University first-year student, Tyler Clementi gained significant media attention in the United States. These cases are summarized in this section and later elaborated upon to provide the contextual background and to evaluate the news media’s coverage of cases of suicide.

The *Dateline* series *To Catch a Predator* aired from November 2004 to December 2007 featuring twelve “sting” locations across the United States. Chris Hansen, the recognizable host of the award-winning program *To Catch a Predator*, confronted adults who participated in illicit online chats and made “house calls” to perceived minors while the *Dateline* cameras were rolling. The cast and crew of *Dateline’s To Catch a Predator* worked in collaboration with a Perverted Justice (PJ), a non-profit organization dedicated to catching pedophiles and sex predators. Together, they collaborated with local law enforcement. *Dateline* hired actors to speak with the predators whose words and actions were documented by PJ and shared with the police and viewers.

On November 5, 2006, *Dateline* staff, PJ volunteers, and the Murphy and Terrell police departments, including a SWAT team, went to the home of former suburban-Dallas prosecutor, Louis William Conratt Jr. after he engaged in an online chat with a self-identified minor. Conratt stated he would meet the minor at his neighbor’s [the *Dateline* decoy] home but did not fulfill this commitment. PJ captured the Internet chat logs and audio files of phone conversations between “Wil” (Conratt) and “Luke” (the hired actor); analysts discovered Conratt’s identity through Internet search engines (Dittrich, 2007). The Murphy Police Department subsequently issued an arrest warrant for the fifty-six year old Conratt after reading the PJ transcript of Conratt’s sexually explicit cyber-interaction with a minor (Dittrich, 2007). Shortly after the SWAT team and police personnel entered his home, Conratt committed suicide with a single shot to his head. *Dateline* was outside his home chronicling the day’s events with their video camera.

Initial coverage of the story focused on the sex sting and the shocking twist—the suicide of a well-regarded public official. Public figures who commit suicide are considered newsworthy due to

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