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# Does the media matter to suicide?: Examining the social dynamics surrounding media reporting on suicide in a suicide-prone community



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## ABSTRACT

Despite the widespread acknowledgement by public health organizations that media reporting matters to suicide, this link has been much debated and the mechanisms undergirding it poorly understood. With this study, I combine a media analysis with ethnographic data collected during 2014–2016 ( $N = 91$ ) to examine the social dynamics surrounding media reporting on suicide in a community (that I call Poplar Grove, USA) with an enduring adolescent suicide problem. I illustrate how the media crafted a particular story about why youth die by suicide that emphasized academic pressure over other plausible causes. In so doing, the media may have broadened ideas about when suicide is seen as an option. However, I also provide evidence that cautions against attributing too much causal power to the media. The media coverage in Poplar Grove reflected conditions that were already present in the community; it was already a high-pressure place for youth to live with widespread mental health stigma. These factors likely shaped media reporting, while also contributing independently to the suicide problem. Finally, I found that the suicide deaths that received media coverage were those that triggered significant cognitive dissonance and thus were much discussed among youth, independent of the media reporting. This generated ample opportunities for peer role modeling of suicide. Thus, while the media may have helped solidify a certain view of suicide in the community, it was not the only social force contributing to suicide in Poplar Grove. While the findings from this study do not negate the importance of responsible reporting on suicide, they do contextualize the role of the media in suicide and suggest that researchers must take a broader view of how suicide suggestion operates in the media and in social contexts.

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A large body of research has demonstrated that irresponsible media reporting on suicide is often associated with spikes in the suicide rate among groups exposed to the media (Niederkröthaler et al., 2012; Pirkis, 2009; Stack, 2005). Though these spikes are most consistently found following media reports of a political or entertainment celebrity (Lee et al., 2014; Stack, 2005), recent scholarship also suggests that prominent articles in local newspapers about the suicide death of a youth may contribute to the emergence of adolescent suicide clusters (Gould et al., 2014). Interestingly, despite the acknowledgement that media reporting matters to suicide by public health organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Recommendations for

Reporting on Suicide, 2011), the link between the media and suicide has been much debated, with some studies arguing that the link has been overstated (Stack, 2005). At the heart of this debate is that *most* media reports about suicide do not have any effect on the suicide rate (Stack, 2005). Of course, media reports on suicide can themselves vary dramatically – some follow guidelines, some do not – which may contribute to the varied findings regarding the media's ability to suggest suicide (e.g., Niederkröthaler et al., 2010).

But the relationship between the media and suicide rates is also potentially more complex. We know little about how the media comes to tell particular stories about suicide. Media reports develop out of social contexts, and often reflect pre-existing cultural beliefs about suicide (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002; Luce, 2016), though little work has examined this aspect of media reporting on suicide. With this study, I address this gap in the literature using data from an in-depth qualitative case study of a community prone to youth

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suicide: Poplar Grove (a pseudonym). The suicide problem in Poplar Grove is centered on the community's only public high school. Since 2000, Poplar Grove High School (PGHS) has lost 15 current or recent graduates to suicide (the student body is approximately 2000 students). Additionally, the community has experienced at least three suicide clusters. I examined both the media's role in actively shaping how suicide is understood, while also considering how the local community shapes the media reporting and any possible link between the media and suicide. Ultimately, this case study demonstrates how media stories are both producers and products of local culture.

### 1. Theorizing suicide suggestion via the media

Why the media may be able to trigger suicide or even suicide clusters is a deeply fascinating and often undertheorized phenomenon (Pirkis, 2009). Though scholars often posit that exposure to media stories about suicide can have a “*suggestive effect* on vulnerable people who then *imitate* the publicized suicide” (Haw et al., 2013: 102 emphasis added), few studies have examined how this effect may operate. One perspective that draws on aspects of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) is that suicide suggestion via the media may teach individuals how to die by suicide. For example, one study found that after a TV show modeled suicide by self-poisoning, there was an increase in suicides using that specific poisoning method in the two weeks following the broadcast (Hawton et al., 1999). Other scholars have argued that identification with or admiration of the suicide decedent is essential to the social learning process (Lee et al., 2014; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010, 2012; Stack, 2005; Tousignant et al., 2005). When an individual models a motive for suicide, individuals who admire or identify with that role model may then adopt suicide as an option for coping with a similar stressor. The role of the media in these cases is to provide information about the motive (something that is cautioned against [Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide, 2011]).

It is useful to emphasize here that the motive for suicide matters precisely because it conveys a rationale for or the socially-constructed meaning of suicide. It communicates when suicide is justified or when it may be used to express or evoke particular emotions in salient social groups. This is important because research has shown that beliefs about suicide are not universal. They can vary based on individuals' identities (for example their gender identity [Alston, 2012; Braswell and Kushner, 2012; Cleary, 2012]) or based on nationality and culture (Kitanaka, 2008; Targum and Kitanaka, 2012). For example, in Japan, suicide has been seen by many as an act of free will that people choose rationally and legitimately, often as a way to either “create meaning through one's own death” or to “[take] responsibility for one's actions” (Targum and Kitanaka, 2012). This contrasts with the belief that suicide is caused by mental illness which is more common in places like the USA (Kitanaka, 2008). Though the literature on the meaning of suicide has not considered the role of the media, other research has shown that the media can shape how events are collectively remembered and understood (Kitch, 2008). As such, the media may be one location where collective meaning of suicide is generated and, importantly, perpetuated.

### 2. The case for caution

Though there are strong theoretical reasons to suspect suicide can be suggestible via the media, there is also good reason to be cautious about not overstating this relationship, particularly given the mixed results of past research on the role of the media in suicide (Stack, 2005). First, the media is not just a producer of culture and collective memories (Kitch, 2008), it is also a product of society.

As such, the media draws on society and on its pre-existing tropes and stereotypes when crafting stories (Coyle and MacWhannell, 2002); thus, how the story of a suicide is told may draw on existing knowledge or beliefs about motives for suicide. Second, the media does not cover all events equally, but rather goes through social processes to determine what is *newsworthy* (Gans, 1979), even in the case of suicide (Pirkis et al., 2007). This may mean that suicide deaths that impact more people or that were already highly discussed may be more likely to receive media attention. This point underscores the difficulty in determining whether the observed association between media coverage of suicide and suicide diffusion represent a causal or spurious relationship. Art, in the form of the media, may simply reflect life as it is, with or without the media covering it.

The difficulty separating the influence of the media from other factors that are often omitted or unmeasured in quantitative studies of the media's influence may be particularly relevant for the literature tying media coverage to adolescent suicide clusters (Gould et al., 2014). Adolescent suicide clusters are highly traumatic events that are often much discussed, in and out of the media (Mueller and Abrutyn, 2016). Additionally, studies have shown that peer modeling of suicidal behaviors can also play a role in the diffusion of suicide among youth (Abrutyn and Mueller, 2014; Mueller and Abrutyn, 2015). Since clusters are more likely to occur within bounded social contexts, like schools (Haw et al., 2013), there is good reason to suspect that peer-role modeling or shared environmental risk factors may contribute independently to adolescent suicide clusters. Hence, the impact of media reports on local suicide rates or even the emergence of a suicide cluster may be confounded with the effect of peer role modeling of suicide in the community or school. With this study, I examine these issues to improve our understanding of the role of the media in suicide.

### 3. Methods

To investigate the role the media plays in suicide suggestion, I conducted a media analysis matched with an in-depth case study of a community I call Poplar Grove. This study is part of a larger project to understand the social forces behind the significant adolescent suicide problem in Poplar Grove (Mueller and Abrutyn, 2016). Poplar Grove is a relatively small (population < 50,000), wealthy, suburban, majority white, community with an enduring adolescent suicide problem.

The data for this study come from two main sources. First, I examined all media articles discussing suicide in and around the community. These articles were gathered via extensive searching on ProQuest Media, Lexis Nexus, Newspaper Archive: Academic Library Edition, Google News Archive, and EbscoHost Newspaper Source for key terms (including the words suicide, “Poplar Grove,” and the names of all known suicide decedents). A total of 187 articles were collected and analyzed, though for this study I focus on the ones that appeared in the local newspaper. While most analyzed articles came from Poplar Grove's local paper, articles also came from a nearby city paper. To protect the identity of the town, papers are referred to according to their distribution size: Local Paper (readership around 20,000) and City Paper (readership around 200,000). The City Paper is located within an hour of Poplar Grove and primarily covers national and local city news with only occasional attention to Poplar Grove.

Second, I draw on interviews and focus groups that my colleague, Seth Abrutyn, and I conducted with 91 community members, including youth, young adults, parents, mental health workers, medical professionals, suicide prevention activists, and school personnel with the goal of understanding the community's suicide problem (N = 91). These interviews offer important context

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