

# Increasing Adherence to Media Guidelines on Responsible Reporting on Suicide: Suggestions from Qualitative Interviews with German Journalists

Antonia Markiewitz<sup>a</sup>, Florian Arendt<sup>b</sup> and Sebastian Scherr <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Media and Communication, University of Munich (LMU), Munich, Germany; <sup>b</sup>Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria; <sup>c</sup>School for Mass Communication Research, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

## ABSTRACT

Responsible reporting on suicide (RRS) is a cornerstone of suicide prevention. Scholars have developed media guidelines facilitating RRS, but there are barriers to accepting and implementing these suggestions, alongside obstacles for journalists' comprehensive adherence to them. For example, journalists could perceive media guidelines as a threat to their autonomy or to the freedom of the press. However, there is scant evidence on how journalists actually evaluate RRS media guidelines, leaving it unclear as to how journalists perceive them and how willing they are to adhere to them. The present study addresses this research gap and explores potential barriers to guideline adherence using 30 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with journalists in Germany. Journalists expected that their freedom of speech would remain untouched, which mostly referred to the non-restrictive tone of the guidelines, to persuasive, evidence-based explanations, and to clear reporting examples. Practical implications for increasing journalists' adherence to media guidelines are discussed.

Every year, about 817,000 people die of suicide worldwide (Naghavi 2019). In Germany, over 10,000 suicides occur every year, which corresponds to about 30 suicides per day (WHO 2017), thereby outnumbering deaths caused by road accidents, homicides, drug abuse, and AIDS combined. Thus, suicide and suicidality (that is all ways of thinking and/or behaving of people who strive for their own death through thoughts, active action or passive omission; Wolfersdorf and Etzersdorfer 2011) are a crucial topic both on a national level and globally. At the same time, suicides are still stigmatized globally. Thus, the topic remains under-represented in the social discourse, even though there is a great need for education and support (Wolfersdorf and Etzersdorfer 2011).

The media are an important factor as they can contribute to both harmful and helpful effects (i.e., imitative behaviors vs. help seeking). Thus, research on the role of the news media in suicides can best be described as a *double-edged sword*: On the one hand, the so-called Werther effect (Phillips 1974) describes the undesirable, harmful consequences of irresponsible depictions of suicide in the media, which has been shown to positively

link with national suicide rates (Stack 2005; Fu, Chan, and Yip 2011). On the other hand, responsible reporting on suicide (RRS) can also be suicide-preventive, an effect coined as the “Papageno effect.” Thus, from the viewpoint of suicide prevention, RRS is of the utmost importance and should be promoted (Niederkrötenhaler et al. 2010).

RRS media guidelines have been developed in many countries as a part of concerted national efforts to prevent suicides (Pirkis et al. 2006). In addition, supranational organizations such as the WHO (2017) have also disseminated media guidelines. One motivating factor as to why suicide-prevention efforts have targeted media reporting is that suicide reporting is an important contributing factor for both suicides and suicide prevention that can be more easily modified than many other suicide risk factors can (Gould, Jamieson, and Romer 2003).

Some studies have already evaluated journalists’ adherence to media guidelines by relying on content analyses of news articles (Michel et al. 2000; Roškar et al. 2017). However, studies on journalists’ perceptions of such guidelines are largely absent with only a few exceptions in recent decades (Pirkis et al. 2006; Scherr, Markiewicz, and Arendt 2019). Nevertheless, the discourse with journalists is still scarce, and many questions about the subjective perceptions of media guidelines as well as psychological mechanisms that possibly restrict or promote the integration of media guidelines into daily journalistic routines remain unanswered. Thus, journalists’ attitudes toward media guidelines and their willingness to adhere to them in their daily work have not been clarified. The knowledge about facilitating factors and their underlying psychological rationales may help to reduce individual journalistic barriers and thereby increase adherence to media guidelines in daily journalistic routines. Unfortunately, there is hardly any research on how journalists subjectively perceive such guidelines and make meaning of them.

To close this research gap, we conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with journalists from Germany. We asked journalists to evaluate awareness materials that reflect the most relevant aspects of RRS (World Health Organization 2008). The aim was to identify content elements that support guideline adherence to and implementation in journalists’ daily work. Thus, we were interested in journalists’ subjective perspectives: We investigated what journalists demand for such media guidelines with regard to their content, structure, and design, but also how they would like to be informed about new media guidelines on RRS. Importantly, we aimed at identifying possible barriers for journalists’ adherence to such guidelines.

## **The Werther and Papageno Effects**

Phillips (1974) coined the term “Werther effect.” Specifically, it describes the phenomenon whereby the suicide rate in the population tends to increase after a suicide case has been discussed prominently in the media. The suicide itself is often imitated through the same suicide method (Stack 2000; Scherr 2016). The existence of the Werther effect has been noted across the globe, particularly regarding, but not limited to, the effects of newspaper stories about celebrity suicides (Stack 2000; Kim et al. 2013).

The underlying mechanism is often traced back to Bandura’s social-cognitive theory of learning (Gould, Jamieson, and Romer 2003; Valkenburg and Peter 2013). In this process, disinhibition is a key factor, as suicidal behavior is both learnt through observation in the media and the consequences of the respective suicide—or the lack of such—are displayed

transparently for the recipients, possibly resulting in the weakening of social norms and a reduction in inhibitions (Scherr 2016). Even though long-term effects may occur, research on the Werther effect mostly shows that an imitation effect emerges more frequently in temporal proximity to the respective suicide reports (Frei et al. 2003). Furthermore, research shows that the dose–response principle seems to apply (Gould, Jamieson, and Romer 2003; Pirkis et al. 2006).

In contrast, specific suicide reports may also have protective effects, ultimately resulting in preventing suicides. This occurs under the assumption that media reports are appropriately crafted, for example, by explaining positive coping mechanisms, by showing how to deal with suicide or by depicting the positive development of someone who has managed to overcome the suicide struggle (Niederkrotenthaler et al. 2010). Contrary to the Werther effect, the Papageno effect has been less well researched, which diminishes the preventive potential that RRS could possibly evoke (Scherr and Steinleitner 2015). Therefore, it seems even more important that journalists should be informed about the dangers and risks of suicide reporting, and that the immanent suicide-preventive potentials should be pointed out and emphasized, as well as the journalists' suicide reporting seeming to be a key factor for the emergence of each of the two diametrically opposed effects.

## **Responsible Reporting on Suicide**

Within the concept of RRS, the criteria and strategies that contribute to preventive and responsible reporting on suicide and the aspects that should be excluded to avoid harmful consequences have been discussed: National and international WHO guidelines on suicide reporting rely on the concept of RRS (World Health Organization 2008), closely linking those aspects to each other. In essence, these guidelines are congruent and include beneficial and harmful aspects of suicide reporting. RRS mainly deals with the implementation of these factors into the everyday life of journalists and their reporting (Beam, John, and Yaqub 2018). All these guidelines point to aspects that should be avoided (see the Werther effect) and others that should be emphasized (see the Papageno effect) when reporting on suicides (Nutt, Kidd, and Matthews 2015).

## ***Detrimental Elements of Risky Suicide Reporting***

In order to prevent imitative suicides, the first category implies the avoidance of great attention being placed on the suicide event (a suicide should not be discussed as a top news item with pictures or over a long period of time), as well as the exclusion of specific details such as the suicide method or the place where the suicide took place. Sensationalizing, heroizing and glorifying a suicide should also be avoided. Furthermore, a suicide should not be presented in a positive way or as an inevitable solution to problems. Additionally, external accusations of guilt, or mono-causal, simple justifications as reasons for the suicide are also assumed to have harmful effects. The trivialization and stigmatization of mental illnesses, suicidal tendencies, or suicides are also extremely counterproductive in the prevention of imitative suicides, as they can further strengthen the fear of exclusion among those affected (Arendt 2018). Details that possibly lead to the identification of the recipients with the suicides presented in the media are also considered crucial to the emergence of the Werther effect, and should therefore be mentioned and

described with caution, and, if possible, they should be avoided (World Health Organization 2008, 2014). Furthermore, research has shown that the framing of a suicide report is pivotal: The term “suicide” is neutral, whereas “self-murder,” “failed attempt,” or “successful attempt” are emotionally charged and result in unfavorable framing effects (Arendt 2018).

However, these elements may be part of various stories, in which the suicide topic is more or less immediately obvious, which is why detrimental effects on audiences might vary substantially. Thus, it is not always obvious that a news item is a “suicide story”. For example, due to their access to deadly weapons, there is reoccurring media coverage on suicides of police officers (Miller 2005), but also on about “suicide by proxy” (Kingshott 2009). The latter describes a situation, in which threatening behavior towards armed others are deliberately performed in order to evoke a lethal response from them. Similarly, articles on self-crash murder-suicides (Soubrier 2016) describe cases of suicides with potentially threatening effects on audiences. Such “risky coverage” also bears the chance to have negative effects through explicit stigmatization by framing suicide as a crime and a result of mental illness.

### ***Conducive Elements of Suicide Reporting***

The second category considers elements in suicide reports that are assumed to be conducive to suicide prevention. Unlike some journalists’ assessments that it might be best not to report on suicide at all, this absolutism is neither beneficial nor reasonable (Beam, John, and Yaqub 2018): Suicide reports should highlight the fact that suicide and attempted suicide are signs of psychological problems that can be treated. Journalists should report on the background of the suicide and provide information as well as refer to contact points for help and assistance (e.g., by referring to a crisis intervention center or telephone counseling service). In this context, it can be helpful to report on warning signals and risk factors at an early stage of a suicidal crisis, possibly helping friends, family members, or co-workers to recognize them. Most importantly, positive coping mechanisms and examples of people who have overcome a suicidal crisis should also be included in suicide reporting in order to encourage people and provide a way out (Niederkrötenhaller et al. 2010). Finally, journalists should present the consequences of suicide for the suicide victim’s social environment to demonstrate the harm and pain a suicide can cause (World Health Organization 2008).

### **The Journalists’ Perspective**

Studies with anecdotal or descriptive evidence, mainly employing pre–post research designs, show that media guidelines containing the elements discussed above are very well suited to improving the reports on suicide in a favorable manner (Michel et al. 2000; Bohanna and Wang 2012). However, regarding the concrete individual journalists’ points of view, there is only preliminary evidence that they tend to accept and adhere to such media guidelines more often and with a greater commitment if they or someone else from their practice get involved in the process of constructing, designing, and implementing those guidelines (Bohanna and Wang 2012; Scherr, Markiewicz, and Arendt 2019). To date, journalists’ perspectives on the guidelines are clearly an under-

researched topic, which is unfortunate, as they are the target group of those media guidelines, and thus the ones who should follow those research-based recommendations. To meet this research gap, we conducted this study as a thorough understanding of journalists' views on the available guidelines can positively contribute to increasing the quality of suicide reporting.

### ***Merging Research and Practical Journalism***

To date, there are still two sides that need balancing: On the one hand, there is research trying to design media guidelines to prevent suicides through RRS. On the other hand, there are journalists trying to balance everyday work and the responsibility that comes with it. Sometimes, these two positions are inconsistent with one another, leading to no or mixed adherence to the media guidelines discussed previously (Tatum, Canetto, and Slater 2010; Fu, Chan, and Yip 2011). Little attention has so far been placed on merging the two aspects by better understanding individual journalists' demands and needs. In this context, research shows that journalistic active-role conceptions link with job satisfaction on the one hand, and with normative attitudes toward the power of the media on the other hand (Scherr and Baugut 2016). Journalists being particularly active (e.g., fighting for "making the world a better place", being a spokesperson for the under-represented) in this means that they might have more specific opinions on how many restrictions that are placed on them through media guidelines are acceptable so that they can keep up their active-role performance. Thus, we need a better understanding of the exact factors preventing journalists from adhering to the media guidelines alongside what factors have the potential to increase adherence.

### ***Barriers to Comprehensive Adherence***

To achieve the best possible results in terms of suicide prevention through favorable suicide reporting, one must first understand the obstacles and barriers to the journalists' comprehensive adherence to the media guidelines. There are some unfavorable short- or long-term effects that can possibly occur among journalists because of such media guidelines. These include obfuscation (which is critical when creating a campaign), dissonance, boomerang effects, an unnecessarily high prevalence of apprehension, desensitization, culpability, opportunity costs, social reproduction- and norm-enabling, and system activation (Cho and Salmon 2007). Additionally, reactance effects can arise when journalists are confronted with alleged work instructions (e.g., the respective media guidelines on RRS) that may represent a possible threat to their journalistic freedom and autonomy (Brehm and Brehm 1981). These barriers should be overcome at all costs, which is an important motive behind us considering these crucial aspects when conducting the current study and trying to understand the journalists' subjective perspectives.

The fact that there are studies with mixed to negative results regarding the implementation of several of those recommendations emphasizes the need for a better understanding of journalists' perspectives (Tatum, Canetto, and Slater 2010; Fu, Chan, and Yip 2011). Against this background, what is still missing in the broader research canon is the individual journalists' subjective views on which factors contribute to increasing adherence to such media guidelines, including possible psychological barriers. A thorough

understanding may positively contribute to increased adherence, which will lead to improved responsible reporting, ultimately contributing to the prevention of suicides.

To fill this research gap, we asked the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What makes suicide worth reporting for German journalists?

Research Question 2: What problems do German journalists see regarding the media guidelines and awareness materials for responsible reporting on suicide (RRS)?

Research Question 3: How should the media guidelines and awareness materials for responsible reporting on suicide (RRS) be designed so that journalists apply them to their reporting?

Thus, this study provides insights in the journalists' ideas and beliefs of how media guidelines can be of help to them when they are confronted with reporting on suicides and how those guidelines can best be implemented in the newsroom environment. These insights are critical as they can be the basis for further improvements of such guidelines (and similar campaigns), thereby leading to better results regarding their adherence.

## Method

We investigated barriers to RRS guideline adherence by conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviews in Germany. Thirty journalists were exposed to the same RRS media guidelines. These guidelines, which we used as a starting for our interviews, point are based on the information and recommendations of the WHO (World Health Organization 2014), of the German Society for Suicide Prevention [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Suizidprävention] (2006), and of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Health [Bundesministerium für Gesundheit] (2011), mapping the least common denominator out of the three of them. We utilized an interpretative analysis to extract facilitative and obstructive factors that are related to guideline adherence.

## Procedure

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth, one-to-one interviews, as they act as a link between theory and practice and enable us to directly examine existing awareness materials representing the international RRS media guidelines (see study by Scherr, Arendt, and Schäfer 2017) with regard to their applicability in everyday editorial work, since this latter sub-area has not yet been investigated in depth. Thus, an initial exploration using a flexible approach involving semi-structured interviews seems suitable, especially with regard to its ability to comprehend emotional and motivational patterns in the journalists' perceptions, interpretations, and individual relevance settings and barriers, as well as in terms of their openness toward information about suicides that ultimately leads to specific actions (Hollstein and Straus 2006; Ziebland and McPherson 2006).

Direct conversations give us the chance of digging deeper into the journalists' individual perceptions and of gaining more knowledge about the barriers to guideline adherence, thus advancing the research project in the spirit of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Therefore, we constructed an interview guide comprised of seven sections: The interviewees were asked to answer open questions (1) on their opinions on the existing awareness materials we used as a basis and treatment, (2) on suggestions for their

improvement, (3) on their previous experience with suicide reporting, (4) on the practicability of such guidelines and awareness materials, (5) on the journalists' previous knowledge of possible effects of suicide reporting, (6) on the editorial policy, and (7) on their demographics. When needed, the interviewer asked supplementary questions.

### **Participants**

Interviews were conducted with 30 journalists (13 female) throughout Germany. Their ages ranged from 23 to 57 years ( $M = 37.80$ ,  $SD = 11.61$ ) and they had between 2 and 30 years ( $M = 14.60$ ,  $SD = 10.06$ ) of professional work experience as journalists. Regarding their concrete experience with suicide reporting, 20 of our interviewees have already reported on suicide themselves, five of them have had indirect experience with suicide reporting as they have discussed the subject and talked through concrete cases with their colleagues. Only five journalists did not yet have any experience with this subject at all. We decided to include these in our sample as they have experienced the journalistic working conditions and newsroom environment as well which we considered to be the most important condition to be able to assess and evaluate the media guidelines and their aptitude. Almost all ( $n = 25$ ) of the journalists graduated from college with only five having a somewhat lower formal education. Thus, our sample comes close to the *average German journalist* who is—according to the last and still most recent representative survey of journalists—male, 41 years old, and a university graduate (Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl 2006).

Most of the journalists from our sample ( $n = 26$ ) also held a “middle position” in the newsroom with no or restricted editorial responsibilities, and four were actively working in editorial and/or newsroom management positions. As reports in tabloid newspapers often tend to contain many detrimental elements in terms of suicide reporting (Niederkerotenthaler et al. 2010), we included a wide range from quality outlets to mass-market outlets (tabloid media in our sample), thus trying to maximize variance regarding the types of news outlets. The majority of journalists ( $n = 17$ ) were working for quality media, seven worked for tabloid media, and six were freelance journalists working for different types of media. Our sample includes journalists from the most relevant and most widely circulated newspapers and news magazines in Germany (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Der Spiegel*, *Stern*, and *BILD*; IVW 2018). These are opinion leaders and agenda-setters for the whole media sector in Germany and thereby strongly define and influence reporting standards (Blum 2011). The goal was to conduct face-to-face interviews with journalists, however, in some cases, we also accepted telephone interviews (maximum variance sampling). Thus, 16 interviews were conducted over the telephone or Skype and 14 interviews were conducted face-to-face at the offices of the news media outlet, or in public restaurants. All of the interviews were between 16 and 63 min long and were conducted between May and July 2018. The participants were identified by directly contacting newsrooms and asking for voluntary participation in combination with further snowball sampling.

### **Data Collection, Interpretation, and (Re-)Evaluation**

The interviews were conducted following the suggestions based on grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which have been more heavily applied to the health domain by

Ziebland and McPherson (2006). Data interpretation followed a hermeneutical–interpretative approach (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2010). Our interview guide was based on existing theories and results from previous studies from the media and suicide domain.

To understand the explicit and implicit evaluation levels within the interview statements, we analyzed the interviews using the software *MaxQDA* that allows for the development and continuous refinement of categories in which answers can be drawn upon as part of the coding (Mayring 2000). The final category system consisted of four main categories: *awareness material*, *suicide in reporting*, *understanding of roles*, and *demographics*, which, in turn, are composed of differentiated subcategories. The coding of the interview statements was performed by the same researcher who also conducted the interviews. All interviews were originally conducted in German, thus the direct quotations presented in this article have been translated, and whenever interpretations and connotations were ambiguous, translations were discussed among all researchers until the issue was solved (Baumann et al. 2018).

## Results

The interpretative analysis identified three main themes: (1) circumstances and the journalists' motives behind reporting on suicides, (2) factors contributing to reactance toward media guidelines, and (3) strategies to avoid reactance.

### ***From Complete Avoidance to Undue Prominence: Circumstances Make the News***

When it comes to reporting on suicides, there are two diametrically opposed extremes: One extreme involves journalists never reporting on suicides. However, this is often counterproductive as it can be detrimental in terms of tabooing suicides, which harms those in need even more. On the other hand, some journalists report unduly prominently or luridly on suicides, which should be avoided in terms of eliciting a Werther effect. To handle this continuum and to avoid drifting into extremes is a challenge for journalists. In this process, the media guidelines are intended to provide assistance. Against this background, however, it is firstly crucial to examine how journalists access the act of reporting on suicides. Apparently, most journalists of our sample know that suicide reports do have an impact:

[It] is a point where a journalist actually interferes in another person's life. This can possibly be life-changing. That's why it's really important to think about it.<sup>1</sup>

However, the journalists' feelings of when to report on suicide are diverse, but at the same time, these feelings determine their demands for the RRS guidelines and seem to be the basis for all further reflections. This is because during the interviews, it became apparent that some journalists initially adopted some kind of defensive attitude by stating that "generally speaking, one does not report on suicide" as "it is now common practice not to report on it anymore." However, this statement is not meant to be unconditional:

I believe that we no longer report on "normal" suicides—and that has now prevailed throughout the newspaper [the journalist works at], even if there are individual cases in which we did so.



According to the journalists' prevalent opinion, these individual cases mainly arise if a suicide meets one of the following criteria: It is a celebrity suicide, the suicide was originally assumed to be a crime or that some sort of criminal activity was involved, the suicide has some effect on the wider public, or it exhibits particularly bizarre or spectacular suicidal features. Apart from the first point (a celebrity suicide is always "worth a story") and the involvement of crime, both of the other factors have a somewhat wider scope as journalists do interpret them differently. For example, an effect on the wider public can be extended suicides involving other people, suicides in public, or even rather anonymous rail suicides, as those affect the railway service. What is even more diffuse is the sensationalism factor—if a celebrity suicide is worth being placed on the front page, or what elements make a suicide rather bizarre and thus newsworthy are subject to the journalists' interpretation. In terms of circulation and competition, journalists do seem to feel a certain need to cover such suicide stories:

If you don't put something like that on the front page, but instead something rather unspectacular, this will get difficult, [as] you hinge on selling the newspaper and attracting attention.

But they also have a "journalistic sales impulse" and do feel some pressure to "find the balance between responsible reporting and the need for attention and circulation," often deriving from competition with other media and publishers, as one journalist sums up:

You are forced to work relatively quickly, you have to be up to date, you are in competition with other media. You always have to see what they do and wonder why you don't do it yourself. That's difficult.

In addition to this **economic pressure**, the journalists face time constraints and often have to balance many topics and articles at once. This is especially precarious in the online sector. Both factors result in a lack of time and resources for an elaborate confrontation with both the chances and risks of suicide reporting and the respective guidelines and advice. The results on the economic pressure in journalism are well in line with previous research (Weaver and Willnat 2012; Steindl, Lauerer, and Hanitzsch 2017); however, the current study is the first to link this economic pressure behind suicide stories to concrete statements from journalists themselves. Against this background of everyday challenges, the journalists in our sample see some problems in the media. First of all, some journalists state that they find it **difficult to reduce their attention on suicide articles**, especially those of celebrities, which seems to make matters worse:

[E]specially in celebrity reporting, there is a lot of competition going on: who got the message first, who spread it first, who gets the most clicks.

As the media guidelines and awareness materials do not explain why this is of great importance to prevent imitation suicides, journalists do not seem to realize the risks and tend instead to favor the competing-for-attention aspect rather than some advice from a guideline. According to the journalists in our sample, they face a major problem when it comes to reporting suicides: Addressing the RRS media guidelines is sometimes in conflict with internal guidelines of the editorial department or they are difficult to implement due to the economic pressure and its resulting working conditions. Furthermore, journalists are often dependent on the decisions of their superiors and sometimes have to deliver

work that may be against their actual intentions or beliefs as in most cases, the editor-in-chief/senior editor has the final say:

I have to do it the way my editor-in-chief wants me to—or I'll lose my job.

or

If you get an assignment to research and report this and that about a suicide, then do it. You don't need to come up with the argument that this is not ethically justifiable, or that you would like to handle it differently. Otherwise you will be advised to go get another job at another medium.

Although these are just two examples of two interviewees, it becomes clear that the editors and the editorial policy may well have some influence on how journalists are actually able to adhere to such guidelines which might be perceived as an intruder intervening in the habits and structures of the newsroom. A false consensus, pluralistic ignorance, and co-orientation in journalism may possibly reinforce this effect (Sallot, Cameron, and Weaver 1998). Thus, it is all the more important to consider the journalists' perceptions and needs.

In general, the journalists did agree on the awareness materials regarding the recommendations on heroization, and glorification, but they also felt the need for **further explication and examples** to better adapt this to their own writing and reports. The same applies for the advice not to pick out the suicide method or place as a central theme, which some of the journalists were unable to project onto their own habits. It seems as if it is important to better understand the circumstances of the journalists' work as well as their reporting intentions, motives, and urges *before* tailoring media guidelines and awareness materials on RRS to meet those needs.

### ***Avoiding Journalists' Reactance by Finding the Golden Mean***

Furthermore, most journalists come with an **active journalistic-role conception regarding maximum journalistic freedom and autonomy** that is frequently linked to the argument of the freedom of the press. Some feel patronized such that the media guidelines in general and the awareness materials in particular are seen as a restriction of this freedom, as "no journalist likes to be told what s/he has to do." This feeling is intensified when journalists get the impression that their work is criticized ("After ten years of experience [resulting from] everyday life I don't need guidelines telling me how to do my job." Or "If one knows how it [journalism] actually works, this [media guidelines] is outrageous.") or that they are made personally responsible for imitation suicides as a result of their suicide reports. This is especially the case, as many of them have a role conception that emphasizes their journalistic role as that of a spokesperson of the under-represented and as "moral agents who make value judgments according to their own sense of ethical responsibility" (Skovsgaard et al. 2013, 29):

To say that journalists can prevent suicides sounds like a great responsibility (...). This is a clear accusation.

Consequently, this will probably lead to a defensive reaction and **reactance** toward the guidelines and awareness materials (Brehm and Brehm 1981; Cho and Salmon 2007; Yaqub, Beam, and John 2017), which also arose as the guidelines were perceived as an

attack on the moral integrity of the journalists (“I don’t think the media need another moral authority” or “I believe that our moral roots have grown to such an extent that we do not actually need these recommendations.”). These impressions emerge particularly due to some of the wording in the awareness materials and media guidelines that includes, *inter alia*, it “should absolutely be avoided,” “at all costs,” to “journalists must,” or “journalists can actively cause or prevent suicides.” Furthermore, they make a point of the guidelines complying with **journalistic standards** such as clean language, which they felt disesteemed by the usage of passives (“this promotes non-transparency” and “conceals the source”) and the unvaried wording.

What the journalists in our sample criticized most in terms of the media guidelines and awareness materials was the **(perceived) lack of empathy for the journalists’ self-concept and working conditions** that is reflected in the stiffness and wording of the materials. Additionally, when it comes to designing such materials, there seems to be some tension between illustrating the importance and possible consequences of suicide reporting while simultaneously **not making the media professionals responsible** for further suicides. At the same time, the journalists attach great importance to an **appealing optic** (especially of the video awareness material; the “old-fashioned cutting” and the “predictable scenery” were criticized), to the provision of sources and background information on the RRS evidence, as well as to the expert presenting the media guidelines. All those aspects are critical when it comes to the journalists’ decision to deal with and adopt such guidelines and awareness materials—a decision which is usually made within a short time (RQ2).

### ***Avoiding Reactance: The (Professional) Ethos of a Journalist Should Not Be Challenged***

Previous research has already shown (Pirkis et al. 2006; Yaqub, Beam, and John 2017; Beam, John, and Yaqub 2018) what the current study confirms within the suicide domain: On the one hand, journalists seek support from the scientific research on such sensitive topics as suicide, but, on the other hand, they react rather dismissively to (perceived) restrictions at the same time. Even though most journalists do not want to be told how to do their job, many of them do wish for **assistance** when it comes to the sensitive topic of suicide, as they “do believe that such guidelines (...) are needed. Like a kind of guide” or an “assurance of what you should and what you should not do.” To account for this premise, RRS media guidelines and awareness materials should be communicated as recommendations or helpful handouts rather than as strict guidelines or rules they have to stick to. According to the journalists, the term “media guideline” seems to be rather unfavorable and should therefore be replaced by a softer term such as **recommendations or tips on reporting on suicide**. This is important as unfavorable wording can leave to unintended effects, such as reactance or boomerang (Cho and Salmon 2007). The same applies to terms such as “at all costs” and “journalists must,” which should be avoided. Instead, the importance of the RRS guidelines can be made clear by directly addressing the journalists and avoiding passive and infinitive constructions, as well as by naming the **sources** (e.g., the WHO and the research institution aiming to draft the respective awareness materials), which provides additional credibility. When designing such awareness materials, one should assure oneself that one is aware of the **journalists’ role and professional**

**ethos**, that one respects both and does not want to challenge them. This is closely related to the journalists' urge for background information and explication they expressed in the interviews in order to "show why this is relevant to journalists at all":

And, most importantly, you have to say why journalists should stick to it [the media guidelines], preferably at the very beginning. What are the consequences if they don't? Otherwise they wonder: "Why should I look at it and why should I take it to heart? Is this proved scientifically and why should I trust him [the expert displayed in the video]?"

Meeting this suggestion could probably contribute to the journalists' understanding of the importance of responsible reporting, ideally leading to less perceived limitations being placed on their journalistic freedom and a greater willingness to stick to the respective guidelines—hopefully, at the expense of attention, circulation, and clicks when it comes to choosing.

Furthermore, the journalists in our sample would prefer more examples and **concrete** regarding what information to include in their reports, as well as favorable wording, negative examples to see how not to do it, and positive ones they could directly apply to their own reporting on suicides:

[T]ake the editors by the hand and say: "So, look, this is how it is done and here you have the corresponding examples X, Y, and Z." To better show how to implement those [guidelines].

A summary at the end of both types of awareness materials as well as an "overview or checklist" of the most important points within the text version are recommended, so that journalists can simply tick off the individual tips when writing their suicide reports.

To meet the journalists' demands for an appealing and modern optic (especially for the video awareness material), there should be short and sharp cuts, a neutral background, and no video time should be wasted with unnecessary content such as watching the expert doing "expert things" or a long-winded introduction by the expert. Instead, the expert should merely be noted in a text format before immediately starting with the actual content. In addition, the very beginning of such awareness material seems to be crucial regarding whether one keeps watching or reading the awareness materials—just as journalists try to achieve it in their own work and reporting.

Altogether, it is crucial to find the balance between ensuring journalistic freedom and autonomy as well as a certain flexibility, yet providing a clear direction and specifications in terms of RRS tips (RQ3). In this process, it is important to reflect on the everyday challenges of a journalist and to keep them in mind when drafting such awareness materials. In this way, and by reflecting on the demands and needs of the journalists, one can build a bridge between research and practice. This has been shown to have a positive impact on the journalists' willingness to be open-minded regarding such awareness materials and their adherence to the respective media guidelines (Tatum, Canetto, and Slater 2010; Bohanna and Wang 2012), thus promoting RRS, which ideally results in suicide prevention. According to some of our sample's journalists, this could be further intensified by including a journalist in the video awareness material next to the scientific research expert.

## Discussion

The media are considered a key factor in suicide prevention and media guidelines have been developed and disseminated by suicide-prevention scholars and professional organizations

such as the WHO. Although there is evidence that the dissemination of these guidelines can increase responsible suicide reporting (Bohanna and Wang 2012), there are also studies showing mixed to negative results regarding the implementation of several of those recommendations (Tatum, Canetto, and Slater 2010; Fu, Chan, and Yip 2011). Previous research heavily relied on content analytic and observational approaches. Unfortunately, there has been a lack of knowledge on how journalists think about guidelines. The present study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the journalists' perceptions, motivations, and ability to stick to recommendations outlined in media guidelines. In fact, we aimed at identifying possible psychological barriers for adherence and how to overcome them.

As the findings show, many journalists do not seem to be aware of how often suicides—especially non-celebrity ones—do actually occur in their editorial routine, and hence, they do struggle with how to react and report properly according to the RRS guidelines, implying that these guidelines are not as salient as desired and required. In Germany, for example, there are no legally binding media guidelines that have been officially released by the German Press Council (Schäfer and Quiring 2013)—the institution in Germany journalists turn to regarding ethical questions—, except for a restraint order saying: “Reporting on suicide calls for restraint. This applies in particular to the publication of names and photographs and the description of the particular circumstances” (Guideline 8.7; German Press Council 2017). The German Society for Suicide Prevention has released some more detailed guidelines for reporting on suicide, however, they are neither binding nor are all German journalists even familiar to them (Nationales Suizidpräventionsprogramm 2006). However, detailed manuals, similar to those on copyright and how journalists can use unlicensed material (“fair use”) by Aufderheide and Jaszi (2018), are lacking. The allocation of RRS awareness materials to journalists is therefore reasonable as well as essential. For the awareness materials to be as effective as possible, it was crucial to explore the journalists' expectations, needs, and demands in terms of such.

The findings show that the journalists are not fully aware of the possible outcomes and consequences of their suicide reporting. They often report rather improvisantly on celebrity suicides or such with some kind of extraordinary detail. Both aspects should be handled sensitively in terms of the Werther and Papageno effects (Jamieson, Jamieson, and Romer 2003). What seems to be paramount is an economic mindset ensuring attention, circulation, and clicks. Therefore, advising journalists, for instance, to fully waive attention, especially regarding celebrity suicides, does not seem to be constructive, as it fully contradicts the economic principle as well as the journalists' function of informing the public. In addition, in terms of eliciting Papageno effects, not reporting on suicides seems to be rather unfavorable from the research's point of view, too. Instead, media guidelines and awareness materials should provide an acceptable and realizable alternative by focusing on explaining why certain aspects of suicide reporting are not favorable or even harmful, and by providing examples of what one could write and what one should not write (positive and negative examples) to both meet the economic challenges and report responsibly. Thereby, if concrete examples are provided and the need for journalistic freedom and autonomy is ensured, adherence should be promoted (Deci and Ryan 1993; Skovsgaard et al. 2013; Scherr and Baugut 2016). Preserving this (perceived) autonomy should be the spirit of such awareness materials, especially to reduce (or even avoid) reactance effects. In Germany, the journalists' understanding of their journalistic role conception is that of a neutral disseminator, which includes reporting things as they are

(Steindl, Lauerer, and Hanitzsch 2017). Due to this self-perception, it can be suggested that recommendations from the outside (here: the media guidelines) can be misinterpreted as an attempt to tell journalists how they should do their job—even though they have already committed themselves to the premise of neutral and balanced reporting. This, in turn, could elicit reactance and other unintended effects (see Cho and Salmon 2007). Workshops for journalists or interventions by experts (i.e., scholars and trained professionals) in the newsroom can help journalists to adhere to the media guidelines and contribute to a successful implementation (Scherr, Markiewitz, and Arendt 2019).

Suicides as well as reporting on suicides are worldwide phenomena. Although we analyzed the answers of only a small group (considering the rather global context) of journalists, we found implications that can (and should) be adopted on a general level. The main finding of our study is that the journalists in our sample attach great importance to their journalistic freedom and autonomy, and react dismissively when they feel this is threatened, which is not surprising, considering that the road to freedom of the press was long and hard fought for (Pickard 2015). These findings which are in line with previous research (Pirkis et al. 2006; Yaqub, Beam, and John 2017). This should be kept in mind when designing awareness materials. Examples and explanations, as well as considering the economic conditions of journalism, contribute to this, and increase the adherence to the respective media guidelines or awareness materials. To date, existing materials are often lacking this aspect.

Next to this maxim of journalistic autonomy, the journalists' comments on the design, optics, style, wording, and specific details of the particular recommendations discussed in this article are a well-grounded basis for future attempts to design awareness materials (on similar or maybe even different topics) for journalists or target groups with a similar need for autonomy. Interestingly and surprisingly, the journalists voiced preferences about the aesthetics of the way the guidelines were presented: To date, media guidelines and awareness materials mainly focus on the content, largely disregarding optical and formal factors, yet despite these aspects, they seem to be crucial for journalists in terms of them looking at the guidelines and materials, and considering them in their daily work.

Summarized, according to the journalists' perceptions, a compromise must be found: On the one hand, the media guidelines should be structured and communicated in a way that they provide the best possible basis for contributing to suicide prevention. On the other hand, they need to be drafted to be as compatible as possible with everyday journalistic challenges and the journalists' professional ethos and should consider journalistic freedom. Examples and a manual-like character of the guidelines help applying the tips and recommendations. In this process, attention should also be paid to the wording: It is advisable to talk about *recommendations* or *tips* rather than about *media guidelines*, as the journalists state that the latter implies some kind of constraint. In line with this, the specific recommendations should be phrased clearly and positively and as tips rather than as rules. In terms of language, journalistic standards should be considered to meet their demands on linguistic aesthetics.

### **Limitations**

The present study has several limitations. First, we cannot rule out a social-desirability bias although we hope to have broken through this pattern by careful enquiry. In addition,

interviewer effects could have occurred, but we tried to keep this factor rather small by adjusting the interview situation to the journalists' needs as far as possible.

Second, although our sample consists of 30 journalists, the data cannot be generalized. However, the data do have a certain amount of variety as the sample consists of a heterogeneous group of journalists. Nevertheless, we only interviewed journalists from Germany, limiting the results' generalizability. Furthermore, we can only depict the journalists' personal perceptions as we had no insight into the actual daily work of the journalists because we did not accompany them in their daily work. Thus, we cannot retrace the dynamics in the editorial environment (e.g., pressure from the editor-in-chief or a lack of time in certain situations).

Third, regarding the guidelines and awareness materials used as the basis for our interviews, we did not test if labeling them with different originators (e.g., the globally known WHO vs. national organizations such as the German Society for Suicide Prevention) would have had an effect on the credibility and trustworthiness, and on the journalists' willingness to adhere to them. A respective study could be useful to further investigate these mechanisms.

And fourth, the current study is designed to focus on media professionals from the non-fictional sector. Nonetheless, the Werther and Papageno effects also occur in fictitious media content, especially in the entertainment sector (Jamieson, Jamieson, and Romer 2003). This aspect should be considered in future research.

Finally, we did not explicitly *examine all of the sorts of stories in which suicide could have been mentioned*. "Risky coverage" (Heydendorff and Dreßing 2016) includes for example "suicide by a proxy", "self-crash murder-suicides" including "road traffic suicides", or even "suicides involving aircrafts". This is a limitation to our findings, especially with regard to the potentially stigmatizing and criminalizing effects of such news stories.

## Conclusion

Media guidelines have been developed to improve RRS and studies have found mixed results: Sometimes it appeared that adherence was high, yet under other circumstances, adherence appeared to be low. What was missing were well-designed awareness materials grabbing journalists' attention for the sensitive but likewise important topic of suicide as well as informing them on how to best report on suicides. Despite the limitations, we believe that the current study provides the basis for designing such awareness materials. Future awareness materials should consider the findings of this study.

## Note

1. If not stated otherwise, all quotes in the results sector are quotes from journalists of our sample.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Data availability statement

All data and materials used in this work can be obtained from the corresponding author upon request.

## ORCID

Sebastian Scherr  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4730-1575>

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