

Effectiveness of a Workshop Intervention on Responsible Reporting on Suicide Among Swiss Media Professionals

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Abstract. *Objective:* There is limited knowledge about the effects of a workshop intervention on responsible reporting on suicide (RRS) by media professionals. The study aimed to test how a workshop can shape reporting-relevant attitudes and beliefs among media professionals. *Method:* A pre–postintervention survey of Swiss media professionals ($N = 26$, 55.7% male, $M_{age} = 38.1$, $SD_{age} = 12.8$, all Swiss nationals) was conducted. All participants received the same intervention and survey questions. The analytical focus was on within-person changes caused by the workshop intervention. *Results:* Among media professionals, the workshop intervention increased perceived knowledge sufficiency about RRS, raised awareness that RRS can save lives, decreased insecurities related to RRS, and reduced the misperception that there are no clear recommendations about RRS. *Limitations:* Despite the missing randomization of workshop participants, the repeated measures design allows to speak to the short-term changes in RRS. *Conclusion:* An RRS workshop intervention has multifaceted positive effects on media professionals. The study found no evidence for unintended effects of the intervention.

On the basis of the wealth of empirical evidence related to the Werther and Papageno effect (see Reinemann & Scherr, 2011; Scherr, 2013, 2016; Scherr & Steinleitner, 2015), press councils, national suicide-prevention societies, and the World Health Organization (WHO) have continued to develop and update journalistic guidelines to assist journalists in reporting on suicides (Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, & Skehan, 2006; WHO, 2017). The implementation of media guidelines on suicide reporting has not been equally effective across countries (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Michel, Frey, Wyss, & Valach, 2000; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Skehan, Burns, & Hazell, 2009). Nonetheless, suicide reporting can (theoretically) be modified more easily than many other suicide risk factors (Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003).

The present study evaluates the impact of a workshop intervention on responsible reporting on suicide (RRS) regarding the individual malleability of knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of media professionals about suicide reporting. The study contributes to the literature on how media recommendations are perceived by media professionals, and how direct engagement with media recom-

mendations can change attitudes and beliefs about suicide reporting.

Effectiveness of Interventions on Responsible Suicide Reporting

Media guidelines on RRS recommend avoiding sensationalized, attention-grabbing, prominently recurring, and detailed media depictions of suicide that heroize, romanticize, or glorify suicides. RRS is key to prevent suicides using depictions of how to cope with a suicidal crisis and providing information about where to find help (see Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010). Additionally, responsible reports should actively debunk suicide myths and point to the comorbidity of suicide and mental illness. Scherr, Arendt, and Schäfer (2016) recently showed in an experimental setting that suicide reporting became more responsible after journalists were directly exposed to media guidelines presented as a text or a brief video clip, but it is crucial to understand how this works.

To the best of our knowledge, the often-suggested dialogue with the media about RRS has not been constantly

evaluated. One study (Frey, Michel, & Valach, 1997) analyzed the adherence to media guidelines of suicide news reports in Switzerland. The main findings were presented during a press conference and in personal conversations with Swiss journalists. However, their effects were not systematically evaluated. Similarly, a study in Germany (Schäfer, Althaus, Brosius, & Hegerl, 2006) intervened with journalists in the form of a press conference on suicide reporting and by submitting media guidelines to three local newsrooms. The suicide news in one of several media outlets later showed higher compliance with the guidelines. Moreover, there are some promising evaluations of direct strategies with the media from outside Europe as well (Skehan et al., 2009; Skehan, Greenhalgh, Hazell, & Pirkis, 2006).

Nevertheless, the discourse with journalists about media recommendations remains under-researched, despite the fact that this knowledge helps tailor messages about RRS to those who deal with suicides professionally and on a regular basis. Thus, we ask the following two research questions:

RQ1: Does a workshop about media recommendations on responsible suicide reporting increase beneficial beliefs about suicide news?

RQ2: Is there evidence for any unintended effect of a workshop on media recommendations regarding responsible suicide reporting?

Method

Procedure

To address the research questions, the Kanton Zürich Gesundheitsdirektion (health department) organized a 1-day workshop in Zurich, Switzerland, on September 8, 2017. The organization advertised the event among local media professionals. An initial questionnaire was handed out to the workshop participants to obtain a pre-measurement of their suicide-related beliefs (Table 1). The workshop itself included the same elements as the most recent recommendations about suicide reporting (WHO, 2017). After a presentation on how journalistic suicide news reports can contribute to suicide prevention within their legal and professional boundaries, and a plenary discussion, a second questionnaire with identical questions was completed by the same workshop participants as a post-measurement of their suicide-related beliefs.

Participants

A total of 26 media professionals working in the area of Zurich, Switzerland (55.7% male; $M_{age} = 38.1$ years, $SD_{age} = 12.8$; all Swiss nationals; 70.4% with college diploma) attended the workshop. Of the participants, 67.7% were full-time journalists, 11.1% in journalism training, and 7.4% working in corporate communication. Beyond professional reasons – 28.6% indicated having dealt with one or more suicide reports during the previous year – 14.8% also had an interest in local suicide prevention. A post hoc power analysis using G*Power 3.1 (*t* tests; difference between two dependent means [matched pairs]; one-tailed) determined the achieved power of this study with $\alpha = .05$, and an estimated effect size of 0.5, to be .798. Hence, this study can detect medium- to large-sized workshop effects; however, larger samples would be necessary to detect smaller attitudinal and behavioral changes.

Measures

The questionnaires consisted of two blocks. In the first block, participants were asked about their professional background and about the status of suicide reporting within their daily work. The second block focused on beliefs about suicide reporting. Only the second block was asked about in the postintervention survey. Pre- and postintervention answers for each participant were matched using an anonymous code. All items are described in Table 1, including their wording, and the means and standard deviations as measured before and after the workshop intervention. Owing to time constraints, we were not able to use multi-item scales.

Results

We observed substantial within-person differences regarding knowledge of and beliefs about suicide reporting before and after the intervention (see Table 1). Analyses show that the workshop increased perceived knowledge sufficiency (Items 1–2) and raised awareness that responsible reporting can save lives (Item 13). Workshop participation also decreased insecurities that media professionals perceive during their daily work when reporting on suicides (Item 3) and reduced perceptions that suicide reporting is a widely unknown area with a lack of true expertise (Item 5).

Importantly, regarding journalistic decision-making, the workshop intervention did not evoke unintended defensive reactions. It did not affect how media professionals

Table 1. Within-person effects of a workshop intervention about responsible suicide reporting for Swiss media professionals

	Preintervention		Postintervention		Intervention effect			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d_{repeated}</i>	95% CI
1. At this moment, I have sufficient knowledge about suicide reporting.	3.0	1.4	5.4	1.4	10.65	<.001	2.26	[+.67-, +3.84]
2. I feel that I could know much more about suicide reporting than I do at this moment.	6.1	1.3	4.1	1.8	5.05	<.001	-1.34	[-1.96, -.73]
3. In my daily job routines, I often feel insecure about how to report on suicides.	4.5	1.3	2.9	1.7	3.99	<.001	-1.06	[-1.70, -.43]
4. I know about recommendations on suicide reporting, but I usually prefer to ask a colleague if I am insecure.	3.6	1.9	2.8	1.8	1.93	.067	-.42	[-1.01, +.18]
5. I feel that nobody really knows what is truly important in suicide reporting.	4.7	1.6	3.3	1.7	3.92	<.001	-.83	[-1.43, -.22]
6. If there is doubt, it is best not to report on suicides at all.	5.0	1.7	5.2	1.9	.59	.564	.08	[-.48, +.65]
7. I believe that responsible suicide reports are important.	6.8	0.4	6.9	0.4	.00	1.000	.32	[-.23, +.88]
8. Responsible suicide reports are a good thing.	6.6	0.7	6.7	0.6	1.00	.327	.15	[-.40, +.71]
9. Responsible suicide reports are very desirable.	6.4	1.0	6.8	0.5	1.89	.071	.37	[-.19, +.93]
10. My colleagues think that responsible suicide reports are a good thing.	5.5	1.4	5.5	1.3	.59	.561	-.05	[-.62, +.51]
11. My colleagues think that responsible suicide reports are very desirable.	5.7	1.3	5.5	1.2	1.37	.186	-.21	[-.77, +.36]
12. Responsible suicide reports help some people.	5.9	1.2	6.6	0.7	2.08	.048	.39	[-.19, +.96]
13. Responsible suicide reports save lives.	5.4	1.2	6.4	0.7	4.03	<.001	.68	[+.10, +1.26]
14. I am free in my decision as to whether to follow the recommendations on suicide reporting or not.	4.4	2.2	4.3	2.3	.32	.750	-.05	[-.64, +.54]
15. My supervisors decide on how much I have to follow the recommendations on suicide reporting.	3.1	1.9	3.3	2.0	.96	.349	.13	[-.46, +.72]

Notes. Identical item wording in both the pre- and postworkshop questionnaire as depicted; answers ranged on a 7-point scale from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree.

T values based on within-person (paired samples) *t* tests; *p* values refer to this test.

d_{repeated} describes a more nuanced effect size for single-group pretest–posttest designs as suggested by Morris and DeShon (2002) including the 95% CI of the effect (based on 1,000 bootstrapping samples). The measure takes the individual correlation between the pre- and posttest into account.

perceived their own autonomy in covering suicides (Item 14), nor did it change the way in which they perceived their supervisors' decision-making authority regarding suicide coverage (Item 15).

At the same time, the workshop intervention had no effect on the motivation to ask a colleague whether media professionals felt insecure about how to cover a suicide story (Item 4). Moreover, the workshop intervention had no effect on media professionals' own beliefs of when not to report on suicides (Item 6), or on their attitudes toward RRS (Items 7–9, 12), nor did it change their perceptions of how their colleagues would think about suicides (Items 10–11).

Discussion

Our study shows that a local workshop intervention with media professionals elicited beneficial effects on RRS-related attitudes and beliefs. Furthermore, none of our assessments indicated unintended negative consequences. The workshop first introduced media guidelines in detail using specific reporting examples, and then discursively clarified aspects of the recommendations that were less clear.

Importantly, our workshop revealed new directions for suicide prevention. Only 30.4% of the workshop participants were confident that they could explain the Papageno effect to their colleagues, which reflects much unrealized preventive potential. Educating journalists about the beneficial effects of RRS remains a worthwhile suicide-prevention strategy. Our workshop intervention also reduced perceptions that suicide reporting suffers from a lack of knowledge and a lack of consensus about its effects, and should therefore be able to increase journalistic self-efficacy. Finally, we found no evidence that a newsroom intervention is seen as censorship or that it would impair the professional autonomy of journalists.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting our findings. First, our study was not randomized and had no control group. Randomized trials are needed in the future to rule out the influence of a variety of factors involved in a workshop intervention. With this concern in mind, we also wished for a larger total sample size of media professionals. However, media professionals are usually very limited in their availability for face-to-face settings. Early postal announce-

ments might help, but they may also raise the journalists' awareness about the topic and possibly increase social desirability in answers (e.g., indicating a high personal relevance of RRS), which has to be addressed methodologically, for instance, with over-claiming techniques (i.e., assessment of RRS knowledge with both true and false statements). Time restrictions also made us rely on primarily single-item measures. Most professionals had been sent to represent their media outlet instead of work. The accompanying workshop survey therefore was planned to be brief and clear. Future studies should use our multifaceted insights and explore them further with reliable multi-item constructs. Finally, the focus of the study was on the within-person malleability of knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about RRS – relevant predictors of future behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) – not on actual reporting practices. Apparently, attitudes (Items 8–9, Items 12–13) and norms regarding RRS (Items 10–11) were only partially influenced by a workshop intervention, whereas indicators for self-efficacy (Items 1–3, 5) were increased more coherently by the intervention. A workshop intervention may help participants to feel more empowered and confident when it comes to suicide reporting. Even if we cannot make any claims about the longevity of the observed changes, and how these will translate into suicide news reporting, our findings seem helpful for the design of such long-term behavioral studies, which are still scarce.

Conclusion

The study shows that a workshop intervention with media professionals can increase the knowledge and behavior-relevant attitudes about RRS, and therefore accompany the release of media recommendations. There was no indication of any unintended effects of the workshop. Invitations sent to local media (newsrooms) resulted in mostly single representatives for each media outlet, which might be indicative of further spread-the-word effects within newsrooms afterwards.

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