Suicide on TV: minimising the risk to vulnerable viewers

International media guidance should be strengthened, implemented, and enforced

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On 31 March Netflix released its series *13 Reasons Why*,[1] portraying the fictional death of 17 year old Hannah Baker, who records her story on tapes before her suicide. Each of the 13 episodes explores a reason for her suicide, emphasising Hannah's social environment as a causal factor. The series was dubbed into French, German, Italian, and Spanish, and concludes with the protagonist's explicit, graphic suicide. The series was widely viewed—there were over 11 million related tweets within three weeks of release.[2]

The programme sparked immediate criticism from mental health organisations. In particular, the depiction of Hannah's death was deemed to violate media guidelines for suicide reporting,[3] and concerns were raised that the series could trigger self harm among vulnerable viewers by romanticising suicide and portraying it as the only option to cope with negative experiences.[4 5] Organisations including the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention[6] and Suicide Awareness and Voices of Education[7] provided resources to help parents, schools, and community leaders discuss the series with adolescents.

News media, including the *New York Times*, reported anecdotal evidence that the series triggered "imitative" behaviours among high school students—for example, girls cutting their hair, painting their nails blue, or recording similar tapes.[8] A recent study found that Google searches for suicide—a potential marker of suicidal ideation—increased after the series' release.[9] So far, however, no studies about actual increases in self harm rates have been published.

Concerns have been expressed about similarities with a German television programme, *Tod eines Schülers* (Death of a Student), broadcast in the 1980s.[10] This series showed the fictional railway suicide of a 19 year old man. Similar to the Netflix series, it focused on the protagonist's social environment as the main causal factor in his death. The broadcast was followed by a statistically significant increase in railway suicides among boys and men aged 15-29 in Germany—from 33 cases in control years to 62 cases in the 70 days during and after the first broadcast. A re-run of the series a year later was followed by a weaker, statistically non-significant increase in railway suicides among young men.[10]

Although we cannot infer causality from this study, the identified associations are consistent with a potential Werther effect, which describes media-induced increases in self harm.[4] Subsequent studies of both fictional and non-fictional media strengthened the evidence base further,[11 12] and the World Health Organization published an official recommendation for responsible, deglamorised media reporting in 2005.[13]

The death by suicide of Linkin Park singer Chester Bennington in July was another potentially harmful media event that prompted mental health organisations to distribute guidance for the media on the responsible reporting of deaths by suicide.[14] A widely reported internet challenge known as the blue whale game is also causing concern. Typically adolescent players are given "assignments" that can reportedly escalate to self harm, even suicide.[15 16] Clinicians need to be aware of heightened media attention to adolescent suicide, and ask vulnerable young patients about possible exposure so that potentially harmful effects can be minimised.

The entertainment and news industries also need to be aware that a subset of young people may be adversely affected by irresponsible reporting or depictions of suicide, although recent research shows that the effects of suicide-related films vary considerably depending on the content.[17]

In one study, a movie portraying suicide as the only option to cope with severe distress increased suicidality in some audience members.[17] The same study suggested, however, that a film depicting someone overcoming and surviving a suicidal crisis could increase resilience in audience members.[17] The protective

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potential of narratives that feature ways of coping with adversities, suicidal thoughts, and suicide has been described as the Papageno effect, and has been supported in several studies.[18-20]

At a policy level, there is a need for wider implementation of international guidelines, better reinforcement by monitoring agencies, and training for some parts of the entertainment industry.[3 13] An updated version of the international media recommendations[3] is scheduled for publication later this year. The new version will emphasise the protective potential of narratives that highlight ways of coping with suicide and suicidal thoughts. Specific safety standards for broadcast material about suicide are also needed. Standards could include the independent pre-testing of a series,[17 19] alongside consultations with suicide prevention experts, people with experience of suicidality, and those who have lost someone to suicide.

The producers of *13 Reasons Why* recently announced a second season to be released in 2018.[2] Professional organisations remain concerned about harmful effects, citing anecdotal reports of "suicidal crises and even suicides" linked to the first series.[21]

A broad collaborative effort—that includes young people, family members, schools, health professionals and policy makers—is now needed in order to minimise the risk of self harm. High profile discussions between the producers of *13 Reasons Why* and suicide prevention experts would give considerable leverage to all of these efforts.

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