Why Do We Report Suicides and How Can We Facilitate Suicide Prevention Efforts?:

Perspectives of Hong Kong Media Professionals

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Abstract

Background—The Hong Kong news media report suicide-related events more frequently and sensationally than Western countries. Little is known about Hong Kong media professionals' experiences and thoughts about such reporting.

Aims—To understand Hong Kong media professionals' experiences and perceptions of suicide reporting and whether the news media can be better engaged into suicide prevention.

Method—We conducted three focus groups of journalists from both the Cantonese and English language news media. Data were analyzed using grounded theory methods.

Results—We discerned three rationales from participants regarding their intense coverage of suicide-related events: (1) satisfying commercial competitiveness, (2) addressing social problems, and (3) responding to readers' interests. The first rationale was a dominant and vigorous motivating factor, and often influenced suicide reporting among local Cantonese media. Media professionals recommended engagement strategies targeted at frontline journalists, media managers, and general media consumers.

Conclusion—We see potential to involve news media professionals in Hong Kong as working partners in suicide prevention. To succeed, this effort requires engagement in a proactive, consistent, and sustained fashion.

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Mass media plays a powerful role in disseminating information, and it has been shown to influence attitudes and change behaviors of individuals and of communities (Cook et al., 1983; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Weaver, 2007). The topics of suicide and suicide prevention are no exception.

On the basis of previous research, we understand at least three reasons to endorse a potential role for news media in influencing suicide prevention efforts. First, ecological studies have demonstrated that prominent reporting of suicide, especially celebrity suicide, has been associated with a subsequent short-term increase of suicide rates, especially among youth or depressed people (e.g., Bollen & Phillips, 1982; Cheng, Hawton, Lee, & Chen, 2007; Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2012; Pirkis, Burgess, Francis, Blood, & Jolley, 2006; Yip et al., 2006). Second, several studies have shown that reductions in the reporting of suicides and an improvement in reporting quality were associated with decreased general suicide rates or with rates related to specific methods (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007). Lastly, several authors have described suicide attempters who reflected that their suicidal behaviors or choice of a specific method had been influenced by media reports (Cheng, Hawton, Chen, et al., 2007; Tsai et al., 2011). These findings suggest that collaborating with the mass media and promoting responsible reporting of suicide may offer another population-level tool among the available approaches for preventing suicide (Mann et al., 2005).

However, there are still several gaps in knowledge and controversies related to media reporting and suicide. There have been inconsistent findings of the media's influence on copycat suicides; while some studies have shown increased suicides following lurid reports, others have not (e.g., Cheng, Chen, & Yip, 2011; Hamilton, Metcalfe, & Gunnell, 2011; Hittner, 2005; Stack, 2005; Wasserman, Stack, & Reeves, 1994), including some celebrity suicides (e.g., Fu & Chan, 2013; Queinec et al., 2011). Most studies in the field have focused on the adverse impact from suicide news reporting, which may reflect a selection bias for examining readily noted events; nonetheless, a few have found that some types of news content have been associated with either no change in suicide rates or with a decrease (e.g., Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Phillips, Carstensen, & Paight, 1989). And, efforts to implement media guidelines in different countries or regions have been inconsistent in their impact – inviting more studies to discern factors contributing to apparent differences (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Fu & Yip, 2008; Michel, Frey, Wyss, & Valach, 2000; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Pirkis et al., 2006). Interviews with journalists have shown that some media professionals were not aware of or hold skeptical attitudes toward the copycat effect stemming from the media and media guidelines (Collings & Kemp, 2010; Jamieson, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003; Pirkis, 2010; Tully & Elsaka, 2004).

In the context of these issues, the present study sought to add new perspectives by exploring systematically Hong Kong (HK) media professionals' experiences and thoughts concerning suicide news reporting. Previous studies have shown that HK print media report suicides frequently and sensationally (Cheng & Yip, 2012; Fu, Chan, & Yip, 2011; Fu & Yip, 2008), with over one in three suicides reported in local newspapers (Au, Yip, Chan, & Law, 2004; Cheng & Yip, 2012), a rate far in excess of that in Australia (1%) and Austria (3.9%; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009; Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis, 2007). Although the

World Health Organization (WHO) media guidelines were introduced to the HK press in 2004, our group found that there was subsequently poor adherence to these suggested standards (Fu, Chan, & Yip, 2011; Fu & Yip, 2008), which contrasts with the impact of similar guidelines following their introduction in Austria and Australia (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Pirkis et al., 2009). Such differences invite close scrutiny of the experiences and perspectives of HK media professionals, especially whether there is any potential to actively engage both them and their organizations in future suicide prevention activities.

The present study had two objectives: (1) to understand HHK media professionals' experiences and perceptions of suicide reporting; and (2) to collect their suggestions on how the media can be better engaged in suicide prevention.

Method

This study used the focus group methodology (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Liamputtong, 2011). Formal invitations of participation were sent to the official email addresses of 18 major news media organizations in HK, including seven newspapers, four news magazines, three television stations, two radio stations, two news portal websites, and two journalism-related associations. It was addressed in the invitation that participants should be media professionals who had previously covered suicide-related news or commentaries. The recruitment process stopped when the pool of participants was sufficient to cover a variety of media outlets, languages, and various positions in the newsroom or organization (details in Table 1). When we were not able to recruit any participant from a certain group within 1 month after sending invitations, we contacted key personnel within the media industry, such as executive of-ficers of media outlets and veteran journalists, to facilitate recruiting. We contacted 51 individuals, of whom 24 were recruited to join three focus groups in July 2012 (see Table 1 for profiles).

Eighteen Cantonese (the local dialect in HK) media participants were randomly assigned to two Cantonese-speaking groups (cited as C1–C18). The remaining six participants, either local English media journalists or correspondents of foreign media in HK, were assigned to one English-speaking group (cited as E1–E6). Three authors of this paper moderated the groups and adopted the same research protocol and questions approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Faculties at the University of Hong Kong. Before starting each focus group, all participants signed written consent forms to confirm that their data could be anonymously used in scientific papers and reports.

All group discussions focused on our two research objectives. The moderators were trained to be nonjudg-mental with the media's practices and possible effects, but to encourage participants to freely express their own thoughts. The discussions were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim into Chinese or English, according to the original language used. All the participants' personal information was de-identified during the transcription.

We used the grounded theory method to analyze the data (Addison, 1999; Birkis & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006). The first author conducted the coding and content analysis while

holding intensive discussion with the coauthors until reaching agreement. The original Chinese quotations were translated into English by the first author and then back-translated by a native English speaker fluent in Chinese.

Results

Our results are reported in two parts, corresponding to our two research aims. In the first part, we extract and conceptualize three rationales on why HK media cover suicide stories. In addition, we analyze differences between local Cantonese and English media under each rationale. The second part summarizes the participants' suggestions for engaging the media in suicide prevention, which also correspond to the three rationales.

Issue 1: Understanding HK Journalists' Experiences and Perceptions of Suicide News Reporting

Participants were asked, "What do you think about the suicide news reporting in HK?" They commonly described the reporting as sensational, especially in print media. Most reflected that they had learned either in journalism school or at work that news of suicides, especially among elders or people suffering from illness, should be reported with caution in order to avoid possible copycat effects. Some also knew the availability of media guidelines for suicide news reporting. However, some participants questioned the extent to which so-called copycat suicides could be causally attributed to media reports. Moreover, almost all of the participants commented that the currently promulgated media guidelines are not feasible in HK.

They provided several additional explanations of media sensationalism, which served as the basis for the three major rationales. While group participants described the three rationales as distinctive, our analyses suggested that the first informed the other two.

Rationale 1: Satisfying Commercial Competitiveness

Participants commonly referred to competitive pressures to justify their style of news reporting. They perceived competition within the HK media industry to be "extreme," sometimes "irrational," and considered it as a feature of the "media ecology" in HK. Participants perceived pressures to produce high volumes of news output with limited time and manpower. They observed high turnover rates among journalists in HK and that such rapid turnover directly affected the quality of reporting. According to participants, frontline reporters in HK often are young, recent university graduates, employed in their first post-graduation job, and paid less than their colleagues in other professions, such as social work and nursing. This is consistent with the findings of a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Journalists Association (Mak, 2011). Those with as little as 5 years of experience may already serve as senior reporters or subeditors – roles of significant responsibility, even as the salary still remains low in comparison to similar supervisory roles in professions such as nursing or education.

Several participants noted that photos of bloodied or dead bodies are no longer printed in tabloid-style newspapers, but instead appear on their related online news websites. They further explained that their counterpart websites frequently hired reporters and editors with

even less experience than their tabloid peers, further compounding a dearth of understanding regarding journalism ethics or appreciation of the potential for adverse public impact of graphic material.

Participants regarded the acceptance of the competitive media ecology as a precondition for working in HK media companies, even as it may have conflicted with their own values and professional judgment or with practice guidelines recommended by other organizations. Their compliance, of course, served to reinforce the perceived values and rigidity of the organization. For example, a participant who had reported for a local Cantonese media organization, but now works at an English media outlet, stated the following:

> My experience is that, especially in Chinese societies, a lot of people went to journalism school because they wanted to help society… But in the end, when you really work at a media organization, you just work for the sake of working. If you try to be that [working-for-the-society] type of reporter, your road will be very bumpy. (E3)

Rationale 2: Addressing Social Problems

Participants in the Cantonese groups opined that selected suicides should be reported because they reflect societal or social problems, such as family and workplace abuse or violence, social policy flaws, and various other external factors. This explanation is related to their beliefs that the media should serve as a societal watchdog.

One local television reporter provided an example that his news program reported a railway suicide of a mentally challenged person because they "wanted to criticize the railway company. Why didn't they make sure the platform was safe? Why couldn't they stop people from jumping onto the tracks?" (C8). In addition, several participants suggested that specific social problems particularly warranted reporting of suicide-related news stories, such as adverse living conditions, the huge income and opportunities gap separating poor and rich persons, and mistrust between the media and the HK government. These reporters asserted that suicide reporting served to urge local authorities to advance their policies and services.

However well-meant their intentions, journalists' perceptions that suicides may at times be attributable to specific external factors led some to oversimplify suicide stories. For example, one participant working at a popular Cantonese newspaper introduced his experience when covering a female student's suicide. He strongly believed, "a girl with a bright future would not kill herself unless she encountered some social problems" (C3). Therefore, when he heard from the girl's parents that she had attended a university orientation camp before killing herself, he immediately speculated that there was a connection between the two events, and sought to investigate what had happened at the orientation camp. While he could not ascertain information to confirm a causal connection, his editor nonetheless titled the article, "Orientation camp killed a female freshman," to give a sensational edge to the published piece.

Members in the English language group differed from their Cantonese colleagues; not all of them considered a social change agenda as a rationale for reporting about individual deaths. One foreign media correspondent indicated that some suicides, such as the string of migrant

workers' suicides at Foxconn (background details in Cheng, Chen, & Yip, 2011), may reflect social problems in China and therefore should be reported. However, another participant critically suggested that attributing suicides to social problems will "victimize" those who killed themselves as well as justify their deeds.

> I found when reporting suicide, they tend to… victimize [the deceased or attempter]. The major thing they do is to make the person sound like a hero or like, say, if a student committed suicide, that student must be a very good student, he did his best at school, he was well behaved, etc. They were so great, but the society, school, or parents were not doing the right thing, that's why they ended their lives with suicide… The problem is we are not sure if that was the real situation. (E3)

These views were complemented by the perspective of another correspondent from an international media outlet who said that the idea of reporting suicides to address social problems had never crossed her mind, whereas recommendations to avoid suicide-related reporting were deeply embedded:

> I'm quite surprised to see HK [media] cover so many suicide stories… I used to be a reporter in Vancouver… We often heard a lot of suicide stories in police stations, but never reported a word…it has been a norm for more than a decade because of two reasons: One is confidentiality, and the other is the prevention of copycats. They don't want copycats, of any kind, at all. (E4)

Rationale 3: Responding to Readers' Interests

To describe "readers' interests," participants used terms such as "newsworthy" and "curiosity." Participants suggested that the range of "readers' interests" has tended to grow ever wider when comparing traditional electronic media (television and radio) with newspapers and now online news media.

We separated "readers' interest" from "commercial competitiveness" because they were described and perceived by participants as distinct rationales, although we noted them to encroach upon one another. Participants described "readers' interests" as being interchangeable with "news values," which they assessed with their own professional judgment regarding audience preferences. On the contrary, they asserted that concerns about "commercial competitiveness" arose explicitly through pressure from their managers or bosses, which in fact violated their professional autonomy.

Fulfilling the interests of their readers was promoted in itself as a sufficient rationale for reporting specific suicides; for example, the deaths of entertainment celebrities or notable public figures, which both Cantonese and English language media consider as newsworthy. Therefore, they shared a major concern with the suggestion included in media guidelines that reports of celebrity suicide should be restrained in their coverage and tone. A senior journalist and executive manager of a radio station told us of her experience covering the suicide of a Chinese entertainment icon, Leslie Chang, who killed himself in 2003 by jumping from a hotel in downtown HK:

> [When I heard that he just jumped from a hotel] my question was why Leslie Cheung would commit suicide. He had fame, money, a big house, and a boyfriend.

> Why? I really wanted to know why. This is human nature. I don't think this is sensational… I'm a normal person, not a violent or sensational person. If I already feel curious, my audience must also want to know more about it. (C7)

Cantonese group members also considered some non-celebrity suicides as newsworthy because they involved dramatic or unusual stories, including wealthy people, students, or professionals (e.g., teachers, doctors, nurses, etc.). By contrast, the English group participants did not mention these types of suicides as newsworthy.

While participants expressed a strongly held view that "readers' interests" represent audience preferences, they candidly reflected that their media organizations seldom invited representative readers to attend focus groups or provide feedback, and often ignored complaints from readers regarding the sensational nature of their reporting. Thus, it was ultimately impossible to reliably or precisely disentangle reporters' views of readers' interests from how they might have understood the wishes of their immediate supervisors or business owners.

Issue 2: Can the Media Facilitate Suicide Prevention Efforts?

Participants were invited by moderators to propose ways by which the media and the suicide prevention community could work together to prevent suicide and mitigate its antecedent risks in HK. First, they asked researchers to provide more evidence to clarify the media's potential role. They indicated that they would more likely accept the media's deleterious impact on copycat suicides if more studies demonstrated associated changes in suicide rates following not only increased but also decreased reporting of suicides. They also suggested specific strategies to engage media professionals and consumers. These can be categorized into three major points, corresponding to the three rationales offered for media interest in suicide-related stories.

Engaging Media Managers

After acknowledging the almost irresistible pressure of commercial competition (i.e., Rationale 1), some participants suggested that changes in the style of reporting suicides could only stem from a top–down approach. Therefore, they suggested that suicide prevention organizations and professionals should primarily engage middle- or high-level media managers as their target group(s).

Specifically, they suggested middle-level managers, such as copyeditors and reporters-in-chief, are the key personnel to be engaged, especially since high-level managers or media owners seldom micromanage newsrooms except when such actions relate to political or corporate interests. Therefore, participants suggested that these managers should be proactively and repeatedly contacted regarding general principles of responsible news reporting.

Engaging Frontline Journalists

Several participants emphasized that it is the frontline journalists who report suicide news. Their view was that changes in suicide reporting would occur from the bottom– up through frontline journalists. They indicated that many individual journalists still hold a sense of

social responsibility (i.e., Rationale 2) and are willing to accept suggestions to improve their reporting quality. They emphasized that the turnover rates in frontline journalist positions are very high, so engagement would have to be repetitive and sustainable.

Specifically, they suggested that: (1) contact information of suicide prevention organizations and professionals be properly maintained, updated, and easily accessed; (2) activities be organized to allow suicide survivors, which often refer to the kin of suicide victims but can also include those who have survived their own attempts, to share their experiences with journalists, which participants believed might encourage journalists to be more aware of how their reports potentially influence survivors' lives; (3) research findings detailing the negative consequences of using some suicide methods, such as neuropsychological damage or disfigurement, should be delivered to journalists (although more research needs to be conducted to examine whether distributing this kind of information to the public discourages individuals from suicide); and (4) participants working at online news media should urge suicide prevention organizations to develop guidelines for properly handling suicide-related information online.

Engaging Media Consumers

Some participants also suggested engaging the readers or audience. They argued that readers should be able to critically read news and indicated that if readers express clear disfavor with sensational suicide news, media managers would have to change reporting styles to satisfy consumers (i.e., Rationale 3).

To engage the readers/audience, they proposed that media literacy education should be provided through schools and parents. In addition, one participant suggested that local Cantonese media should learn from Western media and invite representative readers to attend focus groups or preview the news and provide feedback. This participant expected readers' voices to remind media professionals where the real readers' interests lie.

Discussion

HK is a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. It had been a British colony for more than a century before it was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Most HK print and broadcast media were established before the handover and were influenced by Western media culture as well as local Cantonese culture (Chan, Lee, & Lee, 1996; Lo & Chan, 2004). In this context, we expect the study of HK can benefit both Western and Eastern societies.

Collectively, the participants of the present study described local suicide-related news reporting as sensational and problematic, for which they offered three general explanations, which we have termed "rationales." It was notable that they presented these explanations as distinctive, where our assessment of the group themes pointed to the intertwined nature of the rationales. Seeking a competitive advantage in reporting, in our view, informs and infuses explanations that relate to social needs and topical interests of readers. This was particularly evident when discussing celebrity suicides, which were strongly affirmed as newsworthy by our participants, confirming findings from other studies (e.g., Jamieson et

al., 2003; Pirkis et al., 2007). As commercial enterprises, one would expect that the latter two ultimately support efforts to gain an "edge" on competitors. It is just such deaths that apparently have the greatest effects on subsequent suicide rates and individual suicidal behaviors (Cheng, Hawton, Chen, et al., 2007; Cheng, Hawton, Lee, & Chen, 2007; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2012).

At the same time, participants emphasized that if properly cast, there are natural areas of convergence for media and prevention advocates.

Media Professionals' Concerns With Suicide Research

Further research is an essential first step for engaging media professionals, given the substantial uncertainties that remain to be addressed. Research questions generated from the focus groups included:

- When suicide rates increase following the deaths of celebrities or local notables, how much of any increase may be causally attributed to the media coverage?

- When controlling for confounders, does a decrease in suicide reporting lead to a decrease in suicide rates in HK? Is this broadly applicable or specific to local factors?

- Will reporting of the damaging consequences of specific suicide methods experienced by those who survive attempts (e.g., persisting brain injury due to anoxia; facial disfigurement from chemicals or burns) diminish or discourage the use of those methods? Or will it lead to using other more lethal means (e.g., jumping from heights, firearms)?

- Will the discussions involving suicide survivors and journalists lead to more responsible reporting?

- Do media efforts, arising from suicides, lead to changes in cultural norms and social policies? Are there any examples to date?

Without answers to these questions (e.g., Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Yip, Kowk, Chen, Xu, & Chen, 2013), it is less likely that media professionals will feel compelled to change their reporting behaviors. Moreover, the questions serve as a framework for exploring many of the previously defined gaps in our collective knowledge.

General Media Ecology

Certainly HK is not alone in struggling to determine how to best consider serious challenges to reporting standards and journalism ethics (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006). One example has been the News International phone-hacking scandal in the UK, where the parliamentary inquiry into the culture, practices, and ethics of the press found that British newspapers had recklessly pursued sensational news. The final report indicated that deeply ingrained practices could not be changed without comprehensive strategies, such as policies, legislation, self-regulation, and third-party monitoring (The National Archives, 2012). Building upon the Leveson Inquiry, we need to broaden our perspectives and consider the

reporting of suicide and similar violence-related news in the context of the general media ecology.

Our findings show that radio and television stations in HK, as in many other countries, work under stricter ethical regulations to maintain their licenses. They, in turn, report suicide news much less sensationally than newspapers and news websites do. Moreover, English language media that generally target readers with higher education levels use less sensational methods for reporting the news. Both point to the possibility that there can be a balance that promotes a safer style of communication without compromising free speech principles.

Addressing Societal Problems

The rationale of reporting suicide to address social problems is consistent with interviews with journalists in New Zealand by Collings and Kemp (2010), who identified "promoting the public good" as one of the expressed motivations for reporting suicides. This rationale suggests that media professionals are concerned with individual suicides as potentially reflecting broader societal problems, which would conform with a public health approach to prevention efforts (Caine, 2013; Hoven, Mandell, & Bertolote, 2010).

While exposing society's ills may have transcendent value for some journalists, it also may serve as a convenient excuse for stereotyping and oversimplifying unique life tragedies. These tendencies may arise from common perceptions noted in Chinese and other Asian societies, where suicides have often been attributed to social problems (Chen, Wu, Yousuf, & Yip, 2012; Wu, 2011; Yip, Liu, Hu, & Song, 2005), although similar processes of oversimplification and scapegoating have been detected in American media (Gould, 2001). These framing angles make suicide appear as a suitable alternative for suffering in the face of intractable social forces (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003; Hawton & Williams, 2002). Thus, public health-minded journalists need to be reminded of how best to describe unjust or inequitable social adversities or to convey important messages of conscience without incurring negative unintended consequences.

Collaborative Example of Prevention-Minded Media

Following completion of our focus groups, two people killed themselves using helium gas, a novel method for HK. Authors working in HK observed that several news websites both reported the deaths and included animated videos vividly showing the suicide method – in essence, a "how-to" video presentation for killing oneself. Mindful of the past impact of detailed diagrams presented during the late-1990s in local tabloids of how to implement charcoal burning suicide, which apparently had served to stoke the rapid rise of a previously unused method (Yip et al., 2006), we contacted several participants from our focus groups, who put us in touch with the pertinent chief editors. All of the editors appeared to be apologetic and removed the animated videos from their websites. Moreover, a collaborative and universal process of "de-sensationalizing" the coverage did not adversely affect anyone's competitive situation.

Conclusion

Our study was limited in several aspects. Our focus group discussions included a small sample, cautioning against over-generalization. The focus group method lends itself to members overtly or implicitly influencing each other, leading to a selective or setting-specific biased expression of opinions. Nonetheless, the study provided a direct forum for hearing about the experiences and thoughts of HK media professionals. Participants came from diverse outlets and positions, serving to complement one another and helping to provide a more representative picture.

While there are strong competitive forces that will pose barriers to any effort to develop prevention initiatives, we found a nearly universal willingness among frontline reporters and managers alike to consider novel approaches to conveying important news without jeopardizing safety or public health. At the same time, it was readily evident that no program will be effective without broad support and implementation from news practitioners – a collaborative "disarmament agreement" that does not adversely affect any outlet's competitive position. But this will not be feasible without offering further scientific evidence that such efforts can save lives.

In sum, the results of the present study suggested that media professionals were willing to serve as important working partners for suicide prevention. Like many partnerships or cooperative efforts, all members of the group need to know that their interests will be well protected and that the steps to be followed will make measurable differences in peoples' lives.

Acknowledgments

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Table 1

Description of participants

Participants' profiles	Number (N = 24)
Media languages	
Cantonese	18
English	6
Media outlets	
Print	15
TV	5
Radio	2
Online	1
Journalism-related NGO	1
Positions	
Reporter	14
Chief reporter	3
Editor (including radio program host)	3
Chief editor (including director of radio station)	2
Executive	1
Columnist	1