

Briefing note on the reporting of suicide – March 2009

Suicide: a sensitive issue

Suicide has always been covered by the Code's rules on intrusion into grief, stressing the need for sympathy and discretion and sensitivity in publication. But there is a dimension to reporting suicide that sets it apart from other tragedies: the inherent risk of 'social contagion'.

Research has demonstrated that media portrayals of suicide—as in news reports or fictional TV or films—can influence suicidal behaviour and lead to multiple imitative acts, particularly among the young. Instances of self poisoning increased by 17% in the week after it was featured in a TV drama.

In 2006, faced with real evidence that over-explicit reporting could lead to copycat cases, the Code Committee introduced a new sub-clause: When reporting suicide, care should take to avoid excessive detail of the method used. So editors face a twin test: they must both publish with sensitivity and avoid excessive detail. (See Page 38 of the Editors' Codebook)

The Bridgend experience

A series of more than 20 suicides of young people in and around Bridgend in South Wales thrust all this into the spotlight. Some politicians, police and parents blamed media speculation about possible links between the deaths for possibly triggering later cases.

A PCC survey revealed a complex web of public anxieties in Bridgend that often went far beyond the scope of press self-regulation, embracing concerns about broadcasters and foreign media, and sometimes involving wider societal issues. These apart, the picture that emerged was less a case of repeated individual breaches of the Code, than a cumulative jigsaw effect of collective media activity, which became a problem only when the individual pieces were put together.

While the Code covered many public concerns, it was clear that others might be more appropriately—and effectively—addressed not by over-prescriptive rules but by editors modifying their activities voluntarily.

Important areas of public concern where the Code already applies include:

- **Graphic images** illustrating suicide methods were often upsetting to relatives and friends. Under the Code, such images would normally have to pass the 'excessive detail' test.
- **The cumulative effect** of repeated media inquiries to family members also caused unintended distress. Here, too, the PCC can help by passing on 'desist' messages via its arrangements for handling media scrums.
- **Glorification of suicide:** Stories presented in a way likely to romanticize suicide could have a serious influence, especially on vulnerable young people.

But, within the spirit of the Code, most coverage of this sort would again risk breaching the 'excessive detail' rule.

Possible areas where editors might voluntarily mitigate the effects of legitimate publicity include:

- **Helpline numbers:** When reporting the Bridgend deaths, many newspapers voluntarily published contact details of charities that work with people with suicidal feelings. This was widely welcomed as directing those most at risk— especially vulnerable young people—into the arms of those who could offer them most help.
- **Republication of photographs:** Each new death often prompted reprinting of images of others who had taken their own life, adding to families' distress. Sometimes it might be necessary, others not.
- **Publications of photographs without family consent:** Using pictures supplied by friends or from social networking sites, without the close family's consent, can cause unintentional distress.

There can be no hard rules in such subjective areas. These and similar measures can only be discretionary. But the lessons of Bridgend are that, by bearing them in mind, editors faced with difficult judgments at critical times could avoid causing unintended offence or exposure to accusations of insensitivity.

[**NB.** This note is taken from The Editors' Codebook (2nd Edition, March 2009) and is not – unlike the other notes in this section – guidance from the PCC itself.]