

# RELATE INSIGHTS

## What is the role of the Media in reporting suicides?

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## What is the role of the Media in reporting suicides?

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### Highlights

- In 2019, there were 5 suicides a day
- Stories about suicide are correlated with increase in copycat suicides
- Media can play an important role to reverse trend of suicide rates.
- Guidelines for reporting suicide have been created for the above reasons.

### Executive Summary

The media in Malaysia play an important role in reflecting the realities and challenges of society, and a free press is fundamental within a functioning, healthy democracy. Media outlets and publications wield significant influence over the public and therefore have a responsibility toward fair reporting on sensitive topics such as suicide, free from sensationalism or glamourising stories. Clear media guidelines on ethical reporting of suicide are needed not only to ensure fair reporting, but also to educate and inform the public on suicide prevention and how to get help when needed. In reversing the trend of suicide rates, the media has a crucial role to play through ensuring people are empowered rather than harmed by the news they consume.

## Does freedom of expression trump responsibility of influence?

In March 2017, Netflix released *13 Reasons Why* – a teen drama that follows the stories of high school students in the aftermath of a suicide.

The four seasons-long show aired its final episode in June 2020, coming under heavy criticism in part for “romanticising suicide”, and including a graphic suicide scene involving the show’s central character, Hannah Baker.

While the show’s writer intended the show to raise awareness of suicidality and encourage people to seek help, a 2017 study<sup>1</sup> found an increase of 900,000 to 1.5 million searches on suicide – a 19 per cent increase than usual – just two weeks after the show’s premiere.

Searches for the phrase “how to commit suicide” were 26 per cent higher than usual, and the phrase “commit suicide” saw a 19 per cent increase in searches.

The study also highlighted an increase in the phrases “suicide hotline number” (21 per cent) and “suicide prevention” (23 per cent), although researchers had no insight into the behaviours of people following such searches.

Within the first month of its release, *13 Reasons Why* received a total of 476 million view hours in its first season, and 496 million view hours in its second season<sup>2</sup>. With an estimated audience of 6.08 million in its first three days (the US only), the show “skews heavily toward young and female viewers”<sup>3</sup>, raising interest questions surrounding the role of new and traditional media in portraying and reporting suicide cases.

## With great power comes great responsibility

In traditional media, newspapers and other publications run news stories that are described as being “in the public interest.” According to the UK’s National Union for Journalists (NUJ), one criterion includes “protecting public health and safety,” while the “freedom of expression itself” is also stated as being in the public interest<sup>4</sup>.

It can be argued that the principle of a free press and, by extension, its freedom of expression is fundamental to a free and democratic society. A free press and freedom of expression allow for a multitude of voices to be heard, enable transparency through the sharing of information, and hold those in power and authority to account.

As with any right, freedom of expression comes with significant responsibility and is not without consequence. For example, if you shout, “Fire!” in a crowded movie theatre and there is no fire present, there are clear and valid consequences to your expression in this case.

Similarly, the media does not “just report the news” or facts. Depending on what is shared and how it’s presented, it carries the potential to substantially influence those who read, watch, or hear impacting stories.

When it comes to reporting suicide cases, the Centre for Independent Journalism<sup>5</sup> focuses on two main points of consideration for the media regarding the influence of what’s shared in the public interest:

**Suicide contagion:** “Stories about celebrity suicides, headlines that include information about the methods used, and statements that make suicide seem inevitable were all correlated with suicide contagion or increase in copycat suicides. For example, fans of the late K-Pop star Kim Jong-hyun

wrote to Befrienders KL about how the musician's death had affected them emotionally after learning he had died by suicide."

**Triggering nature of graphic images:** "Befrienders KL received feedback that many are triggered and emotionally disturbed after reading or seeing photos in the news or social media posts about suicide."

It would be remiss not to address one function of the media: like any business, it must serve its financial interests, which includes the generation of revenue gained through advertising and other income streams. To grab the attention of listeners, viewers, and readers, media outlets must deliver compelling content. Phrases such as "bad news sells" and "if it bleeds it leads" point to a fundamental truth: people are fascinated by violence, conflict, and death. Publications aren't filled with "good news" stories because good news doesn't sell – rather than providing excitement and intrigue, good news is, on the whole, pedestrian and dull.

Nevertheless, the media (new and traditional) must recognise its responsibility when it comes to reporting on suicide, especially when we consider that graphic or glamourising depictions of suicide can lead to – or increase the likelihood of – further cases of suicide.

Imagine, if you will, that you are having thoughts of suicide and you come across an article or news story about a completed suicide that provides descriptions of the methods used, location, and perhaps details of communications left behind by the deceased. In addition, the story highlights touching tributes that show just how treasured, cherished, and loved this person was by family members, friends, and colleagues.

It'd be naïve not to see how this might lead someone who's feeling suicidal to consider following through on their thoughts. Should the story fail to include practical and hopeful guidance from mental health experts and neglect to provide details of how someone who's struggling can get immediate support, the story could serve to further entrench feelings of isolation and hopelessness.

The UK's Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) provides a [range of resources](#) for journalists and editors reporting on suicide and other challenging areas, and they link to a helpful [suicide reporting toolkit](#) for journalists and educators.

IPSO also points media professionals in the direction of The Samaritans' guidelines for reporting suicide, which are shared below, followed by some additional guidelines offered through Malaysia's Ministry of Health:

## 10 Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide

(source: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org))

**Please note: Points 2 & 10 have been edited to reflect resources local to Malaysians**

1. **Avoid reporting methods of suicide** such as describing someone as having died by hanging, particularly in headlines.
2. **Include references to suicide being preventable and signpost sources of support** such as the Befrienders' helpline. This can encourage people to seek help, which could save lives. When life is difficult, you can call them 24 hours a day for free on +60 3-7627 2929, email them at [sam@befrienders.org.my](mailto:sam@befrienders.org.my), or visit [www.befrienders.org.my](http://www.befrienders.org.my) to find out more information and resources. Other sources of support can be found on [Relate Malaysia's website](#).
3. **Steer clear of language that sensationalises or glorifies suicide**  
Avoid dramatic headlines and strong terms such as "suicide epidemic." Never suggest that someone died instantly or that their death was quick, easy, painless, inevitable or a solution to their problems.
4. **Don't refer to a specific site or location as popular or known for suicides**  
For example, 'notorious site' or 'hot spot', and refrain from providing information, such as the height of a bridge or cliff.
5. **Avoid dramatic, emotive or sensational pictures or video footage**  
Excessive imagery can glamourise a death or lead vulnerable individuals to over-identify with the deceased.
6. **Avoid excessive amounts of coverage and overly prominent placement of stories** such as a frontpage splash, and do not link to previous stories about suicide.
7. **Treat social media with particular caution and avoid mentioning or linking to comments, or websites/forums that promote or glamourise suicide**

Similarly, it is safer not to open comment sections on suicide stories and careful consideration should be given to the appropriateness of promoting stories through push notifications.

**8. Including content from suicide notes or similar messages left by a person who has died should be avoided**

This could increase the likelihood of people identifying with the deceased. It may also romanticise suicide or cause distress to the bereaved family and friends.

**9. Speculation about the ‘trigger’ or cause of suicide can oversimplify the issue and should be avoided**

Suicide is extremely complex and most of the time there is no single event or factor that leads someone to take their own life.

**10. Be aware that young people are more susceptible to suicide contagion**

When covering the death of a young person, do not give undue prominence to the story or repeat the use of photographs, including galleries. Don’t use emotive, romanticised language or images – a sensitive, factual approach is much safer. Coverage that reflects the wider issues around suicide, including that it is preventable, can help reduce the risk of suicidal behaviour. Include clear and direct references to resources and support organisations

[Read our guidance on general warning signs, myths about suicide, and getting help for suicidal thoughts.](#)

Citing guidelines from the Ministry of Health in Malaysia, the Centre for Independent Journalism includes the following additional considerations when reporting on suicide cases:

The media must...

1. Always **ensure that 'messages of hope'** can be added in the news report which includes mentioning people who have recovered from suicidal crises, regardless of how brief this might be
2. Work closely with the police and health authorities in presenting the facts
3. Provide **sources for support or helplines** in the news article, videos, or audio clips
4. **Ensure strict adherence** by their employees to ethical suicide reporting guidelines
5. Review all video and audio content and **remove negative elements** that depict attempts of suicide.

## Final thoughts

The number of suicide attempts is **at least 15 times more** than the number of completed suicides. While survivors of suicide attempts might seek help and recover, those who complete suicide see a life cut short that could have otherwise overcome a temporary pain and lived a life full of contribution and meaning. Instead, so much personal loss and unimagined grief take over where a bright future could have been.

On a wider scale, completed suicides carry a significant economic cost. In 2019, youth suicide alone was estimated to cost the Malaysian economy RM346.2 million, or RM676,165 per suicide<sup>6</sup>.

If we are to reverse the trend of suicide rates in Malaysia, we must place a central focus on how we talk about and share information on suicide cases and suicide-related topics. While the media should be free to disseminate news that reflects the reality and challenges of society and ask important

questions of those in power and authority, it should also ask important questions concerning its power, authority, and influence. By adhering to ethical and sensible reporting guidelines surrounding suicide, the media can play a crucial role in raising awareness of suicidality in a manner that promotes education, hope, and support to those in desperate need of seeing the light at the end of a dark tunnel. We all need to tell the story that everybody is valuable, that their life matters, and that no matter how difficult things might seem at the moment, pain and suffering are temporary and there is help for you when you need it. The media has an important part to play in sharing this powerful and potentially life-saving story.