THE BRIDGEND SUICIDES

SUICIDE AND THE MEDIA

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-1-137-39292-3 ISBN 978-1-137-39293-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-39293-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016940598

Cover illustration: © Supapixx / Alamy Stock Photo

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. London

For Richard O'Bryant and Joey Davis,
You are missed.
And for my nufty, thank you for your endless support

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Suicide is one of the greatest taboos in society today. More than 800,000 people die by suicide every year and there are many more that attempt to take their own lives (WHO 2012). According to the World Health Organization, suicide accounted for 1.4 per cent of all deaths in 2012 (the most recent statistics available), making it the 15th leading cause of death globally. It is the second leading cause of death among 15–29 year olds (WHO 2012). Suicide is a complicated issue; looking at the statistics for the UK does not help to make it any less so. In 2013, the Office for National Statistics registered nearly 6,300 suicides in the UK, nearly 5,000 of them in England alone. Approximately 19,000 suicide attempts are made by adolescents every year in Britain and, each month, more than 70 young people aged 15–24 die by suicide (Duffy and Ryan 2004; Hill 1995; Marris et al. 2000).

I came to the issue of suicide when I worked as a print journalist in the United States between 1999 and 2006, covering both local and statewide news in Florida. I reported my first suicide story as a cub reporter in 2002 working a general assignment beat. I covered the story much like I would cover any other 'death' story, calling the Police Information Officer, the Medical Examiner's Office, a family member, the place of employment and, in this case, a suicide prevention office. The story was worked mostly from my desk, and from start to completion it took about two hours. I did not give much thought to the phrasing I used, nor the pictures that I ran, and I did not run an information box with contact details for those in need to seek help.

A. Luce, *The Bridgend Suicides*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-39293-0_1

Between 2002 and 2005, I covered four suicide-related stories: a 'murder-suicide', a 'regular suicide', one story on suicide prevention, and one on bringing attention to a support group that helps those bereaved by suicide. These stories did not register much with me; I was the youngest journalist in the newsroom, the newest one to the field, and thus I was given what were considered to be the 'throw-away' stories. In my newsroom, a throw-away story was defined as one that took precious time away from covering more in-depth, analytical and important pieces of journalism. In September 2005, however, my definition of suicide as a throw-away story changed when a close friend took his own life. His death turned my life upside down. Because he had taken his own life at a public institution, a local university, newsroom policy deemed that his suicide be covered.

The story of his death, written by one of my colleagues, ran on the bottom of an inside page, with a mugshot of his face. His death received much coverage both in print and broadcast media, but I found myself conflicted when reading and watching the reports. They seemed insensitive, but I was not sure why. Two days after his death, I returned to work, where, unfortunately, my first story was that of the suicide of a local high school student. I poured laboriously over what words to use to describe his death, now having an understanding of how it felt to be bereaved. Where once I would have given little thought to the story, I now argued with my editor over the picture we were going to run, and the placement of the story on the page. While grieving, I was still reporting, but I was drawn more and more to the reporting of suicide. I pitched a series of articles for the editorial page on mental health, but all were shot down because the publisher deemed that they were not 'appealing' enough to the readership. After an argument at an editorial board meeting with my publisher about the newspaper not being proactive in its stance on mental illness and suicide prevention, he told me if I could angle the story towards children, it would run. Combing death records and filing numerous requests for public information, I was finally able to collate a series of five editorials, of about one thousand words each, on the prevention of childhood suicide and mental illness. The series ran over the course of three weekends in 2006, winning me numerous awards and accolades, but that is where the story stopped. The newspaper was done covering suicide and mental illness, while I was just getting started.

Reflecting upon the series, the first thing that stood out was the fact that the only way it would be printed was if I angled it towards childhood.

This led me to wonder what it was about childhood that had such a hold over newspapers, and why reporting issues that targeted children were deemed to be more important than those that targeted adults. Another notable issue was how I had framed the articles—around fear, arguing for more mental health screening, more funding for suicide prevention and in support of an initiative to create a statewide office of suicide prevention for Florida. Additionally, the phrases I used, the language that was chosen, the pictures and graphics that ran with the series were all chosen with much more care than when I was merely writing a throw-away story back in 2002.

Unfortunately, because I had daily deadlines to meet and needed to move on from the suicide story, these merely remained questions in the back of my mind until I decided to leave journalism and move to Cardiff, Wales and venture into the world of academia to study how the British press framed suicide on its news pages, and to look at the discourses that emerged because of those representations.

1.1 Introducing Bridgend

In January 2008, the South Wales borough of Bridgend became the focus of local, national and international media attention due to a spate of suicides in the region. Suicide, once believed to be a social issue that should be kept under wraps because of the stigma associated with it, became much more openly discussed as the former mining town made national headlines over the first six months of 2008 for having had 20 suicides amongst people aged 15–29. Although government health officials in Wales had long been aware of the high suicide rates in the region, it was not until Welsh newspapers began the closest sustained coverage of the story that those suicide rates came under the spotlight and health officials were taken to task. The story soon made national and international headlines after the Wales News Service sold a sensationalistic piece of copy to both tabloids and broadsheets.[1] The story (accompanied by photographs[2]) focused predominantly on sensationalising the suicides, thus constructing the borough of Bridgend as 'Britain's suicide capital', and 'death town', describing the loss of lives that occurred there as part of a 'suicide craze', and attributing them to a 'suicide cult'.

Despite not providing a headline with the Wales News Service article, the story still made the front pages of the national newspapers on 23 January 2008. Headlines ranged from the *Mirror*'s 'Suicide Town:

Parents' anguish as seven young friends all hang themselves in the space of one year', to the *Daily Mail*'s 'The internet suicide cult: chilling links between seven youngsters found hanged in the same town. They lived and died online', to *The Guardian*'s, 'Police suspect internet link to suicides: seven young people found dead in last 12 months. Mother urges parents to monitor computer use', to *The Sun*'s, 'Bebo mates in suicide chain'.

All newspapers in the sample[3] I examined picked up on the sensationalist references to the alleged link between the suicides and the internet, as well as making references in those stories to the alleged suicide cult. It should be noted here that neither of these references were found to be the reasons behind the suicidal deaths by the South Wales Police. After the suicides from South Wales made national headlines on 23 January, national and international newspapers and broadcasters began to descend on the area the very next day.

1.2 Patterns in Suicide

In Wales, the rates of suicide are statistically higher than those of England and Northern Ireland. Between 1996 and 2006, about 300 people died by suicide in Wales, a rate that has remained relatively constant (NPHS 2008; ONS 2013). Each year in Wales, on average, there are 21.5 deaths per 100,000 population, with rates differing between local health boards throughout the country. Of importance here, Bridgend has higher overall rates of suicides among males (25.2/100,000) than females. Female deaths in the borough are 4.6 per 100,000. The highest number of female suicides in Wales, however, can be found in Conwy, with 11.9 per 100,000 (NPHS 2008: 16).

In 1961, British law deemed suicide no longer a crime in England and Wales. Prior to this, those who attempted suicide and failed could be prosecuted and imprisoned, while the families of those who succeeded could also potentially be prosecuted (Suicide Act 1961 c.60). In part, this was due to religious and moral beliefs around intentionally taking one's own life, which some regarded as an act of self-murder. Following the change in law, McClure (2000) found that between 1963 and 1975 there was a marked decrease in recorded suicides amongst both males and females in England and Wales. He attributes this change primarily to the detoxification process that was being undertaken by the national gas companies—the number of people killing themselves by placing their heads in gas ovens declined—as well as a reduction in the number of people killing

themselves by carbon monoxide poisoning in their cars in non-ventilated garages. McClure argues, however, that this decrease was short lived, as between 1975 and 1980 suicides began to rise again, in part due to the increased purchase of automobiles (2000: 64). It was Kelly and Bunting (1998) who noted 'a decrease in the suicide rate in England and Wales between 1991 and 1996, which was related to a decrease in the proportion of suicides attributed to poisoning with motor vehicle exhaust gas', though this research could be considered flawed (1998: 30). In attributing the causation of suicide to just one factor, Kelly and Bunting's research is an example of narrow thinking. McClure (2000) notes it is not possible to link only one reason to the causation of a suicide. In fact, he argues, between 1975 and 1991, there were increases in male unemployment, violence, single-person households, divorce, warrants for repossession of homes, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, the HIV infection, and the changing role of women in British society (2000: 66), all of which could be linked to increased suicide rates throughout the UK.

In 2008, the Bridgend suicides became international news primarily because, in my view, of a narrow reporting on why the suicides occurred; most frequently, a link between suicide and the Internet was forged, though never proven. As the Internet is a globalized method of communication, and is unregulated, the Bridgend suicides caught the attention of international media because of the potential for similar suicides to occur around the world. As McClure (2000) states, it is rarely possible to link only one reason to a suicidal death. This book will show how British newspapers constructed largely uninformed reasons for the deaths and how, as a result, they further reinforced stigmatized views of suicide, thus pushing any reasonable discussion the citizenry could have had on this social issue even further away than before.

1.3 Childhood and Bridgend

My research into representations of suicide in the media began, initially, looking at how British newspapers discursively constructed three child suicides through their reporting. As I have already indicated, this approach was influenced by the editorials I wrote as a reporter when I was instructed to focus on children. Laura Rhodes, thirteen, from Swansea, Wales, died 4 September 2004. Rhodes and her friend Rebecca Ling met in an Internet chat room and soon became friends. The two then met outside the chat room, spent time with each other and eventually holidayed for two weeks