

Raising Media Awareness in French-Speaking Switzerland: Best Practices

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At STOP SUICIDE, we think that appropriate ways to inform about suicide can help prevent suicide.¹ Media coverage has been the focus of numerous studies and discussions in the field of prevention, but there are very few programs active in this area beyond dissemination of the WHO guidelines on coverage of suicides.

Through ongoing funding from the canton of Vaud,² STOP SUICIDE has worked since 2011 to *improve the suicide-protective effect* of the media and *limit its copycat effect*. We work closely with media to promote sensitive and appropriate reporting of suicide. STOP SUICIDE's "Media programme" leads three main activities: media observation, briefing editorial staff, and journalism students' training.

This article will provide an overview of our experience with this program. Its aim is to point out the best practices identified during the four years of working with media outlets and journalists.

Monitoring the Press

Monitoring Media Coverage

The main task of STOP SUICIDE's Media programme is to monitor on a daily basis how the major French-language print media in French-speaking Switzerland report on suicide (fifteen print and online publications). We assess all articles whose main topic is suicide to ensure that newspapers comply with WHO guidelines on coverage of suicide and with Directive 7.9—Suicide of the Editor's Code of Ethics (Swiss Press Council, 2015).

Directive 7.9 of the Code of Ethics specifically addresses media coverage of suicide. It indicates that journalists should report on suicide if there is a “public need to know” and with “the utmost restraint.” In order to avoid suicides by imitation, the general rule is that the media should “not mention any details about the method or product used” (Swiss Press Council, 2015).³

In a report published in 2014, STOP SUICIDE assessed four hundred articles published in 2013 in eleven French-language Swiss newspapers. The report underscored the incomplete application of guidelines for suicide coverage in the French-language Swiss media (STOP SUICIDE, 2014).⁴

Every two weeks, we also present the findings of this monitoring process in a fortnightly press review⁵ to inform both journalists and prevention professionals.

Lodging Formal Complaints with the National Media Regulation Authorities

In Switzerland, it is possible to lodge a complaint about Swiss newspapers to the Swiss Press Council, the self-regulatory organization responsible for journalism ethics and standards. Since 2003, the council has made around ten statements on articles addressing suicide, among which five of them were complaints made by STOP SUICIDE. In 2011, STOP SUICIDE lodged a complaint against the daily newspaper *Le Matin* about an article entitled “Death for 60 dollars.” According to STOP SUICIDE, this article gave too many details of how a twenty-nine-year-old man killed himself using a “suicide kit” that he had ordered on the Internet. The Swiss Press Council concluded that the publication failed to handle the subject in a “restrained and cautious manner.” It considered that reporting of the suicide method was not in the public interest to be disclosed and might “almost” prompt vulnerable individuals to imitate identical social behavior (Swiss Press Council, 2012).

Such formal complaints work to promote responsible reporting of suicide in the press, especially when they are awarded by the positions of the Press Council. The former editor-in-chief of *Le Matin* later stated in the press that reconsidering the article she would not have published it or any article resembling this one (Loersch, 2014). However, complaints are rare because they take time and we prefer to complain on reports showing high levels of details (to avoid weakening the rule if the complaint is not awarded) and to work in close cooperation with

media outlets.⁶ In the case of the complaint against *Le Matin*, the editor-in-chief invited STOP SUICIDE to brief her about responsible coverage of suicide. Our strategy is to focus on building a long-term dialogue with media and journalists.

Writing Letters to the Press

When we assess that an article may spark fatal behavior among teenagers or adults, because it doesn’t comply with either or both Directive 7.9—Suicide and WHO guidelines, we contact the editorial team directly.⁷ In 2014, we contacted thirty-five newspapers and we were able to build a constructive dialogue with seventeen of them after they answered to us. In August 2015, *L’Illustré*, a very popular French-language weekly paper, published an interview with Doctor Erika Preisig in which she expressed support for assisted suicide for youth suffering from depression (not currently legal in Switzerland) (Berney, 2015). This type of discourse might give depressed teens the idea that killing themselves is the easiest way out of their problems instead of seeking help. STOP SUICIDE wrote to the editor and requested a right of reply and *L’Illustré* published our letter (Inostroza, 2015).

In most cases, media outlets are receptive to our program. When we recommend they limit the level of detailed information, especially about the suicide method, for example, in a title or a picture, they are generally ready to modify the online version of the article by changing the title or the picture, or they agree that they would avoid detailed or sensationalist reporting in subsequent articles.⁸ Following our clues, editors also remind their team that our job is to answer journalists’ enquiries about how to report on suicide. Journalists are increasingly contacting STOP SUICIDE when they are seeking advice on how to portray suicide cases or because they would like us to review their stories.

We also update a list of journalists who have already reported on suicide because they are more susceptible to report again on suicide (in the news section or lifestyle section). According to a Swiss survey, only a minority of journalists has already reported on suicide and although they declare to have better knowledge of guidelines on suicide coverage, only half of them say they are informed about the risk of copycat suicides (Altermatt & Steinmann, 2009).⁹ It means that the vast majority of journalists have moderate or rather weak knowledge of these risks and of the guidelines (Altermatt & Steinmann, 2009).¹⁰

Meeting Journalists

Following the Swiss experience of Konrad Michel and colleagues (Michel, Frey, Wyss & Valach, 2000), STOP SUICIDE implemented a more proactive and preventative strategy in order to improve media knowledge of the positive and negative impacts of suicide coverage. As media outlets don't have much time and suicide coverage is not a priority for them, STOP SUICIDE chose to offer in-house briefings to foster sustainable and interpersonal relationships with newspaper titles. Media outlets show a relatively high interest in organizing in-house briefings on suicide coverage. Since 2012, we approximately organized ten of those meetings with newspapers per year. Journalists are asking for short trainings and they invite us either at lunchtime or in the morning just after the first briefing of the day.

Avoiding Dogma

Many journalists still believe that "it is best not to talk about suicide" in the media. They are generally relieved to hear that there are sensitive ways to report on suicide without sparking copycat suicides. According to the director of the local radio station *Radio Fribourg*, "the briefing of Stop Suicide allowed us to escape from a certain type of dogma surrounding this issue. We notably understood that we can—and even should—talk about suicide, but without going into details of what motivated the person to such extremes."

Most editorial teams welcome our main message even among journalists who think that covering suicide is not dangerous. It is especially the case for "tabloids" as it seems more difficult for them to implement the media guidelines for suicide. Editors-in-chief generally see our briefings as "constructive." They say that they don't feel like we had come to tell them "what to do" (Loersch, 2013) and that they are "open to critical thinking" about their reporting on suicide.

Media outlets ask for our strong expertise in the field of suicide prevention. Most of them want to learn about theoretical aspects of copycat suicides and how they can engage in the prevention of suicide. They appreciate that we rely on facts and on clinical-based insights. One editor-in-chief used to say STOP SUICIDE is "not ideological" but rather "pragmatic, based on field experience." They also appreciate the way we deliver the guidelines: with articles, with practical examples, and on a case-by-case basis.

Influencing Suicide Coverage Before Publishing

Journalists are also interested in STOP SUICIDE providing guidance on reporting of suicide. In 2014, we provided guidance to seventeen journalists who had enquiries about portraying suicide resulting in the publication of fourteen "Papageno-friendly" articles. Our strategy is to work *with* journalists and not *against* them¹¹ and our goal is to reach informed coverage and preventative reporting. Journalists generally call us because they want to report on high-profile, unresolved or "mysterious" cases of suicide, involving prominent people or young individuals, and spectacular or particularly rare methods of suicide. They are also looking for statistics or survivors' stories. When debriefing together we talk about the multifactorial causes of suicide and suggest a sensitive and acceptable level of information without unduly restricting the freedom of the press to report on suicide.

In 2013 a young man killed himself; before dying he posted his picture on Instagram with a scotch tape on his mouth. One journalist wanted to run a story about what he thought was the "first case in Switzerland." Following our advice the article focused on youth suicide and on using social media to prevent suicide. The picture was not published and both the online and the print versions of the article informed on various sources of support. The father told the press other young people might think twice before taking their own life because he was devastated. The article was sensitive and avoided honoring suicidal behavior.

In 2015 *L'illustré* contacted STOP SUICIDE because one journalist of the team wanted to report on the effects of suicide on friends and family members. We met the reporter to brief her and connect her with a suicide attempt survivor, a young woman who was willing to tell her story in a preventive way. In most of the stories friends and family members described the devastating effect of suicide and wanted to prevent further suicides. At the end of the story there was a textbox with numbers of helplines.

Our experience shows that it is possible to influence media coverage toward prevention. In some cases, our briefing successfully changed the focus and the content of an article or a broadcast; we were able to influence the choice of the person/specialist speaking. In some other cases, our briefing was helpful in deciding not to publish an article. But what media need most is to be provided with reliable information and sources.

Providing Useful Information

Many journalists believe suicide deserves a public discussion, especially in Switzerland where many teenagers die of suicide. Some of them have personal experiences with suicide or have covered suicide cases. They appreciate our briefings because we provide them with useful information (e.g., on statistics, “causes” of suicide) and other news or current topics linked to suicide and prevention (e.g., teenage bullying, Swiss prevention strategy).

Journalists are also interested in our approach essentially oriented toward promoting the Papageno effect, which they welcome as a “paradigm-change”. They enquire about means to cover suicides that are both informative and preventative and appreciate to meet specialists in the field. “We do not always know how to address the issue of suicide in a broader context and to talk about prevention,” said a journalist from a regional daily newspaper. “Meetings that allow us to understand the issue better and to meet stakeholders are therefore interesting. We get to know who to call, who to turn to when we need to cover the subject, and are able to talk about it” (S. Heiniger, personal communication, October 1, 2015).

Following Up with Editorial Teams

However, changing old-fashioned reporting practices requires time. And for those journalists who generally “work on suicides,” especially the tabloids, it might not be easy to let down sensationalist reporting. The editor-in-chief of the free and daily newspaper *20minutes* opens a window to change, though: “things need to go fast. We do not have a lot of time to sort information through. That is particularly the case with briefs picked up and used directly from abroad. We talk about things because others are doing it and we don’t want to look like fools. We should perhaps have the courage not to; to say to ourselves, I won’t run this.”

To have the greatest impact, it is important to reiterate our briefings with media outlets and journalists. We offer some “refresh” or “review” sessions to follow-up with editorial teams on suicide coverage. In some newspaper titles, STOP SUICIDE’s briefing takes place every year. Journalists think that it is beneficial to give regular reminders because suicide is a major public health issue. Over the past four years, we have forged ties of trust with the media and we now work better together. Journalists contact us before producing coverage on the issue of suicide or when they need to find experts and witnesses. These special ties

have also improved the coverage of our events and activities aiming at youth suicide prevention, and STOP SUICIDE was also able to develop partnership with youth media such as *tink.ch*.¹²

Getting to Know the “Who Is Who” of Suicide Coverage

Other Swiss institutions aim to foster dialogue with regional media outlets. In 2014 and 2015 the canton of Neuchâtel organized two workshops on media coverage of suicide. Together with STOP SUICIDE, they invited journalists, police, mental health and suicide prevention experts, and media school representatives. Following the workshops, the canton published a fact-sheet with useful information and a “ready-to-publish” list with helpline numbers and websites. As a result, two regional media outlets added this list to their articles on suicide.

The workshops also raised ethical and strategic questions regarding the implementation of guidelines on suicide coverage. Questions raised included: “Should media avoid informing on the suicide method although it is of public interest (e.g., in cases of suicides on the railway)?” Moreover, journalists and mental health professionals talked about ethics of journalism in hospital settings. The workshops fostered their mutual understanding and reciprocal ties. As a result, one reporter was able to meet a suicide attempt survivor and published his story. A local psychiatric unit got in contact with a journalist who reported on suicide screening and assessment.

However, because only three journalists participated in the workshops, the canton of Neuchâtel will consider further approaches which are more in line with media working environments. This includes participation in in-house meetings together with STOP SUICIDE, building editorial partnerships with health section editors and journalists, and strengthening ties with journalism schools.

Targeting the Journalists of the Future

To be effective on the long term, we work together with schools of journalism to directly meet their students. This is a way to change practices and raise awareness at the same time.

Addressing Fears and Raising the Curiosity of Students

Young journalists are often afraid to report on suicide. They fear “getting it wrong, being sensationalist or sparking an undeniable copycat effect,” explains the Director of the Academy of Journalism and Media in Neuchâtel (AJM) (A. Dubied, personal communication, October 1,

2015). According to her, it's important to include suicide in the "baggage given to future journalists" because students are often "tempted by silence," just like many experienced journalists.

In March 2015 three students from this school dared to organize a workshop on the challenges of covering suicide in the media with us. The goal of the workshop was to go beyond such stereotypes, to foster dialogue and train students in this type of "poorly regarded" subject in the profession (e.g., offbeat news, celebrity life).

Asking the Right Questions

Since 2012, STOP SUICIDE has also been involved twice a year with the other French-language Swiss school of journalism, the Centre de formation au journalisme et aux médias (CFJM). During our sessions, we use a mind-mapping tool to help students ask the correct questions before, during, and after they report on suicide. We provide tools to help them find a balance between respect for private life and public interest.

Giving "Case-by-Case" Examples

We display available scientific data on the Werther and Papageno effects to students, as well as the WHO and the Swiss "Points de repère" guidelines. But students (like journalists) often feel that such information is contradictory and ask them to "inform about suicide, while omitting some facts." We show them articles which illustrate that it is possible to avoid this paradox by choosing headlines carefully, publishing sensitive images, addressing undercovered topics, and including information on how to seek help. Our goal is to encourage them to seek sensitive ways of breaking the taboo by covering suicide.

Precious Feedback

According to the student's feedback, what is most interesting about this training is learning concretely how to cover a story on suicide in a balanced and respectful way. They appreciate the tools that we give them, especially one checklist of questions about media coverage. They feel more prepared to cover suicide and mentioned that we helped them in understanding that it was sometimes best to avoid the topic than to address it in an incomplete or "clumsy" manner. Journalism students are generally relieved to know that they can count on STOP SUICIDE's support and to have the helpline numbers. According to one student, "if we don't have enough time to report carefully about suicide, I'd rather not poke this issue."

Conclusion: It's All in the Approach

STOP SUICIDE's Media programme has developed an innovative and pragmatic approach for suicide prevention over the past four years. Beginning with a systematic monitoring of the press of both positive and negative reactions to media coverage of suicide, we have fostered dialogue with Swiss French-language editorial teams. This dialogue has allowed us to adapt the WHO guidelines to journalists' practices,¹³ to create an increasingly appropriate awareness-raising briefing or training, and to "escape from the dogma" that still reigns in the profession: "you cannot talk about suicide." To change common practices, it is essential to work on a long-term perspective, to build trustworthy relationships with journalists, journalism schools, and editorial teams. Starting as early as possible with raising awareness among the journalists of the future is crucial.

Notes

1. STOP SUICIDE aims to prevent youth suicide in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Our headquarters are based in Geneva. STOP SUICIDE. (2012). *Introduction*. Retrieved from <http://www.stopsuicide.ch/site/content/association>
2. Switzerland is a federal state with twenty-six "cantons." French is the official language of French-speaking Switzerland (six cantons, among them Vaud, Neuchâtel, and Geneva) and around 22.5 percent of the population speak French.
3. And it continues as follows: "In all cases, reporting should be limited to what is needed to understand the facts and exclude intimate and personally damaging details."
4. A third of the articles talked about suicide in a simplistic or reductive manner. Twelve percent of all articles included a copycat risk by providing detailed information about the suicide method. Few amount of information addressed the topic of prevention (barely 20 percent of the total number of articles).
5. STOP SUICIDE. (2014). *Informeur sur le suicide peut sauver des vies*. Retrieved from www.stopsuicide.ch/site/medias.
6. As such, our strategy is very similar to the Samaritans' one in the United Kingdom (2011).
7. Articles that work toward prevention can also trigger a positive reaction from STOP SUICIDE. STOP SUICIDE. *Revue de presse et des savoirs*. Retrieved from: www.stopsuicide.ch/site/revues-de-presse
8. This approach and its results are in line with other international best practices. Samaritans. (2011). *Ibid*.
9. In 2009, two students of the University of Northwestern Switzerland released their study on the topic of suicide coverage. They made a survey based on the answers of 222 Swiss-German journalists to an online enquiry. Half of them were working for Swiss daily newspaper. On average they were generally

working under permanent contract and since two years. Only 24 percent of them had experience of reporting on suicide; the majority of them (74 percent) already had to write between one and five articles on suicide. Of those having experience of media coverage, 45 percent had better knowledge of guidelines on media coverage and of the risk of copycat suicides.

10. The authors described the knowledge of the guidelines of all journalists as rather weak (2.5 for inexperienced journalists to 3.0 point for experienced journalists on a scale of 5); 68 percent of all journalists have “some knowledge” of the guidelines.
11. In 2013, STOP SUICIDE worked collaboratively with journalists and other specialists to make WHO media guidelines fit with their practices. This collaboration resulted in a brochure and website. STOP SUICIDE. (2013). *Points de repère à l'usage des journalistes*. Retrieved from <http://www.stopsuicide.ch/site/points-de-reperes-journalistes>.
12. Tink.ch. Retrieved from www.tink.ch.
13. STOP SUICIDE. (2013). *Points de repère à l'usage des journalistes*. Retrieved from <http://www.stopsuicide.ch/site/points-de-reperes-journalistes>.

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Promoting Responsible Portrayal of Suicide: Lessons from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

Lorna Fraser, Lisa Marzano, and Keith Hawton

Summary

Promoting responsible portrayal of suicide is an important priority in national suicide prevention strategies around the world. Samaritans, a suicide prevention charity in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, has extensive experience of achieving this policy objective in practice and is the recognized lead organization on the subject for UK media. Over the years, this has involved a number of proactive initiatives to raise awareness and educate the industry, at all levels; lobbying for change in media regulation; careful and ongoing monitoring and analysis of media reports of suicidal behavior (on average six thousand articles per year); and extensive work with the media and key stakeholders to improve coverage, not least in relation to high-profile stories and programs.

In this chapter, we discuss and reflect on the potential of this multi-level approach to encouraging responsible media portrayal of suicide. Drawing on case examples, we illustrate what can be achieved through this strategy, highlighting key challenges and successes, as well as emerging concerns for research, policy, and practice.

Promoting Responsible Portrayal to Save Lives: A Multistrand Approach

In the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland more than six thousand people take their own lives each year, with many thousands more attempting suicide (Office for National Statistics, 2016).