

FACTSHEET DIGITAL MEDIA

MEDIA GUIDELINES for Reporting Suicide

SAMARITANS

Background

Digital media continues to shape journalism, significantly increasing the speed with which stories can reach mass audiences across a range of evolving platforms. This increases the importance for journalists to be aware of the potential impact that reporting on suicide and self-harm can have on audiences and the risk of contagion.

Be aware

As with all suicide-related reporting, exposure to online media coverage of suicide can increase the risk of suicidal behaviour. Substantial research evidence shows links between media depiction of suicide and spread of the behaviour among vulnerable people. The risk of influencing suicidal behaviour significantly increases if reports include descriptions of suicide methods, if the story is placed prominently and if the coverage is extensive and/or sensationalised.

Best practice for reporting on suicide using digital media

Context

- The pressure to publish content quickly can lead to the spread of inappropriate and potentially harmful information – in the case of suicide or attempted suicide this carries significant risk.
- Stories often spread quickly online before they have been authenticated. Even sources regarded as reliable occasionally generate or repeat inaccurate information. Take extra care to check sources before reporting something as fact, or linking to or embedding unverified content in your story.
- If a suicide has been officially confirmed by the relevant authorities there may still be a great deal of speculation surrounding the circumstances. It is important to remember that suicide is complex and rarely a result of a single cause – such speculation should be avoided.
- A misreported suicide can cause potential harm to those who may be vulnerable, as well as a great deal of distress to bereaved family and friends.

Content

- Digital media increases the range of options for reporting and sharing stories, from plain-text tweets to blogs to video. This increases opportunities to reach audiences, to raise awareness of the issues surrounding suicide, and to dispel myths and encourage people who are struggling to seek help. All of this can help prevent suicides.
- All forms of user generated content relating to suicide should be carefully scrutinised prior to publication online to guard against harmful information being shared.
- A prominently or sensationally reported suicide or attempted suicide, or reports that go into detail about a suicide method, can encourage imitative suicidal behaviour, potentially resulting in further deaths.
- A celebrity's death may attract instant, global attention and give rise to multiple theories about how and why the person died. Be aware that the risk of contagion, through identification with a character, is increased in the case of celebrities. Also, detailed information about the suicide method used by a celebrity is likely to be particularly harmful to vulnerable people.
- Reproducing, embedding or linking to potentially harmful online content, for example from pro-suicide websites, online forums or social networks, which can include detailed descriptions of suicide methods can be harmful to vulnerable people and distressing for bereaved families.
- Digital media enables greater audience engagement in the dissemination of news, with contributions from 'citizen journalists' and feedback from audiences, which can include trolls. People who post on social media, or on comment threads, are often unaware of journalistic codes of conduct or the risks associated with covering the topic of suicide. This can increase the possibility of inappropriate, offensive content appearing on a site. It is advisable to consider if reader comments are appropriate with sensitive stories and, if so, close moderation of these is important.
- Eulogising and memorialising people who have died by suicide is common online particularly with young people. Referencing such content can inadvertently glamorise or romanticise a death and potentially influence imitative suicidal behaviour. When covering the topic of suicide it is advisable to stick with the reality, avoiding sensationalism.
- Repeated use of photography of people who have died by suicide can be very distressing for bereaved families and others affected by the death. Give appropriate consideration to the use of images in reports of suicide.
- Video and audio content posted online may not comply with journalistic codes or general reporting guidelines on suicide, particularly if hosted abroad. Check before linking to such material that it does not glamorise a suicide or give detailed accounts of methods.
- It is advisable to apply the same caution, when promoting a story using social media, as would be the case with mainstream media. For example, making sure that appropriate, non-sensationalist language is used.

Impact

- Because of the potential to reach large numbers of people quickly, suicide stories published online can have significant impact, particularly on vulnerable groups, such as people experiencing suicidal thoughts, people bereaved by suicide and young people.
- Incorporate links to Samaritans and other sources for support as prominently as possible to encourage help-seeking behaviour.
- Contact Samaritans' media advisory team for further information and advice on reporting suicide.

For general tips on best practice consult *Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide* at: [samaritans.org/mediaguidelines](https://www.samaritans.org/mediaguidelines)

Contact Samaritans' press office:
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 #reportingsuicide

Contact Samaritans

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