Media Reporting of Suicide: A Framing Analysis of the Coverage by The Star Newspaper in Malaysia

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Abstract The World Health Organization (WHO) cautions that media coverage of suicide could heighten the incidences of suicide or generate a protective effect by responsible media reporting. In light of the role of media, the need to study the media coverage of suicide reports has become imperative. This study employed a systemic analysis, interpretation and understanding of the framing of suicide cases on articles that were published in The Star (English, with the largest circulation) from 2013-2017. The findings show that the most salient frame found in the coverage of suicide cases is method of suicide; the way in which the victims died was described. Most of the articles used the straight reporting approach and reliance on mainly authorities as sources. Only one article drew on comment or information from a mental health professional. The current approach to coverage of suicide in The Star shows a dearth, if not complete absence of, positive coverage.

1 Introduction

Suicide is a complex phenomenon and has further emerged as a serious public health problem that demands attention, understanding and action. Close to 800 000 people die due to suicide every year, which is one person every 40 seconds. Many more attempt suicide. Suicide occurs throughout the lifespan and is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year olds globally. It is a global phenomenon; in fact, 78% of suicides occurred in low- and middle-income countries in 2015. Suicide accounted for 1.4% of all deaths worldwide, making it the 17th leading cause of death in 2015 (WHO, 2017). More specifically it has been linked to mental health issues. International Association for Suicide Prevention president Professor Brian Mishara highlights the gravity of this worldwide phenomenon when he summarises the statistics - more people kill themselves than die in wars, terrorist acts and interpersonal violence combined (UN News Centre, 2009).

Although an Asian survey situates Malaysia as having a comparatively “low to medium rate of suicide”, the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) has forecast that in the next 10 to 15 years suicide will emerge as the second highest cause of death in Malaysia, after cardiovascular disease (Wei and Chua, 2008). This is supported by a research on completed suicides (people having died from suicide) in Malaysia which concluded that that the prevalence of suicide in Malaysia was six to eight per 100,000 population per year (Armitage et al, 2015).

Coverage of suicide by the media has long been perceived as potentially detrimental to individuals who have suicidal tendencies. Therefore the World Health Organisation (WHO) cautions that media coverage of suicide could heighten the incidences of suicide (WHO, 2017).

In light of the role of media, the need to study the media coverage of suicide reports by the Malaysian media has become imperative. The media could be used more efficiently to support suicide prevention. In order to gain more in-depth insights into the coverage of incidences of suicide by the Malaysian media, this study examines the coverage of suicides and attempted suicides incidences by a mainstream English language daily, The Star to ascertain to what extent this issue is covered, who gives the information (sources) and what are the main frames used.
2 Research Objectives and Research Questions

The overall objective of the study is to examine the coverage of suicide by *The Star* (248,559), the English language daily with the largest circulation in Malaysia (ABC, 2017). Specifically, this study asked the following questions:

RQ1: What is the extent of coverage published by the newspapers?
RQ2: What are the news sources used by the newspapers?
RQ3: What are the news frames used by the newspapers?

3 Theoretical Framework

Mohamad Afiq et al (2017) investigated the perception of media in particular online newspapers on suicide in Malaysia but there was no theoretical framework, let alone communication theory to guide their study. In this study the theoretical framework of framing is used to provide a systemic analysis of newspaper coverage. Entman (1993) quoted by Bosman and d’Haenens (2008) and McCombs (2005) offer a more commonly used definition of framing:

Framing is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman 1993: 52)

Other definitions for framing include ‘the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions’ (Griffin 2003); and ‘the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed’ (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007).

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads etc. Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (tone of the picture). Entman (2007) also stressed that agenda setting, priming and framing fit together as tools of power, and he connected them to explicit definitions of news slant and bias.

In addition, Manheim (1994) summarized that news framing analyses usually cover three aspects: visibility, valence and frame genres. Visibility refers to both the amount and the prominence level of an event/issue or a nation receives in news coverage. Prominence is usually demonstrated by some typical elements such as the article’s placement in the newspaper or web sites, the headline, the visual tools associating with the text, the mention on the evening television news etc. Valence or slant is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames. It is believed to have the potential to generate behavioural effects. By indicating discourse valuations or carrying positive and/or negative elements, valenced news frames present the extent to which the coverage reflects favourably or unfavourably on the event/issue. Entman (2007) also stressed that agenda setting, priming and framing fit together as tools of power, and he connected them to explicit definitions of news slant and bias.

4 Method

This study investigated the reporting of suicide for five years from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2017 using the content analysis method. The articles were collected from The Star’s online database using “suicide in Malaysia” as the search term. The unit of analysis was the article, which included straight news, editorials, columns and letters.

The extent of coverage refers to the importance of news stories (De Vreese, Banducci, Semetko and Boomgaarderen, 2006). It was studied from two angles: 1) number of news items, and 2) type of news items. In addition, this study employed the inductive or emergent coding approach, whereby the researchers outlined the coding categories after a preliminary examination of the data. The categories for
news sources used in this study were: 1) Authorities ie police, government officials; 2) Mental health professionals; 3) Non-governmental organizations (NGOs); 4) Media organisations ie information taken from other media; 5) Family members; 6) General public ie friends, neighbours, bystanders, passersby.

Six categories of news frames were identified in this study with the following corresponding operational definitions:
1. Statistics/prevalence – provides statistics, figures, number of incidences, demographics.
2. Strategies – reports strategies to prevent suicide or improve mental health, and information on how or where to get help.
3. Causes/tendencies - reasons offered for the incident taking place/ family members/ friends/parents, jumping on the bandwagon without understanding the repercussions, bullying, serious illness, drugs/substance abuse.
4. Mental disorder – report of the state of the mind of victim ie mental illness, depression, previous mental health problems
5. Criminalisation - highlighting suicide as a criminal offence, report of suicide attempt met with police action/arrest/prosecution.

5. Findings

This study collected 34 articles on suicide in Malaysia from The Star newspaper (Table 1) of which 31 of them were straight news.

![Table 1: Types of Articles on Suicide Cases by The Star](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight news</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the data collected, the majority of the articles on suicide cases were in the form of straight news (N=31) and the least were editorial (N=1) and letters (N=1).

![Table 2: News Sources Used in Articles on Suicide Cases by The Star](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authorities</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health professionals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media organisations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General public</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the reporting of suicide cases, some articles cited more than one news source. Table 2 shows the total number of news sources cited in the articles (N= 47). It was found that authorities were the most frequently cited sources of information (N=31). NGOs and family members (N=5) were also attributed equally as sources though much less than authorities. Media organisations (N=4), mental health professionals and general public were the least used (N=1) sources.
Table 3: News Frames Used in Articles on Suicide Cases by The Star

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statistics/prevalence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes/tendencies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental disorder</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminalisation</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of suicide</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings reveal that some articles carried more than one frame. Table 3 illustrates the total number of news frames found in the articles (N=79). The most salient frame found in the coverage of suicide cases is method of suicide (N=27). Cause or tendencies of suicide cases (N=18) is the next prominent frame, followed by strategies of suicide (N=17), mental disorder (N=8), and criminalisation being the least frame used (N=3).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study show that there were very few articles on suicide for the five year period examined. This could possibly be due to the fact that in cases where the actions of victims described may generally be deemed suicide, the police classify the incident as “sudden death” and therefore not classified as ‘suicide’ per se. The main source of suicide news was the authorities namely the police, with N=31out of the total of 46 sources.

From the articles retrieved and studied, the most salient frame found in the coverage of suicide cases is method of suicide; the way in which the victims died was described. Based on the literature, news reporting of suicides in a few Asian countries portrays the incidences in graphic, explicit and simplistic manner as compared to Europe and the United States (Beautrais et al, 2008). Such media portrayal of suicide has been associated with copycat suicidal acts (suicide contagion), particularly if the reported suicide is glorified or sensationalised, or the method is explicitly described. Though the articles in The Star were not sensational, some descriptions were detailed.

Mohamad Afiq et al (2017) investigating how online news articles on suicide, concluded that suicide stories in Malaysia have been presented in more harmful than productive manner and recommended that journalists should choose professional and ethical ways of presenting suicide stories that would contribute to its prevention. The articles in our study could contain more information by mental health professionals to help readers better understand suicide cases. Among the articles in this study, information from only one (1) mental health professionals was mentioned.

The findings here show very few articles used the frame of “strategies”, defined as information on strategies to prevent suicide or improve mental health, and information on how or where to get help. Similarly very few articles were written using the frame of causes/tendencies, ie there were few which included reasons for the suicide taking place.

Past literature shows that, the media framing theory are usually applied to the field of political communication and there is no substantial evidence on the application in social issue coverage. Hence, the current research applied the media framing theory in examining the media coverage on the suicidal issue. Media plays a significant role in society in the shaping of public opinion and giving focus on certain issues (Goffman, 1974). As such, it is important for media to report suicide news appropriately.

Jane Pirkis (2017), one of the authors of the WHO document, Suicide Prevention: A Global Imperative, in her plenary address at the 2017 International Association for Suicide Prevention, Kuching, Sarawak said that in the world of suicide prevention, the impact of the media is often discussed but much of this discussion has focused on the potential for irresponsible reporting of suicide to lead to copycat acts. Recently, however, there has been an emphasis on how the media might be used in a positive way, as a vehicle for suicide prevention. Studying the current approach to coverage of suicide in the leading English language newspaper in Malaysia shows a dearth, if not complete absence of, positive coverage.
7. References


