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SUICIDE AND FREEDOM OF PRESS: BETWEEN PUBLIC RELEVANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT:

In Spain suicide is the first violent death cause, even before traffic accidents. Traditionally mass media stick to a non-written rule that recommends not to report about suicides in order to avoid a "copycat" effect. However, media focus has aimed towards suicides linked to other processes such as evictions, and that fact has brought on questioning the utility of that self-limitation of the freedom of press. This article analyze the weight of mass media as a spreading agent of suicidal behavior, and it also displays the instruments that journalists may use to report responsibly about suicide.

KEYWORDS: Suicide – Health – Imitation – Taboo – Journalism.

SUICIDIO Y LIBERTAD DE INFORMACIÓN: ENTRE LA RELEVANCIA PÚBLICA Y LA RESPONSABILIDAD

RESUMEN:

En España el suicidio es la primera causa de muerte violenta, por delante de los accidentes de tráfico. Tradicionalmente los medios de comunicación han seguido la regla de no informar sobre ellos para evitar un efecto imitación. Sin embargo, la atención mediática hacia suicidios asociados a otros procesos, como los desahucios, ha servido para cuestionar esa autolimitación al ejercicio de la libertad de información. En este artículo se analiza el peso de los medios como agentes

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propagadores de la ideación suicida y se exponen los instrumentos de que disponen los periodistas para construir una información responsable sobre el suicidio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Suicidio – Salud – Imitación – Tabú – Periodismo.

1. INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) has described the suicide as a major public health problem worldwide. Every two minutes three people die by their own deliberate action. Spain, without being among the countries with the highest death rate from suicide itself is consolidating an upward trend, and is now the leading cause of unnatural death, ahead of traffic accidents. In its latest report on this matter, the WHO puts the media as agents responsible for the increased rates of suicide by the contagion effect that seem to generate certain little cautious coverages; but it also indicates that they are necessary actors in prevention strategies if they report responsibly and seriously, and give their complicity to such policies.

It remembers that freedom of information enshrined in the Article 20.1.d of the Spanish Constitution which protects the right to freely communicate truthful information by any media, is, in practice, modulated and limited in what it refers to the facts that have to do with self-inflicted death. These limitations, prior to the exercise of journalism, are given in other subjects such as national security issues, gender or minors violence, in which unlimited use of the right to information may undermine public and collective security, or lead to some people to a situation of vulnerability or helplessness. Something similar happens with suicide. There is an unwritten rule, as a self-censorship, which dictates that you should not report about them, except in exceptional cases, to avoid an imitation effect among vulnerable members of the public or the audience. The child protection, public health, privacy, honor, physical and moral integrity, stand as possible limits on the exercise of freedom of information regarding suicides.

This restraint seems to rest on the premise that this information only satisfies the morbid curiosity of a certain audience, and therefore falls outside the protection of the freedom of information. But it appears that the information on suicides has a legitimate and necessary interest for the functioning of a democratic society in a Democracy, as well as having its own weight in shaping public opinion. As an example: in November 2012 a man killed himself in Granada, just before being evicted from his home. Similar cases immediately followed and national impact of these events served to stimulate public and political debate on the problem of evictions. It also opened questions in the newsrooms of media: should we look the other way or have we to echo it and, if so, how? If those suicides have been silenced, would have deprived the public of knowledge of an aspect of reality relevant to decision making in a democratic and pluralistic society based on participation?

2. OBJECTIVES

As we have seen, behind suicides other social problems can be hidden such as the mental health disorders, situations of exploitation or harassment in a large company, or some unhealthy habits among young people.

In the scientific literature it speaks of a negative effect of the news that leads to imitation; and it is less conclusive in regard to the positive influence of a serious and responsible information on self-inflicted death.

How this information is addressed seems to determine the social utility or not of a media coverage. From outside and from within the journalistic profession rules have been generated to report a responsible manner that results in a better understanding and prevention of this cause of death.

Our objective is to review those codes, decalogues and protocols, which are more or less predicament, as if coming from external agencies to the media or not, to analyze the mixed results that they shed and establish a guideline of treatment.

3. METHODOLOGY

Although the focus of this article comes from the sciences of information, we have opted to include sources of the field of clinical and social psychology, the National Institute of Statistics and the World Health Organization to add to the dimension of the problem of public health posed by suicide. A legal look is also provided to determine whether the treatment is covered by the freedom of information. Through the international scientific literature, the article seeks cause-effect connections between news and suicides to deepen into the dispersed hetero regulation that aspires to mark the way to follow for journalists in different countries of our cultural orbit and also in Spain.

4. DISSCUSION

4.1 SUICIDE AS PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

Suicide is described as "*the unknown death*" by Carmen Tejedor Azpeitia (2010), a psychiatrist at the Hospital de la Santa Creu, and head of the first comprehensive plan for prevention of suicide launched in Spain, aimed at the population of the Example of Barcelona. This author agrees with Durkheim (author of the first monograph with scientific vocation on the subject) that suicide is an indicator of the health of a society.

The major depressive episode is the one with a higher risk associated with ideation and attempted suicide (Gabilondo et al., 2007: 496 p.). 90% of cases are associated with a mental disorder, whether chronic or transient type, where depression occupies a prominent place, followed by the psychotic disorder, substance abuse disorders (alcohol is present in half of suicidal acts) and borderline personality disorder

(Tejedor, 2010). Chronic diseases with excessive pain, disabling or ending in cognitive deterioration also often lead to autolysis. Among stressful life events are the loss of bonding or emotional breakdown, economic or labor problems, emigration and the uprooting and social isolation (Weaver, 2010). In this regard, a recent study by the Andalusian School of Public Health, in collaboration with the group Stop Evictions of Granada, says that from people subject to a process of eviction, 16.6% have a high risk of suicide and the same percentage a moderate risk. Therefore, a third of people in eviction manifests that risk (Bernal et al, 2014. P. 4).

WHO has urged member countries in its report on the matter, in 2014, to take action against this silent epidemic. And supports the "*global imperative*" with data: about one million people die annually by self-harm; every 40 seconds a person dies by suicide somewhere in the world; it is the second cause of death among young people aged 15 to 29 years. It warns also that these data fall short of reality because there are many countries where there is no statistical system to record these deaths; and in others, the actual cause is often diluted in other less accurate ratings. Among the risks of suicide, WHO places the difficulties in accessing health care, ease of access to the means of suicide, the stigma on people seeking help for mental problems and misinformation of the media that tends to make sensationalism or to promote the contagion effect or copy.

In Spain, according to the latest data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE), in 2012 there were 3,539 deaths from intentional self-inflicted injuries, compared with 2,150 traffic accidents. That equates to a rate of 7.5 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants and an average of 9.6 suicides per day. The figures place it as the first external cause of violent death in Spain since 2009. Although the Spanish rates are not among the highest in Europe, Suelves and Robert (2012) are wary of the statistical reflection of reality, and believe the true number of suicides may be underestimated. Do not forget that often are masked under the label "*judicial death*".

4.2. Relevance and public interest of the information on suicide

The constitutional jurisprudence points to the relevance of public information as a requirement and as a frame that the news should not exceed (Sanchez Ferriz, 2004). Thus the Constitutional Court ruling 197/88 states in its Legal Foundation 2 that the value of the freedom of public communication only...

can be protected when freedoms are exercised in connection with matters that are of general interest in the matters to which they relate and by the people involved in them and contribute, therefore, to the formation of public opinion, achieving then its maximum level of justifying efficiency.

In turn, the Judgment 62/1982, of 15 October, the Constitutional Court notes that the freedom of expression is a fundamental pillar of the democratic society and in that sense protects harmless information or one that is received favorably, but also those that cause concern to the state and a part of the population, as thus derives from pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness without which a society like this cannot exist.

Seen as a public health issue, it is certainly a matter of public interest worthy of media attention, as shown in this headline of EL PAÍS.es of 02/11/2009:

More than half of the suicidals had warned of their intentions

Experts call for awareness of primary care, gateway of persons with suicide ideas that enable it to identify them

The problem is that the suicide as a rested issue hardly occurs in the media and when it is dealt with it is urgent because of the news, the event, or the impact that leaves little room for reflection, giving priority to the imminence of the individual event and the anecdotal. The information on suicides tend to receive the same treatment given to the events, directly related to the information of criminal acts. However, that relatedness with all that the action of the security forces and the state implies is, in itself, another reason for the public interest, and so says the Constitutional Court in the STC 14/2003 which states that "*is of importance and public interest information on the positive and negative results they achieve in their investigations the forces and corps of security*". An example:

LA VANGUARDIA.com, 26/02/2013:

The autopsy attributes to suicide the death of the young Coria del Río
The body shows no signs of violence

Moreover, death, when it occurs violently, is a violation of the peace or the established order, and awakens a logical interest. Let's see:

ABC.es, 24/01/2013:

Man dies after burning himself as a bonze in La Rioja

The victim is a Moroccan aged 46, married with two children, living in this locality

In this sense the professor Urzua (2003: p. 354) says that the death that arouses more interest in people is suicide. First it appears as something incomprehensible, something that goes against human nature and against the existence. So when someone seeks to end his life is breaking a natural order, which creates in the public a special attention, which can be transformed into gruesomeness. Although known aspects of death, says Urzúa (2003: p. 356), will be of public interest if with that future attempts are avoided. And here enters precisely the interest of some mental health experts that call for more and better knowledge about suicide in the general population to favor early detection and prevention.

Moreover, the dichotomy between public and private characters has its weight in the legitimacy of informations on suicide. For celebrities, the interest of the information is given by the prominent feature of the subject, often of prominent public life, and therefore a more limited privacy for their own exposure to society (Urzua, 2003: p. 356). The lawyer Llamazares Calzadilla (1999) remembers that the public interest may be in the object, but also on the subject of the information, and does not have to be together to provide relevant information. Clearly, in the case of public figures

for their notoriety, profession or position it assumes greater interest justification of that information. However, the information about public people that do not contribute to the formation of public opinion is not justified: not anything goes.

As Carmona Salgado recalls, the STC 107/1988 stresses the idea that the preponderance of freedom of information loses strength when exercised in relation to private conduct devoid of public interest or whose judgment is unnecessary. However, this author uses the doctrine of Berdugo stating that "*in the knowledge of data about that life can come together as a relevant public interest, that determines the prevalence of freedom of expression*" (1991, 130 p.).

Aim also Urzua (2003: p. 356) that suicide can be used as a means of protest from some sectors of society or as a vehicle for terrorist action. Suicides like a bonzo in a public place and with high concentration of people becomes a private matter in a situation of public relevance. The same applies to the terrorist who sacrifices himself, in which case you can fall in the risk of giving a voice to the terrorist organization which ordered the attack.

However, there are critical approaches, such as the audiovisual communication professor Gerard Imbert (2004) who is concerned about the way the media erected the conflict, the violence and the death in vectors of the representation of social reality. He states that in the social discourse today it is given a pornography of violence that trivializes it, turns it into an everyday phenomenon and leads it to produce insensibility. Imbert believes the media go into a spectacle of violence, while they move in an ambivalent discourse that oscillates between the attitude of principle that obeys reason and consensus, and an inclination towards a dramatized portrayal of violence led by the passion, falling into a mimetic representation of reality and away from the objective narration of facts. There come the most yellow versions. Let's see an example that fits what was stated by Imbert.

ABC.es, 05/10/2013:

[Three citizens prevent a suicide in the Segovia Viaduct](#)

A priest, a seminarian and a distributor of advertising achieved to change the opinion of a man about to jump into the void

Whether you agree or not with the theory of Imbert, intentionally self-inflicted death is open to a multiple casuistry that conditions varying degrees of public interest: the death of a politician or a famous actor does not arise the same attention, than that of an anonymous citizen; nor of the anonymous citizen if he kills himself at home or if he does it by jumping from a building in broad daylight and in front of dozens of neighbors; There are suicides that follow a crime of gender violence; others that are protesting against the oppression of a people or a lack of rights triggering a revolution, as in Tunisia; there are suicide bombers who kill themselves by activating an explosive device strapped to his waist and killing dozens of innocent people because it has been so ordered by his organization; some people commit suicide just before being evicted from his property; or they leave on video or in writing the testimony of bullying that they have not been able to bear; there are suicide chains

of people without greater connection than to work for the same multinational; there are attempts to end without death thanks to the fortunate intervention of a citizen or of the forces and state security bodies; or people who use unusual and unprecedented methods that trigger the alarm. They are examples of the variety of situations, motives and moral substrates that we can find on the subject. That's the background. Another thing is the way the media have to address it, and it leaves a lot to be desired about the real social utility and the contribution to the formation of public opinion that spreading it may have.

4.3. Information on suicide and its aftermath. In search of a positive effect

Since the middle of last century, many researchers (almost all of them Americans, at first) have tried to show a link between the negative consequences of publishing news and increased suicide rates ("*Werther*" effect). Most advocated a cause and effect relation of contagion to other vulnerable subjects and leads them to imitate methods by their exposure to media accounts. Jane Pirkis and Warwick Blood (2010), researchers in the field of public mental health in Australia, after a critical analysis of nearly a hundred of the major international investigations on the subject, found more evidence of a negative impact of news about suicide, than positive or neutral. The WHO itself accounts for 50 investigations that certify that link between information and suicidal behavior.

Much less is the number of investigations that denies a multiplier effect or that attributes positive effects to it. The way in which the medium collects the suicide appears to be particularly significant, as it is to reduce the number of imitations. This happens when you put the focus on the devastating impact of suicide on the others, and when it is interpreted as a tragic loss unnecessary as well as avoidable. An Australian study of 1997 focused on the suicide of singer Kurt Cobain argues and substantiates this, which revealed a decline in rates between 15 and 24 years attributed to that the bulk of the media coverage was highly critical about the decision of the singer and no glamor was given to his death (Mindframe Media National Initiative, 2011).

In Spain, Weaver (2010) recognizes the existence of a risk of imitation when they are disclosed in the media, especially among youth and especially if they are celebrities. But he believes that these media have a great positive potential as a prevention tool, which does not happen because of their silence, but for their effectiveness to publicize information about suicide responsibly.

Merike Sisask and Airi Värnik, of the Institutes of Mental Health and Suicidology and the Institute of Social Work of Estonia, respectively, published in January 2012 a critical review of the work that had been done before on the role of media in the prevention of suicide. Their starting approach was that many studies have been devoted to assess the link between suicide stories in the press and actual suicide rate, but few have analyzed the role that responsible information can play in suicide prevention; It is known as the "*Papageno effect*" (a term coined by Niederkrötenhaler referring to a character in Mozart's *Magic Flute* dissuaded by

children from commit suicide when they are shown the good things offered by life). These authors point out that one of the problems of information in the press about suicide is that the reports are not representative of the statistics, and tend to be sensationalistic, to exaggerate or dramatize certain highly lethal methods that are unusual in real life (Sisask and Värnik, 2012: p. 133). They believe that with a relevant and reliable information the theory of imitation may work as a deterrent. Although the media are only one factor of the social environment in which suicidal behavior can be learned, and the effect it is probably smaller than other psychosocial factors, it is a major agent in the social construction of reality, especially for vulnerable people.

Sisask and Värnik (2012: p. 132) collected quantitative and content analysis and applied by Niederkrotenhaller with which he highlights the influence of publishing the overcoming of an adversity. Readers can also be important agents in the construction of reality in the medium. The digital editions of newspapers, with comments from readers, allow the feedback between medium and reader, and also among the readers themselves.

A study published in 2001 by researchers at the National Center for Injury Control in Atlanta, in the US, with a sample of 153 people who had attempted suicide, and a control group of 513 people aged between 13 and 34 years, wanted to assess how suicide is contagious and depends on the exposure to the behavior of others (Mercy et al., 2001). They chose a young population statistically more prone to suicide by imitation, and assessed their exposure to the suicidal behavior of relatives and friends, but also those shown by the media. Respondents also were vulnerable for problems of depression and alcohol addiction. As a result of their investigations they concluded that there is no evidence that exposure to the suicidal behavior of others is a risk factor. Even in those groups most prone to it, a cause-effect was observed. They also found evidence of a link between treatment in the media and suicidal behavior. By contrast, exposure to suicidal behavior in the media and, to a lesser extent, friends and acquaintances, was associated with a lower risk of fatal suicide attempts, although this only happens when the emotional and temporal distance from the possible model is the greatest, because then the subject is able to appreciate with more distance the negative consequences of the act.

Contemporary public health trends encourage the media to work for that Papageno effect.

4.4 Responsible information

4.4.1. Freedom of information and regulation

At the beginning of the last decade, in the United States, the Annenberg Public Policy Center conducted interviews with 59 journalists who had written about suicide. These interviews served to confirm the need to propagate among information professionals the recommendations, since many of them did not appreciate the contagion potential for the spread of the news of autolysis, and others minimized the validity of studies that confirm it (Gould et al., 2003). The center also reviewed

recent practices on the subject in reference newspapers in the United States. That analysis revealed that half of those newspapers put the news of suicides in the first 9 pages, and seven of them were located in the middle of their headlines. In the 90', besides, in the *New York Times* were found, as usual, stories of suicides less than 25. In fact, more than 20 percent of the victims in their reporting was below that age, while the annual figures said that they only represented 14 percent of the total rate. They were therefore informationally overrepresented. In general, although 60 percent of the news showed a cause for suicide, only 8 percent cited depression among the triggers.

Solutions to the "*Werther effect*" are embodied in guidelines and recommendations addressed to journalists and media directors. Sometimes they are documents drawn up by mental health professionals with the participation of journalists; others are guides drafted without the complicity of the journalistic profession (a sector that suspiciously observes what it understands as externally imposed limitations on their freedom of information); and others are drawn from within institutions such as the World Health Organization. The level of acceptance, implementation and use of these guidelines is diverse and varies depending on how much developed the suicide prevention policies are in each country. In many states, the development of these codes is part of more complex strategies to combat rising rates of suicide. In Spain already we advance that there is no preventive global plan (although in Catalonia and Andalusia they are working on it) and that the penetration of these guidelines is quite low. The countries that have more experience in this regard are Australia, UK, Canada, New Zealand, Austria, Switzerland and with more resistance by information professionals, the United States.

Media Wise Trust (an NGO created in the UK by journalists that encourages honest and ethical journalistic practices) refers in one of their reports to the need for rules to talk about suicide. Remember that the taboos surrounding suicide are reflected in the almost complete absence of standards for reporting on this subject in many codes of conduct in the world of journalism (Norris et al., 2006). It is noteworthy that, among the 188 worldwide codes reviewed by the Media Wise Trust, only 13 make a mention, and the signs usually come in the form of prohibiting or ordering not to do, more than explaining why editors and publishers should be especially sensitive when reporting on it.

The study authors make the following reasoning: the media professionals constantly have to make judgments on what is published and what is not, and how to tell the story; when that history can influence the behavior of others, the practitioner should have an enough preformed judgment; for that, professionals have the obligation to listen to the experts, something especially important when dealing with an issue that affects public health. The journalist has the responsibility to provide the public with information to help you make informed decisions about their lives without forgetting that freedom of information is a freedom exercised by professionals in the public. Codes of recommendations on suicide and its monitoring can be. conclude, a good way to modulate the practice of information on suicide.

The problem is that when media professionals outside say about this matter, journalists tend to question if it threatens their independence and their exercise of freedom of information (Norris et al., 2006). However, understand the authors of this report, the media are not above the rules or the accepted moral values. In the Media Wise Trust it is found reasonable to operate independently, whether the journalists develop their own style rules, and looks reasonable to suggest that that self-regulation can accept the advice of experts.

In that justification of the rules he Australians Pirkis and Blood (2010) also work. They do not talk about censorship but to recognize that the media have a preventive role in the condition of suicide as a health problem and must be responsible and respond to a judgment of weight between the right to information and public health. So they note that in some countries, journalists in the best of cases, are only slightly familiar with the causes and symptoms of suicide and the resources that exist to help people at risk. At worst, they ignore this knowledge directly.

4.5. Suggestions of external regulation

Next we dealt with the codes developed from parties external to the journalistic profession internationally. In some of them information professionals together with mental health experts have participated, but they have not born from within organizations of journalists. Some of these documents are contradictory, and there are issues such as whether or not to show the pain of the relatives, on which no consensus. In Spain it does not seem to have made any similar document (self-regulatory standards guide the journalists).

The guide *Resources and Recommendations for journalists*, of the World Health Organization, updated in 2008, starts from the premise that to inform about it in a serious and appropriate manner, and offering help, can prevent loss of life, educate the public and encourage the search of specialized treatment. And also it highlights the fact that, generally speaking, most suicides are not echoed in the media, but only those that particularly involve a special person, place or method. The problem is not the media coverage itself, but certain types of news that increase the risk of suicidal behavior in certain vulnerable individuals, especially if the coverage is extensive, explicit, prominent or sensationalistic. It also has incidence in the risks of imitation that grow in the time immediately after the publication (with peaks that rise after three days and go down two weeks later), when coverage is repetitive or it has been given a big impact and when the vulnerable individual and the person protagonist of the story have aspects in common, whether the suicidal is a celebrity, when the methods are described in detail, and when the final audience is young or person with depression.

Schematically the WHO launches the following standards to the reporters:

- To take advantage of the opportunity to educate the public about suicide. The media can play a role in breaking down myths and misconceptions. The factors are usually multiple and complex and should not be portrayed in a simplistic manner.

Mental illness is a strong predictor. It is almost always a mistake to attribute suicide to a single event, such as a sentimental breakup or failure in a test, especially if the death has not been investigated.

- To avoid language that sensationalizes or normalizes suicide or presents it as a solution to problems. A vocabulary that reinforces the idea that suicide is a public health problem and does not make sensationalism serve to educate the public. It is preferable to use the expression "*increased rates*" that "*epidemic*" and the word "*suicide*" in headlines should be avoided. Also expressions that misinform or normalize and bring autolysis out of context, as "*political suicide*" or "*suicide mission*" because can end desensitizing society. The term "*committed suicide*" implies criminality and increases the stigma of those who have lost a loved one, and also discourages those who are thinking about seeking help.

- To avoid prominent sites and unjustified repetition of stories about suicide.

- To avoid explicit descriptions of the method used. A step by step description can invite repetition.

- Do not provide details about the place. A bridge, a tall building, a cliff, a cross or a road can develop a reputation of "*place for suicide*."

- To exercise caution in the use of photographs and recordings. Images of the suicide scene should not be used, especially if doing so reveals clearly the place or method. Nor should pictures of the deceased be used and, if done, it should be with permission of the relatives. Nor suicide notes should be publicized.

- To take special precautions when reporting on suicide public or famous people. Because of the admiration they usually arouse, the suicides of the professional world of entertainment or political figures may have a special influence on vulnerable individuals. To glorify the death of a celebrity can be read in the key of that society honors its behavior.

- To provide information on where to find help. That includes health care services, telephone support lines, etc.

In the United States several public and private organizations (among which there are the Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the National Institute of Mental Health) have jointly published recommendations for information professionals. They suggest that the media play a powerful role in educating the population on prevention of suicide and provide information on the likely causes of suicide, its warning signs, trends and recent treatments. They can also highlight existing devices for the prevention of suicide. The implementation of measures for the responsible coverage of the information have taught that they can reduce mortality rates for this reason.

They stop at the relationship between suicide and mental health, noting that more than 90 percent of suicide victims had a mental disorder at the time of their death, often misdiagnosed and mistreated, and often related to behavioral disorders and substance abuse. In these latter cases, the risk is much higher in adolescents and young adults. Remember that the cause of suicide is always more complicated than a simple breakup or the loss of a job and cannot be understood as an individual's response to a situation of stress or the discrimination in a group; that is, social conditions do not explain a suicide. People who commit suicide in apparent response to those events or physical illness, generally have underlying mental problems that have remained hidden. The journalist should encourage them to seek effective treatments for these problems, which are often available but underused. To recognize in the information the problems and setbacks that that person has suffered, but also positive aspects of his life, can help to give a more balanced picture.

On the approach of the journalist to friends and family who have survived the deceased, research shows that immediately after a suicide relatives have difficulty understanding what is happening. The answers can be extreme, the reasons complicated and the problems minimized. In this state of trauma the relatives can find the suicide unexplainable or deny the warning signs. Newspaper stories based on these testimonies can be unreliable. Thus, the information professional has to understand that to dramatize the impact of suicide showing images of pain of the family and friends, classmates and other community members can encourage others to do so as a way to attract attention or even retaliation.

In a recent update of these instructions, reporters are told that instead of headlines and prominent sites, to report minimizing the presence the news without sensationalism; to use photos or images of the work, the school or the family instead of including photos or videos of the place of suicide, pain in the family or funeral; to not describe suicide as something inexplicable and to speak about the warning signs and tips on what to do; the suicide note should not be transcribed; to treat it as a mental health issue, and not as something criminal; that expert opinion on mental health should be sought to discuss the causes and not those of the police.

In Australia, at the expense of his government and since 1999, a comprehensive guide is developed and updated for the management of information about suicides agreed by mental health professionals, journalists and corporate media (*A Mindframe Resource for Media Professionals. Mindframe Media National Initiative 2011*). It is important to note that in it they also give recommendations for the treatment of mental illness-related information (as clearly establishes the link between suicide and mental disorder). With regard to the volume and prominence of news it suggests to the journalist and editors to consider whether the particular story really needs dissemination and reflect on how many similar stories have been reported in the media or other media lately, considering that that repetition can normalize suicide as an acceptable option. It also invites to consider the potential impact of the story or its elements on vulnerable audiences, considering that the risk is greater when some people identify themselves with the protagonists of the news.

On the method of self-inflicting death, as other decalogues do, they insist that, in many cases, there will not be important and of public interest, even though it would be interesting for a certain audience. If the story so requires, it will be discussed only in general terms. They must be especially cautious if it is an unusual method because you can start that way of imitation. Similarly, talking about the places proposed in very general terms so as not to popularize them.

As for the suicide of public figures and celebrities the document recognizes that it is considered a matter of public interest, but can lead to an imitation effect by identifying vulnerable audiences and the glamor of those figures. So it suggests avoiding the description of the method and insist on the uselessness of the act. Telephone calls to Australian care prevention services grow after a famous case, and therefore it is important to include them in the news.

As for family and friends it is reminded that they are grieving remember and some can be in risk of suicidal behavior. It is not recommended th interview them just after the ephemeris of the suicide because of the stress generated in them. The images of the deceased should not be used if there is no permission of the families, and if used it should be in non-prominent places of the medium to avoid overdramatizing the act.

In the UK, the Media Wise Trust has also issued its own recommendations (*Media and Suicide. Guidelines for Journalists from Journalists, 2003*). It clarifies that not all suicides are newsworthy, but when they are, professionals in the media have to present the story with responsibility for reducing the number of potential suicides. In a responsible news the feelings of the relatives, who are particularly vulnerable and may feel angry, hopeless, guilty, or ashamed, are especially considered. Publicity makes the situation worse, especially for children. It warns that it is best to consult the family before publishing material that should remain outside the public domain. It is possible that some will appreciate the compassion of the media, especially when the event occurs in unusual circumstances, but it is better to avoid excessive intrusion into grief and the private life of the family. Explicit descriptions of the method used can accentuate the distress of relatives and friends of the deceased. The guide of the Media Wise Trust also recommends to avoid speculation, especially when it comes to a famous person. The important persons are entitled to a private life, even when they commit suicide.

This guide also reflects about the futility of self-censorship. It notes the importance of the public to be aware of the phenomenon and to know the signs of alarm or the existing places of prevention when seeking help. Invite newsrooms to organize debates between the staff and develop its own policy about the treatment of suicide and ensure that they have data on support organizations that can give advice and answer questions.

Also in Britain, the guide produced by the NGO Samaritans (*Media guidelines for the reporting of Suicide, 2008*) is a reference to the point that even the style book of the

BBC refers to it to extend the rules of treatment of suicide. Samaritans is an NGO of religious origin, born in 1953, with a strong presence throughout the British territory, and whose mission is to provide telephone support and personnel to those at risk of suicide. It offers services similar to those provided in Spain by the Hope Phone.

Their guide warns that there is a fine line between sensationalism and sensitive and intelligent information. The positive effects of good information pass through raising awareness of the complexity of the factors involved in suicide and challenge the stigma; bringing the debate on suicide to the public to overcome the taboo; to demand better resources to deal with mental health problems; to spread support services to encourage people to use them in an early time of the problem; to offer advice to both people at risk as to families and relatives; and to disseminate that it is a phenomenon that can be prevented with the right help.

And when reporting it advises to avoid technical explanations or details of the method as well as reconstructions and dramatizations; to avoid simplistic explanations (usually there is a catalyst, but it cannot be reduced to a single cause); not to gloss over the reality of suicide (featuring a character who has tried it as immediately recovered); to avoid disclosing the contents of any note; not to emphasize the positive results of the suicide of a person (it is a very dangerous message that is transmitted if it appears that people praise the suicidal, or makes parents of a child who has committed suicide to reconcile, or takes to public derision the harassing of school mates); to foster public understanding of the complexity of suicide; to consider the times (the concurrence of two or more suicides in a short period of time and space makes the events most newsworthy, but there must be careful on the connections that establishes by the contagion effect that could cause); do not dramatize or make romantic the events and the reactions of those close (it's useful in prevention to emphasize the avoidable tragedy of loss); to remember the effects on survivors, both relatives and those who have attempted suicide.

In addition, when the journalist works with individuals, families or communities in mourning it is advisable to make it clear when you are interviewing a close person and you will use the material and when not to; to take into account the difficulties that the relatives have to understand what is happening; not to use the Internet profiles or photos of those killed in the Network against the wishes of the family because of the stress involved, and provide an opportunity to the relative to review what he said if he could regret it before publication.

The New Zealand case is an anomaly and an exception in the case of a developed country in the cultural orbit of the above. In this country, the government has legislated against the publication of information on suicides in a kind of censorship on this subject. According to data published in 2011 by the Ministry of Health, in New Zealand about 500 people commit suicide each year and a quarter of them have less than 25 years, with a rate of around 11 per 100,000 inhabitants. There, freedom of information in this area is legally restricted by several articles of the law known as Coroner's Act, 2006.

The Coroner's Act restricts information of individual suicides. In its section 71 prohibits individuals to make public details of a self-inflicted death if the relevant research is not completed, without permission of the relevant official. The only information that can be offered, without official permission from the authorities, is the name, residence and occupation of the person, and the fact that the authorities have found it dead. Authorities will only authorize the dissemination of other things if they think there is no risk to public health. This standard, as you can see, leaves a wide field of discretion to the authorities to limit the freedom of journalists. In the section 73 are defined particularities such as everything related to the manner of death, the circumstances or the research.

However, the New Zealand Ministry of Health published in 1999 a guide for journalists (*Reporting suicide: a resource for the media, 2011*), made with the advice of health experts that has been updated and is juxtaposed to the legislation in use as a complement and guidance.

4.6. Internal self-regulation

Self-regulation by journalists through codes of ethics and style books is common in countries where freedom of press exists. In the absence of explicit legal limits imposed by the State, the media, media organizations and journalists develop their own rules of conduct that do not compel them legally, but they do in an ethical and deontological way, and end up being imposed. We briefly review what some style rules created by journalists and reporters outside Spain say, and then we focus on some of the mainstream media in Spain (where, incidentally, we could not find monographic external guides to provide guidance on the information about the suicide).

At the European level, it is worth bringing here some articles of the European Code of Deontology of Journalism, written by Manuel Nunez Encabo. Although they do not allude to suicide, its provisions can be considered by an editor who is in the work of reporting about this. Its Article 23 it states that "*the right of people to their own private life be respected.*" For its part, Article 30 states that "*in journalism one should not confuse what is conflictive or spectacular with what is important from the informative point of view*".

The National Union of Journalists of Scotland (National Union of Journalists of Scotland) publishes a guide for the treatment of suicide (*The reporting of Mental Health and Suicide by the media, 2006*), aware because it is among the highest rates in the UK. In its preamble it warns that the guide is not intended to be an exercise in political correctness or constrain the freedom and independence of journalists, but also offers a tool to inform precisely and adequately. The guide notes that suicide is no longer a crime nor it is illegal, but usually requires the presence of a judge and to certify the minutes of death. So it is not appropriate to say "*committed*" and is preferred verb "*completed*".

On the suicide of adolescents and youth, it proposes to take special care with the mourning of families and friends or the impact that the suicide of a student causes to teachers and classmates. To approach the classmates, for example, at the entrance of the center is not only of bad taste but also dangerous. It is best to wait for declarations of the school or other institution. We must avoid meddling in the intimacy and privacy.

Also in Britain, the book style of the BBC (*BBC's Editorial Guidelines*) gives special attention to suicide. Interestingly, it devotes a section under the heading "*Damage and crime*", under the title "*Suicide, attempted suicide, self-harm and eating behavior disorders*", although it only devotes 16 lines to it. It indicates that

(...) suicide, attempted suicide and self-harm, suicide should be portrayed with great sensitivity, both in fiction and non-fiction programs. The reports and fictional portraits have the potential to make these actions appear as possible, and even appropriate, for vulnerable people.

Also it states that any proposed broadcast "*... should be referred to a chief editor, or, if the editor is independent, to the commissioning editor. You should also go to the Chief Advisor of the editorial policy*" It further states that "*Caution must be exercised to avoid describing or showing methods of self-harm or suicide in explicit detail, unless there is a clear editorial justification.*" It reminds that the sensible use of language is important and that "*suicide was decriminalized in 1961 and since then the term to commit is considered offensive to some people, 'to take one's life' or 'to kill oneself' are preferable alternatives.*"

In Spain, although none of the provisions of the *Deontological Code of the FAPE*, the Federation of Press Associations, makes explicit reference, some of the fragments could be relevant. Article 4 states that

The journalist will respect the right of people to their own privacy and image, bearing in mind that:

- Only the defense of the public interest justifies intrusions or inquiries about the private life of a person without their previous consent.
- In the news coverage of the issues in which elements of pain or distress mediate in the affected persons, the journalist avoid meddling and unnecessary speculations about their feelings and circumstances` [...].
- Special attention will be given to the treatment of matters affecting children and youth and the right to privacy of minors will be respected.

The Style Book of El País refers briefly to suicide in the Title I: Principles, Section 1: Editorial Policy. In particular, its Article 1.6. reflects that

The journalist must be particularly careful with the information concerning suicides. First, because there is always the appearance coincides with reality, and also because psychology has proven that these news incite to take one's life to people who were already prone to suicide and they feel at the time a stimulus to imitation. Suicides should be published only in the case of people of importance or involving a social fact of general interest.

From the Stylebook of RTVE Corporation several articles can be drawn that directly or indirectly affect the journalist in relation to suicide. In the section on respect for privacy, honor and reputation and in the subsection *"The pillars of respect"* it is stated that the information on dramatic situations *"should harmonize the informative interests with the obligation to avoid unnecessary pain both to victims and families."* It also notes that *"one thing is the public interest and other the interest of the public. The morbid incentive that certain events or the private lives of people with public notoriety arises does not justify the intrusion into the privacy of citizens."*

On private grief, this book explains that *"the right to privacy must be especially respected in cases of suffering and disgrace"* and that *"the pain of the victims is a private feeling."* This rule can be applied to the pain of relatives. As regards the use of particularly harsh or dramatic images it is talked that *"should be limited to cases that have a high informative value and their broadcast be necessary to understand the scope of what happened,"* further noting that *"to play back images or sounds of great impact and / or violence only by their visual or auditory value is not justified in RTVE"* Besides, it adds that *"close-ups of injured people and dead bodies are always unnecessary, even if they are from victims of terrorist attacks"* and *"The same is true of people who are suffering a situation of great tension"* No doubt these rules require to exclude images of suicide obtained in public.

Obviously, all of the guidelines just described apply to information on suicides, but also in Chapter 5 (*"Sensitive issues"*) a special section is opened on the treatment of suicide in which it is recommended to avoid *"the information and images related to suicide and serious self-harm, and even when its protagonists are children or adolescents. In RTVE, suicide should be considered a particularly sensitive issue."* Exceptions must be justified and *"suicide may only be cited as the cause of death, especially when it comes to relevant personalities or when it reveals a social fact of general interest"*. The book appeals to the responsibility and that implies...

to consider the feelings of relatives, avoiding the detailed description of the method of suicide adopted and to take into account the sensitivity of the receiving public. Although it may be relevant to indicate how a person died, providing too much detail may encourage others to try these methods. Explicit descriptions can also accentuate the distress of the families and friends of the deceased, particularly the children.

The Catalan Corporation of Audiovisual Media, in its style book, points out that the experience of pain is an intimate experience that deserves the utmost respect. About suicide, it recommends treating it with extreme caution and only when required by the notoriety of the person or the circumstances of the fact. It also warns that it should not be qualified as suicide a death if you do not have confirmation. If the identity of the person is disclosed, the cause of death must be mentioned without euphemisms, unless the family or friends speak out in reverse. The contents or details inciting to suicide, or that provide details about the procedure should be avoided.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Reports of suicides associated with eviction processes on the front page of the newspapers have served to draw attention to the drama involving dozens of mortgage releases that occur daily. Maybe it has marked a new trend that widens the range of information published on suicides and it is consolidated as a new standard, as has happened with information about gender violence (for many years she lived in seclusion in the events section, until the social evolution and journalism have given it its proper place). One wonders if the media and journalists are breaking a taboo, beginning to reconsider whether goods such as privacy, honor, physical integrity or public health can and must yield in certain circumstances, for the value that certain information of suicides may have in forming public opinion on issues of general interest. A high rate of suicides can talk about an increase in mental health problems, or a situation of harassment at a big company (as it happened in France) or the drama of thousands of people losing their home and maintain a lifetime debt with banks, or some unhealthy habits among a section of the youth population.

To simplify, one could say that on one side of the scales are the general interest, the formation of public opinion and the debate that influences the knowledge that citizens have of their social environment; on the other side, the right to personal and family privacy, to the honor and, in some cases, the self-image, the security and public health, the protection of minors, and even the right to the life and the physical integrity of the people. The greater or lesser weight, in each case, on either side of the scale can make that an information about suicide move about coverage in the channels of the right to information and determine a line to follow by that and other media in the future, or, on the contrary, there is no advance in improving public opinion, it does not serve to achieve the realization of a common good superior to sacrifice of personal rights of the main characters, or even worse, that it enhances it.

Scientific evidence about the risk of contagion by the publication of certain information on suicides are there, as are the arguments that can be treated in a free public opinion. It is possible to transform this negative Werther effect on a Papageno effect to prevent suicides and encourage prevention. For that it is required to report responsibly, without sensationalism, without euphemisms and treating it as a public health issue.

Journalists and media editors have a responsibility to society. Both action and omission have their consequences. The resistance of professionals to conform to codes and standards imposed from outside is logical, as can be understood as an attack on freedom of information. But remember that in many media the order is NOT TO REPORT suicides, whatever they are. And that is also a form of self-censorship that robs citizens of useful data to make informed decisions, and which prevents the necessary debate on issues that may hide behind suicides. They must be, therefore, the organizations of journalists that generate, from within, and with advice from health professionals, their own codes of practice. The New Zealand solution is a censorship from government agencies, and it seems a bad reference in a democratic society where freedom of information should not find the limits that

sets the architecture of the system of fundamental rights interconnected in a relationship horizontality in which each other become possible.

We remain, finally, with the words of the sociologist Durkheim, "*what may contribute to the development of the suicide (...) is not the fact of talking about it, is the way in which they talk.*"

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