INCENTIVES OF SELF-WILLED DEATH IN MEDIA

Deimantas Jastramskis
Vilnius University
deimantas.jastramskis@kf.vu.lt

Abstract
Research presented in this paper shows that responsible reporting of suicides is excluded from the agenda of Lithuanian media. Content analysis of the five largest Lithuanian internet sites reveals that these media channels do not conform to the majority of the recommendations by the World Health Organization on the responsible reporting of suicides. Presented research raises a hypothesis that the high flow of information on the suicide of famous Lithuanian TV person Aurimas Dautartas in the Lithuanian media could have had significant influence on the increase of suicide numbers in Lithuania (right after this tragic event in 2011). It is argued that the journalistic content on the matter of suicides (which may encourage suicidal behavior of vulnerable society members) is determined by various commercial, editorial, psychological, sociological, educational, legal and ethical factors. Therefore the handling of such a problem depends on the focused efforts of state institutions, educational offices, non-governmental organizations and the community of journalists and publishers.

Introduction
The factors contributing to suicide and its prevention are complex and not fully understood. However, there is evidence that the media plays a significant role both in the prevention and stimulation of suicides (World Health Organization, 2008). The impact of media on the imitation of suicide behavior depends on the manner, framing and quantity of disseminated information. Vulnerable individuals may be influenced to engage in imitative behaviors by the reports of suicide, particularly if the coverage is extensive, prominent, sensationalist and/or explicitly describes the method of suicide. On the other hand, media may have a positive impact: responsible reporting may serve to educate the public about suicide and may encourage those at the risk of suicide to seek help (World Health Organization, 2008).

D. Phillips (1974) research (covering the period 1947–1968) shows that suicides increased immediately after a suicide story had been publicized in the newspapers in Britain and in the United States. The more publicity devoted to a suicide story, the larger the rise in suicides thereafter. The rise in suicides after a story was restricted mainly to the area in which the story was publicized. According to the data of World Health Organization (2008) over 50 other investigations into the imitative suicides have been conducted since the Phillips’ study. Collectively, these studies have strengthened the body of evidence in a number of ways. First, they have used improved methodologies. Secondly, these studies have examined different media. Finally, although most of the early studies were conducted in the United States and examined only completed suicides, later studies have broadened the scope to the Asian and European countries and have also included focus on the suicide attempts.

Media’s role is especially important in the cases of celebrity suicide. Various studies show increased number of suicides after extensive, detailed, romanticized and sensational presentation of suicides of celebrities in media. For example, number of suicides in the United States and Great Britain has increased after the self-willed death of Marilyn Monroe and huge amount of media attention given to this event in 1962 (Phillips, 1974). Although the suicide of Kurt Cobain (1994) was in the centre of media attention too, studies show that in Seattle (US), city in which he spent his last years of life (and had a lot of fans) number of suicides didn’t increase. This was influenced by the professional and responsible approach that majority of the media outlets chose while disseminating the information about this tragedy (King, Apter, 2003).

According to the suicide rate (per 100 000 people), Lithuania has been in the first place among the European countries for many years. Average number of suicide per 100 000 inhabitants in Lithuania has been several times higher than the European Union (EU) average in the period of 2000–2010. For example, in 2009 there have been 31.5 of suicides recoded per 100 000 inhabitants in Lithuania and 10.4 in EU (average number for 27 countries, Diagram 1, Eurostat, 2012).

Diagram 1. Suicide rate per 100 000 inhabitants in EU 2009

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Lithuanian suicide prevention specialists have submitted recommendations for the journalists and publishers on the responsible reporting of suicides; there are also some legal and ethical norms on the suicide reporting in Lithuania. Nevertheless, the studies of Lithuanian press show that responsible reporting of suicides was excluded from the agenda of Lithuanian media. D. Gailièien et al. (2002) research showed very high index of suicide imitation in the national Lithuanian press. Moreover, analyses of regional press (Klaipèda’s newspapers during the period 1991–2004) reveals that majority of articles covering suicides do not satisfy the recommendations of suicides reporting in media (Gedutienè, Maskoliuièienè, 2005). Research of Lithuanian students and schoolchildren attitudes related to suicide reveals that 24.1 % of students (20 years old), 42.1 % of 15 year old and 40.5 % of 13 year old schoolchildren were severely shocked by the samples of suicides in media and it stimulated youth thoughts about imitation of suicide (Gailièienè et al., 1999).

However, it must be emphasized that the reflection of suicides in Lithuanian internet media almost weren’t studied. Moreover, studies up to this date paid little attention for the conceptual formulation of factors that influence the portrayal of suicides in media. This paper strives to shed some light on these previously unexplored areas. The main aim is to find out how the Lithuanian internet news sites conform to the recommendations on the responsible reporting of suicides, while also giving attention to the definition of factors that...
potentially determine the editorial behavior of preparing and disseminating information about suicides. First part of the paper introduces the case study results of one high-profile suicide in Lithuania: analysis of reports in the five largest Lithuanian internet sites is presented. In the second part, theoretical framework of factors influencing the irresponsible content of media (concerning the suicide presentation) is proposed.

Results Of Case Study Analysis
Famous Lithuanian TV person and radio show announcer Aurimas Dautartas committed suicide on March 20, 2011. This was a very high-profile, newsworthy event for the Lithuanian mass media. Various reports about the death of A. Dautartas were displayed in the front pages of internet news sites during the most of the day on March 21, 2011. Lithuanian commercial media has been intensively disseminating the information about this event even after several weeks since the suicide have passed.

Research results presented in this paper are based on the quantitative content analysis of the publications (March 21–27, 2011) and qualitative content analysis of the publications (March 21, 2011) about the suicide of A. Dautartas in the five largest Lithuanian internet sites. According to the data provided by the Gemius Baltic (2011) five largest Lithuanian internet sites during the analyzed period were Delfi.lt, Lrytas.lt, 15min.lt, Balsas.lt, Alfa.lt (Table 1).

Table 1. Delfi.lt, Lrytas.lt, 15min.lt, Balsas.lt, Alfa.lt: reach and visitors (real users) March 2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internet news site</th>
<th>Reach, %</th>
<th>Visitors (real users)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delfi.lt</td>
<td>58,84</td>
<td>1 155 167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lrytas.lt</td>
<td>42,38</td>
<td>832 022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15min. lt</td>
<td>42,26</td>
<td>829 622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balsas.lt</td>
<td>40,56</td>
<td>796 401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfa.lt</td>
<td>37,82</td>
<td>742 422</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gemius Baltic (2001).

To be more precise about the research methodology, the quantitative content analysis was conducted in order to determine the amount of publications (March 21–27, 2011) about the death of A. Dautartas in the five largest Lithuanian internet sites. On other hand, qualitative content analysis explored how did the reports (March 21, 2011) about the A. Dautartas suicide conformed to the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) on the responsible reporting of suicides (WHO, 2008). Six criteria were formed for the qualitative evaluation of publications:

1) position of publication; updating, continuation and repetition of the theme;
2) information about where to seek help;
3) language of headline and publication (sensationalizes or normalizes suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems);
4) indication of method used and place of suicide;
5) footage and nature of photographs and video;
6) education of the public about suicide.

Thus the qualitative content analysis was conducted in order to find out if publications (March 21, 2011) about the suicide of A. Dautartas in the examined internet sites complied these criteria.

Results of the quantitative content analysis of the internet sites Delfi.lt, Lrytas.lt, 15min.lt, Balsas.lt, Alfa.lt March 21–27, 2011 are shown in the Table 2. Large amount of publications about the A. Dautartas suicide in the examined Lithuanian internet sites on March 21–27, 2011 (total amount – 35 publications) show that media outlets paid quite considerable attention to this topic.

Table 2. Amount of publications about the suicide of A. Dautartas in Delfi.lt, Lrytas.lt, 15min.lt, Balsas.lt, Alfa.lt on March 21–27, 2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date / Internet site</th>
<th>Delfi.lt</th>
<th>Lrytas.lt</th>
<th>15min.lt</th>
<th>Balsas.lt</th>
<th>Alfa.lt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/21/2011</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The qualitative content analysis of the Lithuanian internet sites Delfi.lt, Lrytas.lt, 15min.lt, Balsas.lt, Alfa.lt reveals that these media channels do not conform to the majority of the recommendations by the WHO on the responsible reporting of suicides. The examined content of the internet sites partly conform to these two criteria: information about where to seek help, indication of method used and place of suicide. Only one internet site paid attention for the education of public about suicide. Content of all analyzed internet sites didn’t conform to these criteria: position of publication (reports about A. Dautartas death were displayed in front pages); updating, continuation and repetition of the theme; language of headline and publication (sensationalizes or normalizes suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems); footage and nature of photographs and video (romantic galleries of photographs (in all sites) and video (in one site) about the live of A. Dautartas were published).

Hypothesis can be raised that such portrayal of this event increased the short-term number of suicides in Lithuania. First, five suicides were registered in Lithuania on March 21, 2011: it was the highest number of self-willed deaths per day since March 1, 2011. Moreover, 26 suicides were registered per week since March 21 until March 27, 2011. It must be emphasized that this number is by 9 suicides (53 %) higher than the corresponding indicator of the previous week (March 14–20). Furthermore, there were 22 (27%) more suicides in Lithuania on April if compared to March, 2011. Finally, the number of suicides in Lithuania were highest on April compared with all other months of 2011 (Higienos institutas, 2012; Higienos instituto Mirties priežasčių registrai, 2011; Diagram 2).

It is empirically clear that abundance of information about the A. Dautartas death and it’s detailed presentation in the Lithuanian internet news sites (and another media) several weeks since March 21, 2011 coincided with the increase of suicides a week after March 21 and also whole April, 2011. Therefore, presented research raises a hypothesis that the high flow of information on the suicide of famous Lithuanian TV person Aurimas Dautartas in the Lithuanian media could have had significant influence on the increase of suicide numbers in Lithuania (right after this tragic event in 2011). To approve or deny this hypothesis comprehensive study of committed suicides (ant their circumstances) and analysis of more media channels (not only internet news sites) of examined period in 2011 are required.
Factors Determining Irresponsible Content of Media

The research presented in the previous part of this paper reveals that responsible reporting of suicides is still excluded from the agenda of Lithuanian media. Why do the journalists and editors behave socially irresponsible? Why is the risk of influencing the vulnerable individuals to engage in the imitative behaviors fostered by reports of suicide? Theoretical framework for the causes of such media behavior is still quite fragmented and not cohesive in the existing body of literature: it must be emphasized that for of such an important and sensitive research object, comprehensive and conceptual theoretical model is needed. This paper strives to fill this gap and delineate the most important factors that potentially influence the irresponsible content of media concerning the presentation of suicides. Seven major factors are discerned: commercial, news selection, psychological, sociological, educational, legal and ethical factors.

Commercial factor. Most media outlets (channels) are administered by the profit-oriented organizations. With some reservation it could be asserted that suicide (especially of a famous person) is newsworthy, high-profile event which helps to get enough audience attention and economic gain for the profit-oriented organizations. Non-profit media organizations do not usually escalate topics concerning suicide.

News selection factor. There are characteristics identified by the previous research that define the newsworthy events: an event which has at least one characteristic has potential of becoming news. Suicide of a famous person has four of the five primary characteristics of a newsworthy event (Jamieson, Campbell, 1992): personalization, drama and conflict, action, novelty and deviance. Therefore it appears that self-willed death becoming news is a natural part of media work.

Psychological factor. While creating news, journalists and editors place the most important information first within a text (structure of “inverted pyramid”) and answer to these questions: who, what, when, where, why and how. Thus they develop particular cognitive schemes concerning the composition of the journalistic information. It is psychologically difficult for the journalists and editors which produce the reports about suicide to comply with the recommendations of health experts: some recommendations on the responsible reporting of suicides are basically opposed to the journalistic principles of information presentation. If the article wouldn’t include the place of tragedy, it wouldn’t be answered to question “where?”. If the method of suicide wouldn’t be described, it wouldn’t be answered to question “how?”. If in the beginning of publication the most important information about the event would not be placed, it would mean that the job weren’t performed qualitatively. Therefore journalists and editors while implementing the recommendations of experts may experience cognitive dissonance – tension that arises when one is simultaneously aware of two inconsistent cognitions (Myers, 2007). To accept a decision to follow recommendations of experts, journalists and editors must mitigate psychological tension (dissonance) and find a justification why they shouldn’t follow the professional norms of creating reports.

Sociological factor. There are prevailed favorable attitudes in respect to suicide (as a person right to choose) in Lithuania society (Gailienė, 2005). Therefore thoughts conveyed in media that suicide is a possible method of problem solution are basically acceptable for the most of society.

Educational factor. Education of journalists, editors and journalism students about the effects of suicide presentation and framing in media isn’t systemic and sufficient in Lithuania. It is mainly concerned with the specialists of mental health and non-government organizations. It would be meaningful to acquaint journalism students with the problems of suicide presentation in media comprehensively before they learn to answer previously discussed questions who, what, when, where, why, how in the structure of “inverted pyramid”.

Legal factor. Republic of Lithuania Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effects of Public Information (2009) define the public information which promotes suicide, specifies what suicide measures and circumstances are attributed to the information which has a detrimental effect on minors. The Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics and The Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania must supervise how the media subjects follow this legal act. The activity and reports of two media monitoring and regulating institutions (Lietuvos radijo ir televizijos komisija, 2011; Žurnalistų etikos inspektoriaus 2010 …, 2011) show that legal supervising of media in respect of suicide presentation isn’t enough ensured.

Ethical factor. Information about the suicides disseminated in the Lithuanian media in some cases doesn’t conform to the 49 article of The Code of Ethics of Lithuanian Journalists and Publishers. However, the relatives of persons that committed suicides very rarely submit complaints to The Ethics Commission of Journalists and Publishers (a self-regulatory institution that consists of journalist organisations, media organisation associations and other public organisation representatives). The Ethics Commission of Journalists and Publishers almost doesn’t carry out the monitoring of media content: therefore numerous inappropriate reports about the suicides are forming a tradition of ethical norms violation in the Lithuanian media.

Conclusions

The quantitative content analysis of the largest Lithuanian news internet sites Delfi.lt, Lrytas.lt, 15min.lt, Balsas.lt, Alfa.lt reveals that these media channels give considerable attention to the suicide presentation (case of high-profile suicide by the famous show person A. Dautartas was analyzed). However, these media channels do not conform to the most of the recommendations of the World Health Organization on the responsible reporting of suicides. It is hypothesized that such a portrayal of suicide may have contributed to the short-term increase of suicides in Lithuania: abundance of information about the death of A. Dautartas and its detailed presentation in the
Lithuanian internet news sites (and another media) several weeks after March 21, 2011 coincided with the higher rates of suicides a week after March 21 and also April, 2011.

This paper also addresses the need for the theoretical framework of factors contributing to such irresponsible presentations of suicide in media as in the case of death of A. Dautartas. It is discussed that the journalistic content on the matter of suicides (which may encourage suicidal behavior of vulnerable society members) is determined by various commercial, editorial, psychological, sociological, educational, legal and ethical factors. Therefore, it seems that the handling of suicide problem depends on the focused efforts of state institutions, educational offices, non-governmental organizations and the community of journalists and publishers.

References


