CHANGING DYNAMICS OF MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR SUICIDE REPORTING
IN THE AGE OF INSTANT MESSAGING

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Abstract

Efforts to lower the teenage suicide rate in America have been a complete failure. The purpose of this Project is to provide a production guide and literature review for use in the production of a short-film documentary that discusses the steadily increasing teen suicide rate in America. Using an historical research methodology, evidence indicates that the historical media practice of not reporting teen suicide may be detrimental to society’s teen suicide prevention efforts. Recent statistics from the CDC (2016) indicate a dramatic increase in teen suicides; some believe that this increase may be due to a corresponding increase in text messaging and social media use among that demographic. The historical lack of news media coverage providing positive support messaging should be considered a contributing factor to this increasing problem. The literature indicates that conflicting Guidelines for the Reporting of Suicide are currently in use in newsrooms across America, with some news media electing not to publish suicide news, while other news media elect to publish suicide reports. Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory is cited to support the position that a positive approach by news media towards reporting suicide may directly influence future suicidal behavior.

Key words: teen suicide, Media Guidelines to Suicide Reporting, “Werther Effect”, copycat theory, suicide contagion theory, semiotechnology, National Strategy 2012
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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Working Title of Project: Rethinking Teen Suicide

The enormous global popularity of instant messaging via social media has created a new paradigm in communication that influences the way we report suicide in our public media. A review of literature indicates significant variation in the guidelines followed by media in the reporting of suicide, particularly teen suicide. Many newsrooms, journalists, writers, and other professionals follow guidelines promulgated in the 1990s; guidelines that evolved from decades of prior research that included conclusions and recommendations based on research conducted in the 18th century.

For example, the so-called “Werther Effect,” a term coined by American sociologist Dave Phillips in 1974, presented the hypotheses that suicide is contagious and media reporting of suicide is aiding and abetting future suicides. This hypothesis arose from reports of a large number of suicides occurring after the publication of Goethe’s novel, The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774), in which the novel’s protagonist commits suicide (Furedi, 2015, Para. 1).

In an article in History Today, while describing life in the 18th Century, sociologist Frank Furedi (2015) stated:

With the growing popularity of novel reading, the age of mass media had arrived. The publication of The Sorrow of Young Werther turned into an almost instant media event. It became the first documented literary sensation of modern Europe (Furedi, 2015, Para. 5).
There is little evidence to support the reports of multiple suicides as a result of Goethe’s novel. Newspapers of the day relied heavily on fiction writers to provide the day’s copy and actual “news” stories were in short supply. While discussing 18th Century newspapers, Williams (2013) stated:

Newspaper reports responded to public apprehensions and anxieties. Their commercial needs led them to focus on certain types of stories and reflect the prejudices of their readers. Sometimes these anxieties and prejudices could be exploited by voluntary groups and societies and turned into a panic about a certain action, behaviors or identity (Williams, 2013, p. 40).

The subsequent moral panic raised by the popularity of this novel may have given rise to the first “urban legend” and this legend could well be a prevalent myth in our own time.

**Importance of the Project**

The importance of this project can be seen in increasing suicide statistics that seem unaffected by the enormous sums of money, time, and talent being spent on suicide research, outreach centers, prevention hot lines, school training and community outreach. It is apparent that efforts to minimize teen suicide have not been successful.

The changing communication paradigm created by the global explosion of social media and instant messaging requires a new and consistent methodology for the reporting of teen suicide. The historical media practice of not reporting teenage suicide may actually contribute to the rise in teen suicide and current research indicates that positive constructive reporting practices may serve to minimize so-called “copycat” behavior. Public and private media have been reluctant to change or modify long held policies, and the lack of a consensus creates the need for greater understanding and knowledge of current research.
However, the purpose of this inquiry is not to question the accuracy or validity of prior research. The purpose of this project is to collect the most current published research available regarding recommended best practices for media guidelines of suicide reporting.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

*Semio-technological* – a term coined by Professor Ganaele Langlois in her book, *Meaning in the Age of Social Media* (2014) wherein she presented the term “semiotechnological” to define meaning-making software such as that used by Facebook, Google, Amazon, et al.. Langlois (2014) stated: “Semiotics is the science of signification, thus semiotechnologies are mechanical ways of producing significations, and by extension meanings, out of data” (Langlois, 2014, pp. 15-16).


**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This study is divided into 5 chapters. Chapter 2 provides a Review of the Literature, providing an historical timeline showing the evolution of Western Civilization’s perception of suicide, and discusses the Philosophical and Ethical assumptions, Moral Dilemmas, and Theoretical Basis forming the foundation for consideration and the Rationale for study.

Chapter 3 presents the Scope and Methodology used in the design of this project and includes a review of applicable Ethical Considerations. Chapter 4 discusses the project development plan created for the production of a professional short-film documentary (detailed in Appendix 1), as well as efforts taken to develop a “crowdsource” funding campaign. Chapter 5 provides Summaries and Conclusions, discusses Limitations of the Project, and provides Recommendations for consideration.
Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature

The objective of this literature review is to provide a foundation of current information regarding “best practices” for news media in the reporting of teen suicides. Teen suicide is a topic long shrouded in myth and taboo that elicits strong opinion and visceral emotional reaction from many people, including news media charged with the responsibility of reporting, or not reporting, incidents of teen suicide within their communities. There are numerous iterations of *Media Guidelines for Suicide Reporting* produced by a variety of governments, NGOs, institutions, and others. Many of these *Guidelines* present contrary recommendations, some of them based on myth, taboo, and mass moral panic. Cultural myth and taboo have long influenced how societies view and communicate suicide. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an historical perspective regarding the subject of suicide and to present evidence that indicates the need for evolving “best practices” in the reporting of teen suicide.

**Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions**

The ethical issues considered in this review involve historically inconsistent reporting practices among some news media and the potentially harmful effect such practices could have upon suicide prevention within a community. Specifically, the issue centers on whether teen suicide should, or should not, be reported by news media and when they are reported, what are the recommended “best practices” that should be followed. The moral reasoning for taking this position stems from traditional Judeo/Christian values, e.g. “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Golden Rule, n.d.).
A Moral Dilemma

Researchers, suicidologists, and others cite statistics that maintain teen suicide is contagious and, that by reporting incidents of teen suicide, news media are creating mass moral panic, and causing an increase in teen suicide. However, in the age of unfettered individual high-speed communication on social media, that becomes a specious argument. Is doing nothing really the answer? Or, could the increased mass moral panic created by uninformed, naïve, and emotion laden youth using instant communication cause far more damage than a well presented, responsible, and positive news report that provides alternative support messaging.

The ethical issues discussed in this project are not the “right” or “wrong” of suicide or existential questions about the right to take one’s own life. The question here is about teenagers; young people not yet fully developed in their mental capabilities, vulnerable, at risk individuals juggling complex technological communication technologies undreamed of twenty years ago. Has the time come to change the way we report adolescent suicide? The Centers for Disease Control most recent report (2016) on suicide in America, based on statistics from 2014, indicates that the suicide rate continues to rise in America, and more significantly, the greatest increase in mortality was in the 10-14 year-old female demographic (CDC, 2016, p.2).

Theoretical Basis

There are a number of theoretical, ethical, and moral concepts that influence this issue. One specific concept that stands out is a part of the Hippocratic oath: “Primum non nocere,” a Latin axiom meaning, “First, do no harm” (Primum, 2005). This aphorism has long been a standard of the medical profession, and it applies equally to any organization dealing with the public good.
In the case of news media reporting of teen suicide, the ethical dilemma inherent in this axiom is whether it is better to report a teen suicide, or is it better not, to report a teen suicide.

Arnett, Fritz & Bell (2009) stated, “Communication ethics works within the realm of temporal decision making, not answers for all time. Communication ethics is responsive to the demands and needs of the context, persons, and topics that shape our lives together (Arnett et al, 2009, p. xviii).

The many theoretical, ethical, and moral questions considered in this paper are based on Arnett et al., (2009) premise of the “four metaphors of communication ethics praxis.” Described as “The Good” (what we seek to protect and promote), the “Historical Moment” (our manner of engaging this question announces the good we seek to protect and promote), “Postmodernity” (identifies the current historical moment) and “Learning” (the communication ethics good of this era) (Arnett et al., 2009, pp. 2-21).

Each of these four metaphors plays a significant role in the understanding of this issue. For example, “The Good” in this case represents the life of a child. The “Historical Moment” involves a complex history of cultural taboo and a body of literature postulating specific reporting guidelines that may or may not be in the best interest of society. “Postmodernity” is applicable due to the significant role that evolving social media plays in this issue, and “Learning” represents the need for society to keep abreast of the changing cultural mores, and demands of the age.

A specific ethical concern regarding current practices used by some media in suicide reporting is seen in the resistance presented by editorial boards, media owners, some reporters, and others in accepting current national and international recommendations from responsible public health agencies and researchers regarding changes in the manner in which suicide should
be reported. There are those who believe that this apparent reluctance to adopt new standards is, in part, due to a lack of understanding of the ethical issues involved. To put it quite simply, is there a failure to recognize the presence of an ethical issue?

In his text on *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership*, C. E. Johnson stated: “Moral sensitivity (recognizing the presence of an ethical issue) is the first step in ethical decision making because we can’t solve a moral problem unless we know that one exists” (Johnson, 2011, p. 236)

As the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus told us, everything changes, and life experience confirms that observation. Therefore, reason dictates that existing *Media Guidelines for Suicide Reporting* require re-evaluation and modification to reflect the dynamic changes in communication technology and the cultural implications created by these changes.

**A Case Study**

The following is an example illustrating how the failure to recognize an ethical issue can affect the manner in which teen suicide is communicated in a given community.

In the early spring of 2015, the residents of Spokane, Washington were shaken by a series of five teenage suicides that awakened the community from its rural slumber. Over the course of six weeks, five local teenagers would die by their own hand. No evidence linking any of these suicides to each other was uncovered. The students attended different schools, did not know each other, and used different methods to take their own life.

Over the summer of 2015, a survey was conducted of the responses used by local news media during the period. This survey disclosed significant variation in the manner in which these incidents were reported. For example, the City’s primary newspaper, *The Spokesman Review*, after a brief initial report about the first suicide, elected not to report any additional information
about the other suicides; or for that matter, any coverage concerning the general subject of suicide. The other primary community newspaper, *The Inlander*, a weekly news magazine, took the complete opposite approach and provided multiple in-depth and comprehensive reports about teen suicide (Sottile, 2012, pp. 1-17). The four local television stations serving the Spokane community were also surveyed, again showing significant variation in reporting, or not reporting, these suicides. Although not officially monitored or surveyed for this report, it was readily apparent that social media provided the bulk of the information, both accurate and inaccurate, that occurred during these events.

Based on the survey, it is evident that different policies regarding the reporting of teen suicide were in use in the greater Spokane area during this tragic time. It is postulated that the lack of a consistent and uniform policy regarding the reporting of teen suicide could contribute to a general confusion about “best practices” and may, in fact, be proven harmful to suicide prevention efforts.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory is cited to support the position that a positive approach by news media towards reporting suicide may directly influence future suicidal behavior. For example, Bandura (1986) discussed how sociocultural diffusion plays a critical role in changing existing cultural mores. Bandura maintained that for sociocultural change to be successful “instructional and motivational factors are required to overcome the initially unfavorable conditions associated with adopting new ways” (p. 160).

Bandura (1986) explained that persuasion, by itself, is not sufficient motivation for adoptive behavior. However, he maintained that combined with positive incentives and the consent of those who are being affected, change is indeed possible.
Additionally, Bandura (1986) discussed the role that self-regulatory mechanisms play in determining human action. He maintained self-regulation could not be accomplished by willpower alone; he posited that it must be developed and mobilized for self-directed change to occur (p. 337).

In his discussion of self-regulatory mechanisms, Bandura (1986) also brought up the subject of dehumanization as a “disengagement practice” (p. 382). Could the suicide taboo be a symbol of society’s dehumanization of the victim? If so, could creating empathy for the victim though knowledge of that person’s prior life, lessen the practice of dehumanization, thereby lessening the taboo? Bandura stated: “Affirmation of common humanity can bring out the best in others” (p. 383).

The Literature

Historical Perspective on Suicide

“One cannot step in the river twice”

At the time the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535 – 445 BCE) was walking the earth and espousing that sage advice (Griffin, 2012, p. 8), suicide was a very common and accepted social practice. Ancient history is replete with famous suicides. The mass suicide at Masada and Sampson’s destruction of the temple represents two such incidents, still routinely spoken about today. Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible make little mention of suicide, nor offer any prohibition against the act.

Saint Augustine (AD 354-434) was the origin of western civilization’s prohibition and taboo against suicide. The source is *City of God*, Book 1, Paragraphs 19–26 (Augustine, trans.1950, pp. 23-31). It is here that Saint Augustine, while discussing the fall of the Roman Empire, describes suicide as a sin against God writing: “… any one who kills a human being,
himself or another, is guilty of murder” (p.27). Over the course of thirteen “paragraphs,” a reasoned and convincing argument presents the moral and theological basis for his decree. This position was recognized at the Council of Braga in 563 AD (NewAdvent, n.d., Para. 1) and has been considered dogma ever since. It is important to note that the venerable Saint did not have teenagers with cell phones around at the time he made these pronouncements. Teenagers, as we know them, did not exist. It would be many centuries, almost two millennia, before society could afford the luxury of childhood, let alone teenagers.

The one fairly consistent and universal prohibition against suicide, even in ancient times, involved slavery. Slaves, *indentured servants, and others of low socioeconomic status* could not take their own lives; this was a crime against the “master” and his property.

The history of suicide in Western Civilization is well documented, including numerous accounts of failed legislative actions designed to punish those who might attempt suicide. Smyth (2003) told of one unfortunate 19th century Irishman who failed in his attempt to hang himself and was saved by a passing surgeon using a crude, but effective, tracheotomy. Regrettably this poor soul was later sentenced by a British Court “to death by hanging.” Ironically, the official hanging failed due to the tracheotomy. The Court, in their divine wisdom, decided to hang the man a third time; this time with a towel wrapped around his neck. The third time “was the charm,” the hanging proved permanent, and justice was served (Smyth, 2003).

History is replete with examples of drastic measures taken to discourage suicide. In Europe during the Middle Ages, it was common practice to “drawn and quarter” a victim, pound a stake through his heart and bury him at a crossroad so his “spirit” did not know which way to go. Even as late as the 1960s, suicides were refused burial in church cemeteries (Minois, 1999).
Media Contagion and Suicide Clusters

Early Research

There is a large body of literature concerning the subject of media contagion and the existence of “suicide clusters.” As presented in Chapter 1, research indicates that one of the first individuals to propose the “copycat” or contagion theory of suicide was D. P. Phillips, who, in 1974 published a study in the *American Sociological Review* 39(3) 340-352 titled: *The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect*. The term “Werther Effect” originated from a novel written by Goethe in 1774 titled *The Sorrow of Young Werther*, in which the novel’s protagonist commits suicide (Furedi, 2015). Phillips begins his article saying:

Goethe’s novel was read widely in Europe, and it was said that people in many countries imitated Werther’s manner of death….Widespread imitation of Werther’s suicide was never conclusively demonstrated but authorities were sufficiently apprehensive to ban the book in several areas, including Italy (Phillips, 1974, p.340).

Phillips goes on to support his hypothesis of the “Werther Effect” though a survey of data collected from the New York Times that published prominent suicides on their front page during a period from 1950 to 1970. Phillips compared the actual number of suicides occurring after a prominent suicide was reported, against the number of suicides occurring before a news article. Based on his observations he concluded that the publication of suicide news caused a subsequent increase in the suicide rate (Phillips, 1974, p. 341-343). It should be noted, that no mention was made of the type or manner of coverage (i.e. sensationalist, bloody photographs, graphic descriptions, etc.).
A number of studies were soon published following Phillips “Werther Effect”, including an often cited study by S. Stack in 1979. Published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* in 1979, Stack stated:

> Most of the evidence to date for a copycat suicide effect is very indirect and not fully satisfactory. It typically is not known to what extent the people committing suicide are aware of the suicide story (Stack, 1979, p. 238).

However, Stack concluded his research saying:

> As anticipated from social learning theory, the greater the amount of coverage of suicide in the media, the greater the increase in suicide rate. However, it appears that the greatest reduction in copycat suicide may sometimes come from reducing the sheer quantity of news on suicide as opposed to the perceived quality of news reporting (Stack, 1979, p.240).

Stack’s closing quote in the above statement has been used in numerous studies to justify the premise that media should not report teen suicide.

In 2003, Gould, Jamieson and Romer argued that:

> There is ample evidence from the literature on suicide clusters and the impact of the media to support the contention that suicide is contagious. The magnitude of the increase in suicides following a suicide story is proportional to the amount, duration, and prominence of media coverage. (p. 1269-1271)

Gould et al. (2003) also stated in their summary that there was “dissenting opinion regarding the contention that suicide is contagious” (p.1272).

**Dissenting View**

A study published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* (2001) concluded:
In this study, we found no evidence that exposure to the suicidal behavior of others is a risk factor for nearly lethal suicide attempts. Even among groups at relatively higher risk for suicidal behavior (i.e., males, alcoholics, depressed persons, adolescents), we found no indication of an effect (Mercy et al., 2001, p.123).

**Obsolete Documents**

One factor influencing the dissemination of new guidelines for suicide reporting is the continued public presence of older guidelines that have been superseded, or suspended, but remain readily available via the Internet and continue to be cited in contemporary literature. For example: In April 1994, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a widely circulated document titled *Suicide Contagion and the Reporting of Suicide* (CDC, 1994, p.1). This CDC document supported the position that “suicide is contagious” and promulgated a general set of “concerns and recommendations.” One of the conclusions reached by this report stated:

One risk factor that has emerged from this research is suicide “contagion,” a process by which exposure to the suicide or suicidal behavior of one or more persons influences others to commit or attempt suicide. Evidence suggests that the effect of contagion is not confined to suicides occurring in discrete geographic areas. In particular, nonfictional newspaper and television coverage of suicide has been associated with a statistically significant excess of suicides (CDC, 1994, p.13).

The CDC superseded this report in 2012, and those recommendations no longer exist in the replacement document, *Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide 2012* (Reporting, 2012, p.1). The problem with the 1994 report is that it remains in wide circulation and its
recommendations are in continuous use in newsrooms around the world. A recent Google search under the heading “suicide contagion and reporting,” returned a reference to this report as the first response. Following the link returns a copy of the superseded report.

An example of how the continued existence of outdated and inaccurate guidelines influence current research can be found in a study published in 2012, where the author noted: “The guidelines that are provided by the CDC (1988) could help community authorities in diverse disciplines to develop a community response plan either for suicide clusters or for circumstances that might expand into suicide clusters (Rezaeian, 2012, p.129).

Another example showing the same reference to the superseded report can be found in a document published in *Studies in Communication Sciences* (2013) where it is stated:

“Furthermore, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has also published guidelines for media members covering suicide in order to minimize suicide contagion and to emphasize preventative measures” (Corbo, A., 2013, p. 67).

**Recommended Best Practices for Suicide Reporting**

Significant research has been conducted in the past decade regarding the role of media in the prevention of suicide. In 2008, the World Health Organization (WHO) published *Preventing Suicide – A Resource for Media Professionals*. This document stated:

The factors contributing to suicide and its prevention are complex and not fully understood, but there is evidence that the media plays a significant role. On the one hand, vulnerable individuals may be influenced to engage in imitative behaviors by reports of suicide, particularly if the coverage is extensive, prominent, sensationalist and/or explicitly describes the method of suicide. On the other hand, responsible reporting may serve to educate the public about suicide,
and may encourage those at risk of suicide to seek help (WHO, 2008).

Another report prepared for the World Health Organization and published in 2014 stated:

Media recommendations should be updated on a regular basis. Recommendations have to include the most recent epidemiological data...The responsible organizations should keep track with research on suicide contagion and with new media developments, and integrate these finding in new editions of recommendations (Maloney, J. et al., (2014), p. 165).

The Canadian Psychiatric Association (CPA) published a policy paper titled *Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide* by Nepon, et al in 2009. In this policy, the CPA concluded:

There is evidence in the literature that implementation of guidelines for media reporting of suicide actually decreases the rate of copycat suicides and the incidence of suicide. Although guidelines exist, most journalists are unaware of the impact of reporting suicide with regard to copycat suicides. They are often unacquainted with or do not follow the guidelines (Nepon, et al., 2009).

The National Strategy


The 2012 *National Strategy* includes detailed recommendations for media responsibility including the following statement: “Objective 4.1. Encourage and recognize news organizations that develop and implement policies and practices addressing the safe and responsible reporting of suicide and other related behaviors” (U.S., 2012, Goal 4). As part of this National Strategy a set of media guidelines were promulgated that stated, in part: “Covering suicide carefully, even
briefly, can change public misperceptions and correct myths, which can encourage those who are vulnerable or at risk to seek help” (U.S., 2015, p.1).

**Framing**

Current literature emphasizes that suicide should not be reported or framed as being “successful, unsuccessful or a failed attempt” or having been “committed.” Many *Media Guidelines* recommend using the terms “completed” or “died by his/her own hand” when reporting a suicide incident; “successful” implies a positive outcome; “committed” sounds like a crime, and suicide is no longer considered a crime (American, 2014, p.1).

**The Myth Prevails**

Contrary to contemporary evidence and significant governmental recommendations, some national and international news media and researchers continue to perpetuate the belief that news media coverage of suicide causes “suicide contagion” and leads to an increase in suicides. For example: On May 1, 2014, *USA Today* published a news article by Kim Painter headlined: “Newspaper coverage linked to youth suicide clusters” (USA Today, 2014). The *USA Today* article quoted from a survey published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* (June 2014) by Gould, et al., and also cited a similar study conducted by Stack published in 2003. Both of these studies were “retrospective studies,” i.e. used data collected prior to 2000, before the age of social media.

The *USA Today* article included the often repeated research conducted after the death of Marilyn Monroe indicating that there was a “…12% increase nationwide” (para. 2). What this article fails to mention is that reporting a suicide is not the probable cause for an increase in suicide rates, it is really the manner in which a suicide is reported that appears to affect “copycat” behavior. In the Marilyn Monroe case, the reporting was highly sensationalized,
extensive, complete with photos, and included a detailed discussion about the method used. All of those reporting techniques are specifically discouraged in contemporary media guidelines.

Is suicide really contagious or is calling it so merely an unconscious attempt to maintain myth and taboo while keeping suicides at the margins of society?

Ebola, Smallpox, and Cholera are three examples of contagious diseases. Does teen suicide deserve to be called “contagious?” No wonder news editors and publishers are reluctant to publish even the slightest reference to a teen suicide; who wants to be responsible for an epidemic? The word “contagion” is a “loaded word;” its use brings with it a lot of baggage (connotations) including fear, isolation, rejection, stigma, and danger.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) in his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957) stated: “What is a myth? I shall give at the outset a first, very simple answer…: myth is a type of speech” (Barthes, trans. 1984, p.1). Building on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of semiotics (the study of signs and signification), Barthes goes on to explain how a symbol can be broken down into three distinct and significant parts. Barthes named these: “Signifer,” “Signified,” and “Sign.”

In the case of the word “contagious” there is the denotative meaning: the definition found in the dictionary (the Signifer); the connotative meaning: the various meanings given depending upon its use (the Signified); and, the combined total of both meanings as they are interpreted by the user or culture and society (the Sign).

For the word “contagion,” the “signifier” is the denotative meaning ascribed by the sociologist D. Phillips (1974), who coined the term “Suicide Contagion,” (apparently using Merriam-Webster’s 3rd definition: “3b: an influence, doctrine, or emotion that spreads rapidly”
The “signified” is the connotative meaning, which in this case is a contagious disease, and the “sign” is all the baggage that comes along with the word including cultural myth, taboo, fear and danger. Barthes stated: “However, paradoxical it may seem, myth hides nothing; its function is to distort, not to make disappear” (Barthes, trans. 1984, p. 7).

Does the use of the term “suicide contagion” perpetuate the historical taboo surrounding suicide? Social semiologist G. Aiello (2006) stated: “Whereas connotation is the ideological meaning that is attached to a specific sign, myth relates to ideological concepts that are evoked by a certain sign (Aiello, 2006, p. 95). Barthes (1957) stated: “Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (Barthes, trans. 1985, p. 1).

In reflecting on the importance that a word or phrase can play in forming a cultural perspective M.A.K. Halliday stated: “Our picture of language is part of our picture of the world. In particular, it is part of our picture of the world of meanings; and the value of the semiotic interpretations is that it shows us how the world of meanings is structured and what its constants are” (Halliday, 1976, p. 37).

Summary of Literature

The subject of suicide is an emotion charged topic that elicits a wide range of personal response. Media reporting of suicide is a process that has the potential to create strong emotional reactions, and therefore warrants an “awareness of affect,” requiring specific reporting standards unique to the circumstances. Historical data has indicated that sensationalized reporting of suicides has led to an increase in “copycat” behavior, known as the “Werther Effect” (Phillips, 1974). Additionally, many researchers maintain that suicide is “contagious” and frequently occurs in “suicide clusters” (Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003, Rezaeian, 2012, Corbo, Zweifel,
However, current research also indicates that media suicide reports that follow specific, positive guidelines can have a beneficial effect on survivors, potential victims, and the society in general (Mercy et al., 2001, Nepon, et al., 2009, U.S. National Strategy, 2012, Maloney, J. et al., 2014).

A significant issue raised by the review of literature is the continued dissemination and recommended use of obsolete *Media Guidelines for Suicide Reporting*. As shown under the subheading of Obsolete Documents; researchers, media professionals, and suicidologists continue to refer to, and operate under, superseded *Media Guidelines for Suicide Reporting* that incorporates inaccurate and potentially dangerous recommendations. Of particular concern is the fact that these documents are readily available online and this easy access to outdated information creates a major obstacle to the promulgation and distribution of accurate up-to-date guidelines.

**Rationale**

The enormous global popularity of instant messaging via social media has created a new paradigm in communication that influences the way we report suicide in our public media. A review of literature indicates significant variation in the guidelines followed by media in the reporting of suicide, particularly teen suicide. The literature shows that many media follow guidelines promulgated in the 1990s that are no longer applicable to modern communication technology or to changing cultural norms.

The arrival of big data, data analytics, and semiotechnological machines brings with it the potential to identify youth at risk for suicide and with that identification ability comes the
potential for reaching out to those individuals, via social media, with positive support messaging and 21st century methodology providing adequate coping skills to survive in a modern world.

The most recent statistics show that the teenage suicide rate continues to increase throughout the world in spite of enormous sums of money being spent for research and prevention. It is obvious that past suicide prevention methodology is not working and it is time to rethink our techniques and our approach to this insidious disease that is killing our youth.

Teenage suicide is not a crime; it is a disease, and it is time to bring it out of the darkness of myth and taboo into the light of day. Just as news media has had to evolve technologically from a print medium to a digital electronic medium; so too, media must evolve their operating standards out of the analog age to the digital reality of today.
Chapter 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Project

The scope of this video documentary project is three-fold. The primary objective is to spotlight the subject of media guidelines used in the reporting of teen suicide. The literature indicates that out-of-date, obsolete, and superseded media guidelines for reporting of suicides continues to be used by some news media, academic researchers, suicidologists, social workers, and others that perpetuates inaccurate information harmful to teen suicide prevention efforts. Another aspect of this project provides a discussion of the terms “contagious” and “contagion” when used to describe teen suicide and discusses the implication of myth and taboo inherent in the words we use to communicate this tragic subject. The third and final objective of this project is to discuss the potential use of semiotechnologies to address the rapidly changing communication paradigm created by the use of social media and instant messaging.

Methodology of the Project

Media Guidelines

The goal of this project is to produce a professional-quality documentary video, approximately 10-12 minutes in length, which illustrates the issues raised in this “Review of Literature – Chapter 2,” and provides examples of current “best practices” recommended by the United States Surgeon General (2012), the World Health Organization (2014), and the Canadian Psychiatric Association (2009). Using an “archival/documentary research” methodology (Rubin, et al., 2010, p. 212) emphasis will be placed on reviewing primary documents, records and artifacts. A particular concern of this documentary video will be to call attention to the continuous use of outdated and obsolete recommendations contained in superseded documents that remain readily accessible via the Internet.
The literature indicates that the continued use of archaic media reporting guidelines prevents the dissemination of accurate media guidelines and significantly hinders contemporary teen suicide prevention efforts.

Using an “historical research” methodology (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 213) evidence will indicate that the historical media practice of not reporting teen suicide may be detrimental to society’s teen suicide prevention efforts. Recent statistics indicate a dramatic increase in teen suicides; some believe that this increase may be due to a corresponding increase in text messaging and social media use among that demographic. The historical lack of news media coverage providing positive support messaging should be considered a contributing factor to this increasing problem.

Role of Myth and Taboo

As part of a “Secondary Data Analysis” using “qualitative artifact-oriented research” (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 212) the documentary will look at the terminology used to define teen suicide as “contagious.” Rubin, et al. (2010) stated: “The purpose is to reconsider and to reinterpret the data in light of different ways of thinking. The goal of such secondary data analysis is to shed new light on the prior data, interpretations and conclusions (p. 214).

Content Analysis

In addition to using historical research with “Secondary Data Analysis”, “Content Analysis” will also play a part in helping the viewer understand what “effects the content has on those who receive the message, that is, on the audience” (Rubin et al., 2010, p. 217).

Ethical Considerations

The role that ethical considerations play in this narrative are significant. The Chapter 2 - Review of Literature begins with “Ethical Considerations” and speaks at length to the
importance of “First, do no harm” or “Primum non nocere” (Primum, 2005). Throughout the documentary, particular emphasis will be placed on the ethical questions and the moral dilemmas created by media when dealing with the questions surrounding teenage suicide.

As shown in Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature, the subject of suicide is fraught with superstition, myth and taboo. In order for this documentary to question many of these long standing beliefs it will be necessary to challenge the ethical basis for those beliefs and in so doing require a continuing “awareness of affect” so as to meet the requirement to “do no harm.”
Chapter 4: THE PROJECT

Project Description:

Due to the time constraints and the desire to produce a professional quality short-film documentary, this Project is being completed in two stages. This report is the summation of the first stage, which is the outline of the steps necessary to produce a short-film documentary on teenage suicide, and is included as Appendix 1.

The second stage of this Project is a professionally produced short-film documentary that is designed to inform the viewer about the conflicting recommendations published as Media Guidelines to Suicide Reporting that are currently in use in newsrooms across America and much of Europe. Some of the Guidelines currently being used are obsolete and provide inaccurate, out-of-date information that provide dangerous recommendations that may actually contribute to the problem of teen suicide. Although new Guidelines and recommendations have been published by the United States Surgeon General (2012), the World Health Organization (2008) and the Canadian Psychiatric Association (2009), there remain many Media representatives and organizations who are either unaware of the changing standards for the reporting of teen suicide, or are simply ignoring this new evidence.

The subject of suicide is fraught with myth and taboo and this short-film provides examples of how historical myth continues to influence the results and recommendations of research into the subject of teen suicide.

Additionally, this film discusses the influence that social media and text messaging have on adolescents and teenagers, and makes specific proposals for the development of technological resources to identify youth-at-risk of suicide and provide alternative coping and suicide prevention resources.
Examples of the Work:

This Project is currently in the fund raising stage and contributions are being solicited via the crowdfunding resource website https://www.generosity.com, as well as through direct email solicitation and via Facebook. Appropriate Federal Tax Identification papers have been completed, a checking account under the name “Rethinking Teen Suicide” has been established, and arrangements have been made to receive donor funding via PayPal.

Contributions to this project may be made through:

Chapter 5 – Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Project

The topic of suicide is a complex philosophical and social issue; no effort is made in this Project to discuss or evaluate the existential questions concerning the “right” or “wrong” of an individual action regarding suicide. Additionally, although the tragic issue of veteran suicide and the disheartening loss of many senior citizens through suicide are very real problems facing society today, they are also not the subjects of this project. This Project is specifically limited to the issue of adolescent and teenage suicide and the controversy surrounding the question of whether Media should, or should not, publish information regarding a teen suicide.

Further Recommendations

The review of literature indicates a vast disparateness of opinion over the question of how, or even if, teen suicides should be reported. However, it is proposed, that the rapidly changing communication paradigm brought about by the explosive use of social media and instant messaging makes that question a moot point. Today’s adolescents and teenagers are instantly informed of peer suicides, regardless of what traditional Media does, or does not do. The question Media should be asking is: What can they do to minimize the impact this instant communication has on their communities? The traditional Media response of “doing nothing” is not a viable solution for a modern society. The “fake news,” disinformation, and mass moral panic that ensues after a teen suicide, or multiple teen suicides, dictates the need for a proactive and positive information effort by news media.

Additionally, the changing communication paradigm of the 21st Century demands a fresh look at how myth and taboo influence our research. The review of literature revealed that contemporary opinions about teen suicide may well be based on a “myth” promulgated in the
18th century regarding suicide “contagion.” There is substantial evidence that indicates the need for additional research into the so called “Werther Effect,” or “the contagion theory” of teen suicide.

A final recommendation of this Project is for an increase in research into the use of semiotechnologies to identify youth at risk for suicide. It is believed that though the use of that same technology, positive reinforcement and enhanced coping skills could be made available to those at-risk children, thereby helping prevent senseless suicide.

Conclusions

The inescapable conclusion of this report is that society has failed miserably in its attempts to reduce the rate of teen suicide. In spite of the enormous time, treasure, and effort put into understanding and preventing teen suicide, they continue to increase (CDC, 2016, Para. 1).

Regardless of the great strides humankind has made in knowledge and understanding of our universe; dogma, myth and taboo still play a major role in determining how we view our world. For example, beginning in the 16th Century, John Donne (1572-1631), Voltaire (1694-1778), and David Hume (1711-1776) all advocated for the decriminalization of suicide (Minois, 1999, p.12). However, it was not until February 12, 2015, that the Church of England decided to allow full burial rights to victims of suicide, by a vote of 262 to five (Doughty, 2015, Para.1).

In the 5th Century AD, Saint Augustine gave a well-reasoned and thoughtful explanation of why/how suicide was a crime against God (Augustine, trans.1950, pp. 23-31). However, that was almost 2,000 years ago and childhood as we know it was brief (children were put to work as soon as they were able) and teenagers, as we know them, did not exist. In 500 AD mental illness was thought to be the work of the evil spirits and mental health programs were nonexistent. Just as the Church changed dogma to accept the fact that the earth was not the center of the Universe,
so too, perhaps it is time to rethink the dogma, mythology, and taboo that surrounds suicide, particularly the suicide of underdeveloped youth who have not yet begun to think clearly for themselves.
REFERENCES:


APPENDIX 1

Steps in building a Documentary about Teen Suicide

Working Title: Rethinking Teen Suicide

The documentary project consists of four primary stages. 1) Concept Development, 2) Crowd Source Funding Initiative, 3) Video Production, and Editing, 4) Distribution.

1. Concept Development

According to the CDC (2016), the teenage suicide rate continues to increase dramatically. The most currently available national statistics show that the greatest increase in teen mortality from suicide is occurring in the 10 to 14-year-old age female demographic.

Regardless of society’s efforts in scientific research, educational based intervention programs, psychological counseling and community-wide prevention efforts, indicates a serious need for greater understanding of the forces that affect how society views, talks about, and deals with teen suicide.

It is believed that the severity of this crisis and the importance of this issue require a greater earnestness of effort in communicating the content of this documentary. Accordingly, it has been determined that a professional quality presentation will be needed to provide the impact desired, and to effectively reach the intended audience. Accordingly, a professional cinematographer, with extensive experience in documentary production, has been contracted to produce this documentary.

Story Line:

Although the actual script will be produced by the Director, there are three main segments to be considered for this documentary; the topics to be included are:
**Segment One: Media Guidelines to Suicide Reporting**

The literature indicates significant inconsistences in the way media report suicides and some researchers maintain that these inconsistences may actually contribute to the problem rather than prevent it. Research detailed in Chapter 2 indicates that many Media outlets continue to use outdated and obsolete *Guidelines* that remain readily accessible via the Internet instead of relying on current recommendations promulgated by government agencies (CDC, Surgeon General) and reputable Suicide Prevention organizations.

**Segment Two: The Suicide Contagion Theory**

Current research has indicated that a commonly held and often cited suicide theory, the *Suicide Contagion Theory* (Phillips, 1992) is based on inaccurate, out-of-date information, and is long overdue for a reevaluation. This will require an understanding of the role that myth and taboo play in society’s perspective of this important issue. This segment will rely on a *Historical Timeline* (Appendix A) that traces the history of suicide in Western Civilization and indicates the influence of myth and taboo on prevailing suicide theory.

**Segment Three: The Role of Social Media and Semiotecnhologies**

The final concept considered in this project considers the popularity of social media and the explosive use of instant messaging by teenagers. As part of this documentary project, recommendations will be presented to encourage research into the field of semiotecnhologies, and the potential role that data analytics might contribute in identifying at risk teenagers while at the same time providing alternative mass media choices offering improved coping skills and positive support messaging.
2. Crowd Source Funding Initiative

*Indiegogo* (https://www.indiegogo.com) has been selected as the primary crowd funding source site for this project. Indiegogo also hosts a non-profit hosting site call Generosity.com that provides their hosting services for free. The URL for “Rethinking Teen Suicide” is: https://www.generosity.com/fundraisers/rethinking-teen-suicide. A fundraising action is known as a “Campaign.” A Pre and Post Production Budget of $20,000 has been developed that consists of the following expenses:

**Production and Post Budget:**

- **Director/Writer:** $5,000
- **Cameraman and Equipment:** 5 days @ $500/day = $2,500
- **Soundman and Equipment:** 5 days @ $300/day = $1,500
- **Editor:** 2 weeks @ $1,500/week = $3,000
- **Drives & Cards:** $400
- **Misc. Expenses:** $1,200
- **Transportation & Hotel:** $6,400

**Total Budget:** $20,000

In addition to the Production and Post Production costs there are fees assessed by *Indiegogo* as well as credit card processing fees. It is estimated that an additional 10% ($2,000) will need to be raised to cover these costs. The projected total amount needed to be raised by Crowd Source Funding is $22,000.

**Taxes:**

Recently implemented legislation in Washington State, regarding sales tax on crowd sourced funding, indicates that monies received as a gift are not subject to State Sales Tax.
However, if “incentives” are given in return for a contribution to the fund, such as a DVD copy of the documentary, then a Sales Tax must be collected and paid (Washington, 2016).

Federal Tax Law does not directly address crowd source funding; however current regulations follow rules similar to Washington State. So long as monies are collected as “gifts,” and no incentives given, then the funds are considered “non-taxable.” Individuals may make a one-time donation of up to $14,000 without being subject to a gift tax (TaxAct.com, 2016). IRS Form 1120, Corporate Income Tax Return will be filed however no taxes due are anticipated. A detailed expense account will be kept, and any funds remaining in excess of expenses will be donated to a Spokane area suicide prevention organization.

**Bank Account:**

A Bank Account is required for the collection of donations. The type of account needed is a “Unincorporated Business Account (UBA).” In order to open a UBA an Employer Identification Number (EIN) is required. An EIN is requested from the Internal Revenue Service and may be obtained online at no charge. For this Project, a checking account under the name “Rethinking Teen Suicide” has been opened at Chase Bank, 5508 N. Division Street, Spokane, WA 99208.

**PayPal Account:**

A PayPal account is required and this account must be linked to a Bank “Business” Checking Account. In addition, a copy of the EIN was submitted along with a “Statement of Purpose” document. Non-501.3c businesses are assessed a $.30 per transaction fee and a 2.9% overall fee. These criteria have been met, and a PayPal account has been created under the “Rethinking Teen Suicide” banner.
Optional Consideration

The option of creating a non-profit, tax-exempt organization 501.3C was considered and rejected due to the extra expenses, development time, and “one-time use” nature of the project. The use of an existing 501.3C was also rejected due to time constraints and the quasi-controversial nature of the subject.

Crowd Source Funding Campaign Process:

Marketing Materials:

The first step in building a “landing page” for visitors, is to provide a brief summary, or “elevator pitch”, presentation that capsulizes the project and holds people’s attention. For this Project a variation of the Abstract will be used. Another feature of the “landing page” is a link to a more in-depth overview of the project (i.e. Chapter 2, Review of Literature), biographies of the Writer and Director, production plans, budget, and distribution plans. Other items needed with be the documentary “Title,” logo, and page layout and design features.

Timeline:

Once a financial goal is determined, the next step is to decide on the number of days to run the Funding Campaign. Traditionally, this process takes from 30 to 90 days. For this Campaign a period of 50 days will be used. Prior to Launch Day (Day 1), donations will be solicited via emails, social media, and personal contact. Experienced users of this format have found that campaigns that have “seed money” already in their account at the beginning of Day 1, are significantly more successful in attaining the end funding goal.

3. Video Production, and Editing

Once the funding goal has been reached and an appropriate schedule has been established with the Director, the following timeline will be used for filming and production:
Timeline for 8 to 10-minute video documentary: 8 weeks

- Week one and two: research participants
- Week three: Coordinate shoot schedule with crew and participants
- Week four: Shoot interviews
- Week five: Transcribe interviews and begin scripting
- Weeks six and seven: Editing
- Week eight: Final notes & Delivery

4. Distribution

This short-film documentary will be posted to You Tube and initially distributed via the Internet. Provided sufficient funding is available a DVD Edition will be created. The short-film will also be submitted to the “film festival circuit” as funding becomes available. This will include local, regional, national and international film festivals.

Project Audience

The audience for this video will include:

1. News media organizations; journalists; media critics, and others involved in the dissemination of suicide information to the public.

2. Academicians, suicidologists, medical, social service, and other professionals involved in suicide research and/or prevention.

3. Educational and other institutions charged with protecting the safety and welfare of children.

4. Governmental organizations and administrators at all levels, including local, county, regional, state, national, and international.