Bridgend suicides: Media reporting & lessons learned

* **[SLIDE 2 - DAN]** Breakdown of presentation (READ OFF PRESENTATION)
* **[SLIDE 3.1/3.2 – DAN]** About the suicides (Dan)
* So to give you some further background, Bridgend is a town in South Wales with around 39,000 inhabitants.
* It’s hard to pin down the amount of people who actually committed suicide, the BBC report “more than 20”, some believe the actual figure is closer to the 30 mark. Though People magazine went a step further and claimed that there had been 79 deaths between January 2007 and February 2009 – hard to pick out an actual figure, but the point is that a lot of people took their own lives – many of which were linked in some way.
* The majority of the suicide victims were youngsters, aged between 13 and 17 years old.
* To give some context, between 1996 and 2006, an average of three men committed suicide in Bridgend every year. In 2007, the average was believed to be around nine.
* In 2010, police asked the media to stop covering the suicides in an attempt to prevent ‘copy-cat suicides’ – But had the damage already been done? And have lessons been learned in the aftermath of the Bridgend Suicides?
* **[SLIDE 5 – TOM]** Media reporting (Tom)
* Many friends and relatives of those who had lost someone to the ‘cult-suicides’ linked the deaths to the media, believing that because it was glamorised, many more youngsters were made aware of taking their own life.
* One parent, Sharon Pritchard, who lost her 15 year-old-son Nathaniel, claimed that the media were to blame for a large amount of the suicides, due to the fact that it was “glamorising ways of taking one’s life to young people.”
* Assistant Chief Constable Dave Morris, who was holding regular press-conferences regarding numerous suicides, criticised the media’s way of handling the situation.
* This was followed up by Madeleine Moon, Bridgend MP since 2005, who said at the peak of the suicides that “the media were now part of the problem, and that they should now be “part of the solution”
* **[SLIDE 6 – TOM]**
* Suicide – or more specifically, the reporting of suicide - is something that has always been covered by the PCC’s Code’s rules on intrusion into grief, stressing the need for sympathy and discretion and sensitivity in publication of material.
* Research in the past has shown that media portrayals of suicide – as in news articles, fictional TV or films – can influence suicidal behaviour and lead to multiple acts, particularly among the young.
* Following on from this, in 2006, the Code Committee introduced a new sub-clause: When reporting on suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used. Editors must ensure that they both publish with sensitivity and they avoid excessive detail. (Unlike The Sunday Times in 2008 – pictures of a noose with methods).
* **[SLIDE 7 – DAN]**
* Following on from the Bridgend suicides, the PCC looked at ways it could help improve the publishing of suicide stories. Firstly looking at areas of concern which could be avoided in future:
* Such as graphic images – illustrating suicide methods which were upsetting to family members and friends. The cumulative effect – repeated media inquiries to family members also caused unintended distress. Glorification of suicide – Stories presented in a way likely to romanticise suicide could have a serious influence, especially on vulnerable young people.
* It was suggested that editors might voluntarily include:
* Helpline numbers in stories – to direct those in need of help into the arms of those who could offer them the most support.
* Stop republishing photographs – Each new death often prompted reprinting of images of others who had taken their own life, adding to the distress of the families. It was important to try to avoid this, thus not distressing the families further.
* Finally, do not publish photographs without family consent – media publications tend to use pictures supplied by friends or from social networking sites, without the families own consent, which, if avoided, would avoid causing unintentional distress.
* **[SLIDE 8 – TOM]**
* Some more lessons learned in the wake of the outcry from the public following the reporting of the Bridgend suicides include:
* Newspapers should avoid going into unnecessary detail and references that might glamorise or make light of suicide;
* Newspapers should be aware that the use of photographs, especially when accompanied by dramatic graphics, can cause considerable distress to families;
* Care must be taken to remove excessive information prior to publication - both online and offline;
* It is the editor's responsibility to remove excessive detail about how the suicide was carried out.
* **[SLIDE 9 – TOM]**
* In light of this, many of the friends and family of those who had lost a loved one praised the steps taken by the PCC. We could include a whole host of quotes, but this from Madeleine Moon encapsulated the thoughts of many, saying:"Steps are being taken in the right direction. I was disappointed by much of the coverage of the suicides in the Bridgend area last year.
* "While I would like to see further changes made, I am happy that the print media and the Press Complaints Commission have learned many lessons over the past year.
* “You don't get speculation over general health issues and therefore it is right not to expect speculation over mental health issues, including those tragic incidences of suicide."
* **[SLIDE 10 – DAN]**
* So to summarise some of the key lessons that can be taken away from the way the media reported the Bridgend suicides:
* **Editors faced with difficult judgements at critical times should avoid causing unintended offence or exposure to accusations of insensitivity** – PCC website, March 2009.
* The PCC make clear in its ruling on the Choose Life VS Daily Sport complaint that "the Code does not seek to prevent a newspaper reporting on the general subject of suicide, or investigating a pattern of suicides, in a manner that serves the public interest."
* ...though in this particular case, The PCC censured Daily Sport for “glamorising suicide” after the newspaper published an article entitled "Top yourself tourism“ – listing Britain’s top suicide hotspots. Certainly not in the public interest.
* **[SLIDE 11 – DAN]**  Sticking with this Daily Sport case, the complaint was upheld on the grounds that it breached Code 5 of the PCC code of practice, which regards the intrusion into grief or shock. We’ve already touched on the guidelines put in place by the PCC, but here it is clearly defined.

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* **[SLIDE 12 – TOM]**
* Since the Bridgend suicides – or more importantly the reporting of the Bridgend suicides and the updated guidelines which came as a result – it can be argued that many lessons have been learned. To highlight this, we have decided to look at two case studies, to look at the way in which they were reported.
* It was reported, that of the 25 people who had killed themselves between January 2007 and February 2009, all but one of them had been a result of hanging. This was the same method of suicide used by both Gary Speed in November 2011 and Jacintha Saldanha, the nurse who committed suicide at the end of last year after she was subjected to a prank call in effort to contact the Duchess of Cambridge, Katherine Middleton.
* **[SLIDE 13 – TOM]**
* The case study we have looked into was the suicide of Nurse Jacintha Saldanha, the hospital nurse who was found dead in the wake of the Duchess of Cambridge prank call controversy.
* The Samaritans asked the media to bear in mid their guidelines (as you will see in depth later in the presentation) for the reporting of suicide, and strongly advised the press to follow this specific guidance on this case.
* Like in the Bridgend suicide case, there is strong evidence suggesting that copycat suicides occur as a result of extensive media coverage and if the reporting of the suicide method is detailed or sensationalised.
* Lorna Fraser, the Samaritans media advisor stated that careful consideration needed to be taken in regards to reporting the details of the death due to the vulnerable audiences it may involve, saying: The cumulative effect of such mass coverage is a risk in terms of potential copycat behavior” – much like with the Bridgend suicides that we have already looked at.
* **[SLIDE 14 – TOM]**
* As well as the PCC putting rules in place to help with media reporting, charity organisation The Samaritans have also put rules in place for journalists to refer to when in need. Some of the pointers put in place by the Samaritans includes:
* Avoiding explicit details of the suicide method
* Not disclosing the contents of any suicide note
* Remembering that family, friends and colleagues who have been bereaved by suicide can be particularly affected by the reporting, as it may exacerbate their feelings of distress
* Avoiding the placement of stories on the front page or in large headlines to guard against sensationalising the story – Something which the media failed to do around the time of the Bridgend suicides
* Where possible sensitively focus on the life achievements of the person and the wastefulness of their death
* **[SLIDE 15 – DAN]**
* It goes without saying that the death of Gary Speed was completely unexpected. Without going into the details of the story itself, when the news first broke, social media sites went into overdrive.
* We immediately knew that Speed had been found hanged and there were no suspicious circumstances surrounding his death – the obvious conclusion to take from this is that he had committed suicide, but why?
* The natural response from journalists is to find out exactly why he had taken his own life, though unlike with suicide reporting in the past, things seemed to be done differently.
* While the public jumped on numerous bandwagons questioning – guessing – why he had committed suicide, the press instead decided to stick to the facts, being fully aware of the guidelines set out by the PCC.
* One website carried out a content analysis search into the way the media reported the suicide in the days after Speed had taken his life, with the words “suicide” and “hanged” low down on the list – the press were reporting the method the former Wales manager had used to end his life, but didn’t go into unnecessary detail - linking in with the PCC guideline.
* The press had rightfully respected the PCC guidelines and showed that they had learned lessons in arguably the biggest suicide story since the outbreak of the Bridgend suicides.
* **[SLIDE 16 – DAN]**
* The Times argued that had this awful event taken place a year before, the way it was reported in the press would have been completely different – claiming that there was a chilling effect in place which prevented the media from exploring the story to find more details.
* The newspaper’s editorial blamed this on “some newspapers failing to make the public interest case for their stories, therefore confidence in their ability to report on such stories been shattered.”
* I personally agree with The Times when they suggest that the correct balance must be found between serving the public interest, but not crossing into the intrusion of grief or shock.
* As The Times state: “It is critical that we do not live in a society which rumour takes the place of reporting, and misinformation triumphs over the truth.”
* Lessons have most certainly been learned in the wake of the Bridgend suicides, but whether or not that is a good thing is a different matter.
* **[SLIDE 17 – TOM/ DAN]**
* Read off slide (some tips to help when reporting on suicides)
* Newspapers are generally anxious to establish the truth, though of course they are capable of exaggeration. If they get things badly wrong, they are obliged to conduct internal inquiries and are likely to be subject to legal redress or admonishment by the Press Complaints Commission.

Websites:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bridgend_suicide_incidents>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/7253788.stm>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/bridgend-suicides-i-feel-shaken-to-the-core-why-are-youngsters-around-here-doing-this-784402.html>

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<http://www.pcc.org.uk/news/index.html?article=NTU4MQ==>

<http://www.pcc.org.uk/news/newsletter/november/suicidereporting.html>

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<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcumeds/362/36209.htm>

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<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2095128/Gary-Speeds-inquest-ended-vile-internet-gossip-death.html>

<http://www.moreaboutadvertising.com/2011/11/gary-speeds-death-will-focus-more-unwelcome-attention-on-tabloid-newspapers/>

<http://soccernet.espn.go.com/feature/_/id/1189522/remembering-gary-speed-and-his-profound-impact-on-welsh-soccer?cc=5739>