

## **A imprensa e o tabu do suicídio: uma proposta de rediscussão do tema**

### **The press and the suicide taboo: a proposal for rediscussing the issue**

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**Resumo:** *A partir dos anos 1950, observamos na imprensa brasileira um movimento que levou da espetacularização à interdição de notícias sobre suicídio (DAPIEVE, 2007), por receio do chamado “efeito contágio” (DURKHEIM, 2000[1897]). No entanto, apesar do cuidado em relação ao assunto nos principais jornais, o número de mortes autoinfligidas no país vem subindo de forma significativa. No intuito de contribuir com os debates sobre o papel da imprensa na prevenção do problema, apresentamos pesquisa bibliográfica sobre o tratamento editorial do suicídio, complementada por entrevistas com jornalistas que lidam com a questão em seu cotidiano profissional e levantamento sobre menções ao tema em três grandes jornais. Com base nos resultados, apresentamos um conjunto de recomendações complementares às já propostas pela OMS para abordar o assunto.*

**Palavras-chave:** *suicídio; jornalismo; procedimentos editoriais, mídia e cotidiano.*

**Abstract:** *From the 1950s onwards, we observed a movement in the Brazilian press that led from spectacularization to the banning of news about suicide*

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(DAPIEVE, 2007), for fear of the so-called “contagion effect” (DURKHEIM, 2000[1897]). However, despite the care regarding the subject in the main newspapers, the number of self-inflicted deaths in the country has been rising significantly. In order to contribute to the debates on the role of the press in preventing the problem, we present a bibliographic research on the editorial treatment of suicide, complemented by interviews with journalists who deal with the issue in their professional daily lives and a survey on mentions of the topic in three major newspapers. Based on the results, we present a set of complementary recommendations to those already proposed by the WHO to address the issue.

**Keywords:** suicide; journalism; editorial procedures; media and everyday life.

## Introduction

The general orientation of only reporting suicide under some very specific circumstances has prevailed for decades in the most important newsrooms, as indicated by Arthur Dapieve (2007). João Batista de Abreu Jr. (2020, p. 13) also claims that “without a doubt, of all the kinds of death – violent or natural – the one that most deserves silence on the part of the media is, definitively, suicide”. Some editorial manuals suggest the publication of exceptional cases only, to be analyzed by the editorial office, or when they involve the death of public and/or famous people.

By releasing its suicide prevention program, in 2000, the World Health Organization (WHO) expanded the responsibility for combating suicide to media professionals, who even received their own manual: *A Resource for Media Professionals*, translated into Portuguese under the title *Prevenção ao Suicídio: um manual para profissionais de mídia*, updated in 2008 and 2017. According to the manual:

The factors that contribute to suicide and its prevention are complex and not fully understood, but there is evidence that the media play a significant role. On the one hand, vulnerable individuals may be influenced to get involved in imitative behaviors by reports of suicide (...). On the other hand, responsible reporting can serve to educate the public about suicide and can encourage those at risk of suicide to seek help. (WHO, 2008, p. 5)

The document contains assertive indications of conduct on how to report suicide, but at no time recommends banning the topic. On the contrary, it records that “the media can play an active role in suicide prevention” (WHO, 2000, p. 3). In this work, we understand that journalism can play a crucial role in expanding the access of the population to health and quality of life, as long as it proposes to stimulate “the social practices of production and circulation of the meanings of health and the forms of appropriation of public policies by the population” (ARAÚJO; CARDOSO, 2014, p. 123). Instead of merely transferring information “from top to bottom”, it would be up to

the media to promote a good debate on public health problems without giving up listening to the social groups afflicted by these problems. We consider that, by avoiding the topic, newspapers miss the opportunity to stimulate the audience to appropriate information and transform their own knowledge into practices capable of transforming the social reality.

The uneasiness of the press with self-inflicted death is brought up for discussion in this article. Our premise, in line with WHO's guidelines, is that the press must take an active role in preventing new deaths. As they ban the discussion, for fear of the "contagion effect" (DURKHEIM, 2000 [1897]), the media may be contributing to reinforcing the taboo around voluntary death.

To support the discussion, we carried out a bibliographic research on the treatment of the topic in the press and verified how often it has appeared in the three main Brazilian newspapers: *O Globo* (1995), *Folha de S. Paulo* (2001) and *O Estado de S. Paulo* (1997), in the last 20 years. We also retrieved the editorial guidelines for dealing with the subject in these newspapers' editorial manuals, all of them produced and sold with great editorial success, especially in the 1990s. As Mônica Caprino (2002) recalls, these works have become a source of consultation not only to other vehicles, press professionals and students, but also for the general public.

In addition to this, we heard professionals from the three researched newspapers to find out if the procedures indicated in these manuals, written over two decades ago, were still valid and how the journalists who deal with information about suicides in their professional routines act to transform it into news or not, and in what way.

### **Contagion effect and silence**

Minois (2018) says that, in the beginning of the 17th century, when the first newspapers started to circulate in Europe, the publication of news about suicides was common in England. This kind of death was so frequent and numerous that some vehicles published monthly lists of victims. Often using sensationalist narratives, newspapers presented

as much detail as possible to increase the sense of veracity – the exact opposite of what is recommended today.

In Brazil, the subject was not a big taboo either until the 1950s (DAPIEVE, 2007). Suicide reports were common, among many police incidents that filled the pages of Brazilian newspapers. Also according to the author, the coverage of president Getúlio Vargas' suicide, detailed like other suicide cases that reached the newspapers, marked the transition period of journalistic work in the country, in the 1950s.

After this period, the topic is increasingly avoided, for motives such as respect for the privacy of the suicidal person and the pain of his or her relatives (DAPIEVE, 2017). Other factors for the topic not coming to light would be the fact that suicide becomes associated with the idea of failure, in addition to the main reason: the fear of encouraging deaths “by imitation”.

The novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, by German writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, describes the sufferings of a young man after the end of a love relationship. Published for the first time in 1774, the plot narrates the suicide of Werther, who did not accept the loss of his great love. Right after the book was published, several reports began to emerge in Europe of young people who committed suicide adopting the same method used by the character, which led to the book being banned in many countries. These reports originated the term “Werther effect” to designate the imitation of suicides in technical literature. Many deaths were caused by the same method used by the fictional character and, not seldom, copies of the book were found next to the dead bodies.

The case is mentioned in reference works on suicide, for example, the classic *History of Suicide*, by Georges Minois (2018) and in the sociology treatise *Suicide*, by Émile Durkheim (2000 [1897]). According to the sociologist, there is no doubt that the idea of suicide can be transmitted by contagion. It is worth mentioning, as Dapieve (2007) reminds us, that the use of the term “contagion” is metaphorical and, in the author's work, is associated with imitation and not with the possibility of transmission. The French sociologist also highlights that it is not how much is said

about suicides that influences society's perception, but how the issue is approached, which terms are used and which values are transmitted.

In 1962, another suicide, this time of a real-life character, reinforces the theory of the "Werther effect": that of the American actress Marilyn Monroe, diva of the Hollywood movies, who was only 36 years old at the time. The subject was covered with great prominence and detail, and then a 12% increase in suicides was noticed in the United States.

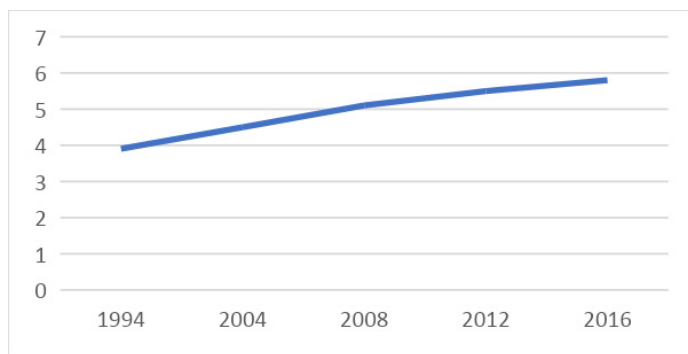
These considerations constitute the theoretical basis for the concerns that led WHO to produce its manual for media professionals. The international organization describes journalists as fundamental agents in suicide prevention, as they have the ability to influence attitudes, beliefs and behavior in society. Therefore, it mentions Werther's case as part of the body of evidence that suggests that "some forms of news and TV coverage of suicides are associated with a statistically significant excess of suicides" (WHO, 2017, p. 21), with greater impact among young people.

Sisask and Värnik (2012) argue that youngsters are, along with the elderly, an age group that is more vulnerable to the "Werther effect". For the authors, middle-aged individuals are usually "more accommodated in the institutional framework of society", due to ties such as marriage, children and work, among the elements of stability. The researchers also draw attention to the fact that it is not simple to establish a cause/effect relationship between the publication of news about suicide and the increase in cases. One difficulty lies in the issue of time and space, given that news from the print media are also published in digital media. This allows news produced in a specific location, on a given date, to be accessed anywhere in the world, with the potential to cause a suicide imitation many years later. However, one cannot state the opposite, that is, that the silence on the topic in the press may contribute to reducing the number of self-inflicted deaths.

In Brazil, the number of suicides has been growing in a consistent manner (Graph 1). In 2016, 11,433 people took their own lives, equivalent to a rate of 5.8 people per 100,000 inhabitants, against 5.7

in 2010, 4.5 in 2004 and 3.9 in 1994. It is the second leading cause of death among young people in the country, aged between 15 and 24, and organizations such as Fiocruz, in Brazil, and the international WHO, have already expressed concern that the situation may be aggravated as one of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>4</sup>.

Graph 1: Suicides in Brazil (per 100,000/inhabitants)



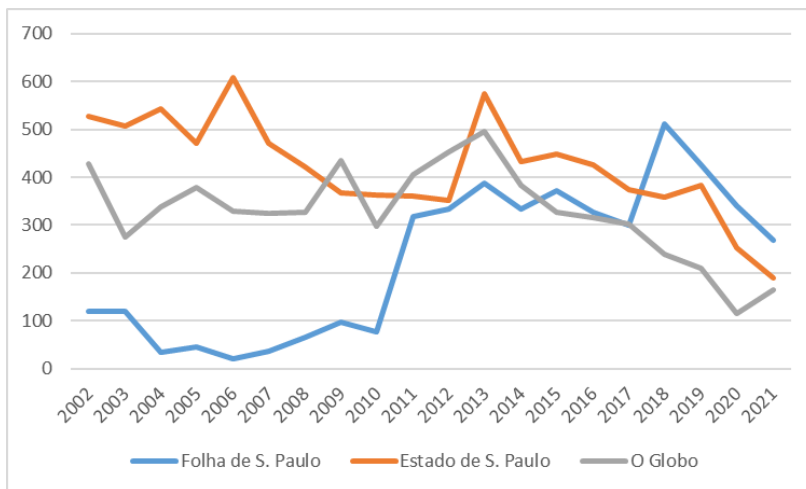
Source: World Health Organization<sup>5</sup>

Inversely to the growth curve of cases in Brazil, we observed a decrease in the number of articles dealing with the subject in two traditional Brazilian newspapers, especially in the last five years. The following graph, from the last 20 years, shows that 429 pages were published with the word “suicide”, in 2002, in the newspaper *O Globo*, and 528 in the same year, in *Estado de S. Paulo*, with a peak of 495 to 574, respectively, in 2013 (Graph 2).

4 The following reports point out the concern: <https://www.bio.fiocruz.br/index.php/br/noticias/1975-pandemia-aumenta-fatores-de-risco-para-suicidio> and <https://www.paho.org/pt/noticias/9-9-2021-apos-18-meses-pandemia-covid-19-opas-pede-prioridade-para-prevencao-ao-suicidio>.

5 The 2007-2016 series is in a document available on the Ministry of Health website: <https://portalarquivos2.saude.gov.br/images/pdf/2018/setembro/20/Coletiva-suic-dio.pdf>. The data from 1994 to 2004 are in Dapieve (2007). The last survey is the one from 2016.

Graph 2: Pages that mention the word suicide in newspapers *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Estado de S. Paulo* and *O Globo*



Source: elaborated by the authors, based on the search engines of the newspapers websites

In the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*, an increase in the uses of the word was verified, but the annual amount remained lower than in the other two newspapers for more than 10 years. The vehicle from São Paulo surpasses *O Globo*, in uses of the word, in 2015 and in 2018, it surpassed *Estadão*. Still, it was possible to observe that of the 512 times in which the word “suicide” was mentioned in 2018, in *Folha*, almost half of them (229) referred to a fictional episode, in the segments of culture and art. Synopsis about movies or plays appear in more detail in the newspaper of *Grupo Folha*, with frequent references to suicides of characters who are not involved with the journalistic focus of our work.

Since 2013, the number has been decreasing in *Estado de S. Paulo* and in *O Globo*. However, starting in 2019, even *Folha’s* curve began to point downwards. In 2021, only 165 pages approached the subject in *O Globo*, 190 in *Estado de S. Paulo* and 269 in *Folha de S. Paulo*. On the other hand, the number of suicides, as mentioned before, has continually grown. The crossing of data does not intend to suggest that there is a relationship of cause and effect between the embarrassment



around the topic in the traditional press and the increase in the number of suicide cases. We infer, however, that the current editorial policy has not contributed as much as it could to combating the problem.

### **Studies in Brazil**

It is worth pointing out that the topic has received little interest in academic research in the field of Communication and Journalism. A search of the *Capes'* theses and dissertations database, covering the last 30 years, reveals that only one study used suicide as a keyword in the area of Journalism/Editing, and 25 in Communication. Most of the research was developed in Psychology (236), Public Health (124), Medicine (110) and Nursing (105)<sup>6</sup>.

Of the 25 studies in Communication, 16 discuss the topic in a more direct way. Among them, seven, defended between 2004 and 2002, address issues related to editorial aspects of suicide, only one being a PhD work. The others bring up issues such as the approach to suicide in social media, TV series and cinema, for example.

Most of the works are from 2019 onwards. The most recent one is the study by Arthur F. S. Pires (2002), entitled “*Quadros de suicídio: um estudo comparado das narrativas sobre autoextermínio no jornalismo diário*” (“Pictures of suicide: a comparative study of narratives about self-extermination in daily journalism”). The dissertation comparatively investigates how suicide is narrated in four English-language newspapers – Daily Mail (England), People’s Daily (China), Times of India (India) and USA Today (USA) – and concludes that each country has a different kind of approach to the topic.

6 Among the five most researched areas, Psychology appeared two times, one with 138 results and another with 98, adding up to 236. In the general searches, there are also other records in the areas of Teaching and Learning Psychology (7), Social Psychology (15), Social Psychology (3) and Cognitive Psychology (2). Likewise, Communication appeared twice. The number 25 registered represents the sum of these two results, respectively with 14 and 11 mentions. The total number of works found with the keyword “suicide” was 1809. Search performed on 03/31/2022.

In the dissertation “*O delicado lugar do suicídio no noticiário impresso paraibano*” (“The delicate place of suicide in the printed news from Paraíba”), Joana B. de Sousa (2019) seeks to identify the objective and subjective factors that explain why suicide is a topic that is not very present in the Brazilian press and analyzes the coverage on the subject in the *Correio da Paraíba* newspaper. Gabriela M. Ferigato (2019) produced “*Morte sem fama: critérios de noticiabilidade do suicídio de anônimos em portais brasileiros*” (“Death without fame: newsworthiness criteria of suicide of anonymous people in Brazilian portals”), a dissertation in which she uses the content analysis methodology to map in which circumstances the suicide of an anonymous citizen becomes news. Based on research on the UOL and G1 portals, she points out the violence factor in this news as evident.

In the same year, Patrik A. F. Batista (2019) produced the dissertation “*Agendamento midiático e o tratamento de temas estigmatizados: o fenômeno suicídio nos enunciados jornalísticos de sites de notícia em Campo Grande*”, (“Media agenda-setting and the treatment of stigmatized themes: the suicide phenomenon in journalistic utterances on news websites in Campo Grande”), with an analysis of coverage on the subject in the news portals *Campo Grande News* and *Midiamax*, over five years, during the *Yellow September* campaign, and in 2017, in the context of the release of the virtual game *Baleia Azul* (*Blue whale*).

In the dissertation “*Por quê? Uma análise dos discursos sobre suicídio no jornalismo diário*” (“Why? An analysis of the discourses on suicide in daily journalism”), Mauren de S. X. dos Santos (2019) verifies that, by promoting the debate on the subject, journalism contributes to the prevention of the problem. She did a study about the coverage on suicide in the *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper.

The previously mentioned master’s work by Arthur Dapieve (2006) relates Durkheim’s theoretical formulations on suicide with the type of treatment given by contemporary press to people who take their own lives and analyzes reports on suicide published by the newspaper *O Globo*. The only thesis was written by Maurício M. de Souza (2004),

with the title: “*O juízo da morte: a violência letal dolosa na cidade de São Paulo nas páginas de Notícias Populares e nos arquivos do Tribunal do Júri (1960-1975)*” (“The judgment of death: intentional lethal violence in the city of São Paulo in the pages of *Notícias Populares* and in the file of the Jury Court [1960-1975]”). As the work is not available in the *Capes* database, since it is predates the creation of the Sucupira platform, we were unable to analyze its approach.

### **Interdiction and treatment of suicide in journalistic practice**

If it is not the simple fact of reporting on suicide that produces a variation in voluntary death rates, what is the reason for the growing shortage of news about suicide cases in the pages of printed and digital newspapers? The interdiction on the topic in Brazilian newspapers is both explained in editorial and style manuals as shaped by an implicit norm that prevails in newsrooms (BREED, 1993 [1955], SOLOSKY, 1999 [1955]).

In its *Manual of Writing and Style*, item Ethical Issues, newspaper *O Globo* states that “the newspaper avoids reporting on suicides by unknown people, except when the fact has uncommon aspects” (GARCIA, 1995, p. 118). In the Security item, it says that, in cases of kidnappings and voluntary deaths, information that causes or increases security risks should be omitted. Interviewed by Dapieve, journalist Luiz Garcia, who died in 2018 and is the organizer and editor of the manual, said: “I always understood, and this was the newspapers’ general policy, the idea that there are many people who are suicidal by imitation. We report the smallest possible number of suicides and only the ones which have some importance, some historical reference” (DAPIEVE, 2007, p. 107). For him, when in doubt, the best thing to do is not to report at all, because “It is difficult to conceive of news so important that it justifies the probability of losing a life” (DAPIEVE, 2007, p. 107).

*Folha de S. Paulo* has adopted a different treatment. In one of the first editions of its editorial manual, the newspaper already registered, in the

entry “suicide”, that “when reporting a death by suicide, *Folha* does not omit the information that the person killed him/herself” (FOLHA DE S. PAULO, 1987, p. 97). In the last edition, from 2021, the orientation is maintained, this time in the context of the entry “death”:

DEATH – Prefer the words die, death and dead then pass away, decess and deceased. (...) Do not omit the cause of death of the character who is the subject of the news. In case of suicide, however, do not describe the method use. Exceptions, in both cases, must be discussed with the Editorial Office. The Deaths section, depending on the editor’s evaluation, may respect the family’s eventual request not to reveal the cause of death (FOLHA DE S. PAULO, 2021, p. 235, emphasis added)

Dapieve (2007, p. 76) noted that the position is coherent with the point of view of the newspaper’s then editorial director, Otávio Frias Filho, who also died in 2018. The journalist worked for about one year as a volunteer at the *Centro de Valorização da Vida* (CVV – Life Valorization Center). Based on this experience, the journalist (FRIAS, 2003, p. 284) said that he had acquired the conviction that “knowing more about the ghost of suicide can be a way to dominate it (...)”, including through the press.

As for the manual of *O Estado de S. Paulo* (1997), it does not mention the topic of suicide. There is no specific item on the subject, which is also not mentioned in the entry “death”. The absence of the subject in the reference guide for journalists does not mean, however, that it is naturalized in the news, as demonstrated later in the testimony of a professional from the company.

Today’s practices in these three newsrooms, regarding the editorial treatment of suicide, were raised in a survey with four journalists, one from *O Globo*, one from *O Estado de S. Paulo*, one from *Folha de S. Paulo*, and a professional who worked for *O Globo* until recently. We reached them through our networks of contacts as journalists, taking into consideration the following criteria: current or very recent work in editorial and writing processes in one of the three researched newspapers,

contact with the topic of suicide in the daily work of these vehicles and significant journalistic experience<sup>7</sup>.

They all received the same questions via Whatsapp and answered them using the same channel, after learning that the content was intended for an academic research on the editorial treatment of suicide. The questions were: Do you consider that the topic of suicide is taboo in the newsroom where you work? Have you ever received any orientation to avoid the subject? What comment would you have on how the company approaches the subject? We left the interviewed free to answer via audio message, text or telephone call, and we had one recorded answer and three in text. Only one of them preferred not to be identified in the article, as he/she had not obtained formal authorization for the contact.

Two of the journalists expressed the perception that the tension in dealing with the topic was greater in the past: “I would say that it is more of a delicate topic than a taboo”, summarized former assistant editor Cristina Azevedo, who worked at *O Globo* for almost 30 years, until 2020, in the International and Neighborhoods sections. In general terms, the interview confirmed the orientation that existed in 2006, when Dapieve concluded his master’s research on the subject. The journalist said that the approach is analyzed on a case-by-case basis, for fear that the news might serve as stimulus to others. “My impression is that, if it’s a story that you can avoid publishing, avoid it”, she explained. However, if the suicide was committed by someone important, it is hard to ignore the motive for the death, which in this case is mentioned discreetly. On the other hand, “If the subject is about suicide cases among young people, for example, it will be published, but the topic is usually treated very carefully”.

However, the transformations in the area produced by the arrival of the internet provoked some changes in the posture of journalists regarding the decision to report a suicide case or not. Journalist Luiz Cláudio Castro, cover editor for *O Globo*, believes that the scenario is

7 Two testimonies were collected by journalist and researcher Luciano Dias as a contribution to this research, in April 2021, and two by one of the authors, in March and June 2022.

changing due to the influence of social networks. He said that, years ago, if the main newspapers decided among themselves that the best thing to do was not to say, in the news, that someone had committed suicide, the readers would find it awkward and sometimes even got in touch with the newspaper seeking for information, but in a few days the matter was left behind. However, with the emergence of networks as a platform of access to news, it has become almost impossible to avoid that the cause of a death that generates public interest is revealed. “If *O Globo* doesn’t report it, someone will. Besides, the concern with the audience weighs a lot nowadays”, pointed out the editor. For him, some companies with less tradition in journalism end up producing articles that are not very careful, in search of “clicks”.

Cláudia Colucci, a special Health reporter for *Folha*, mentioned the coverage of the death of actor Flávio Migliaccio, by suicide, in 2020, as an example of how some vehicles still do not comply with the necessary precautions in addressing self-inflicted death. On the occasion, several vehicles published the letter left by the actor, information about how he killed himself and even pictures of the place where he died. The journalist considers suicide a taboo in the press, not because of the theme itself, but because of the way it is approached. For her, journalists still have many doubts about it:

It has been 22 years since WHO released a manual on how the press should cover the topic of suicide, but to this day it is a territory in which journalists do not feel comfortable. I’ve been approached many times by colleagues asking for advice on the coverage of famous people’s suicides. The last one that I remember was that of actor Flávio Migliaccio. His farewell letter was reproduced in several media despite the orientation of WHO not recommending this practice. I try to guide myself by these orientations and pass them on to my colleagues. But now and then someone still slips into these guidelines, publishing excerpts from a letter, or revealing some detail about the death.

Cláudia never received specific guidance on how to deal with the subject. She told us that it is understood in the newspaper that, if the

person who took his/her own life is not famous, there is no interest in publishing it, unless the case is within a larger context. “For example, during the pandemic, there were more suicide attempts among young people. In this case we can report individual cases, without identifying the person, in order to illustrate the whole picture”, she explained. But, if on the one hand she sees neglect on the part of some vehicles, she also sees progress. For example, “there is more talk about the risk factors that lead to suicide and the promotion of help channels, such as the service provided by the CVV. I think we still need to demand public prevention policies with more emphasis” she reflects.

In the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, the orientation not to report suicide cases is known by the reporters. Usually, we simply don't report it, or if it's the death of someone famous, which can't be omitted, the recommendation is not to mention the suicide”. Instead, they use alternatives such as saying that ‘the cause of death was not disclosed’ or ‘the death was caused by an excess of substance X or Y’. “Anyway, like everything in journalism, there are exceptions, but, usually, this is the rule”, said the reporter interviewed, who asked not to have her name mentioned.

The journalist added an important fact. If the concrete cases of suicide are surrounded by restrictions, the same does not take place when the issue is approached from the standpoint of health. She herself has written many articles on depression and suicide for the Science/Health section, without any kind of interdiction.

As Warren Breed (1993 [1955]) would explain, organizational norms are incorporated “by osmosis” by the staff, in their experience in the newsroom. Among the interviewees, none mentioned the orientation in the manual, but they all knew the current norm on the approach to suicide. When in doubt, the guidance is to consult the immediate superiors who, in turn, may feel the need to consult their superiors.

Soloski (1999 [1955]) reminds us that professional routines in the newsrooms work as a method of controlling procedures. In the case in question, the need for regular consultation with superiors is incorporated as a routine procedure, subject to a system of professional rewards. In

other words, even when the editorial policy on a topic leaves doubts, the routines and the commitment to professionalism act to perpetuate the norms. Here we defend the interlocution with the academic field as a way of fostering debates that may improve certain norms and procedures.

To get closer to a way to deal with the issue in order to generate a protective effect against suicide, we sought the research of the Austrian physician Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, who defends the possibility of reports acting in prevention, based on reports by individuals who had suicidal thoughts, but decided not to take their own lives. According to him, the easy access to information, provided by current technological devices, increases the chances of dissemination of content that can help lower the rates. Interacting readers, for example, can serve as active agents in the construction of a certain reality and help to combat suicide.

Niederkrotenthaler *et al.* (2010) consider that, if the media is capable of encouraging suicides, the journalistic discourse can also cause individuals, by imitation, to give up taking their own lives when they hear stories that emphasize the benefits of continuing to live. Based on the methodology of content analysis and collection of several reports in the most important Austrian newspapers, the physician created the concept of “Papageno Effect” to justify his theory that suicidal thoughts, not followed by an effective suicide attempt, may have a protective impact if disclosed.

The denomination of the “Papageno Effect” comes from an opera by Mozart, produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, named *The Magic Flute*. In the opera, Papageno becomes desperate when he loses his beloved Papagena, and decides to kill himself. However, three geniuses intervene and convince him to go after his love. The result is that Papageno, unlike Werther, gives up on suicide and manages to find Papagena. They both declare themselves in love and start living together. Through this analogy, the authors consider that the intervention of the media, giving visibility to stories of people who gave up on taking their own lives, can act directly in the fight against suicide (NIEDERKROTENTHALER *et al.* 2010).



The key to prevention would be to generate identification between a reader who eventually has suicidal thoughts and someone who has gone through the same situation and got out of it. Articles that deal with social problems related to suicide, or the increase in rates, even with evaluations by specialists, when placed in a sensationalist context, can contribute to an increase in cases. Instead, if the media discourse focuses on reporting individual suicidal ideation, but brings testimonials from people who gave up on this idea, a bond of identification will be created with readers who are experiencing a similar situation.

### **Final Recommendations and considerations**

In this article, we sought to reflect on how the traditional press has positioned itself regarding suicide, from an editorial point of view. We argued that, although well-intentioned, the practice of avoiding the subject, for fear of the so-called “imitation effect”, is not necessarily the best contribution to reversing the number of self-inflicted deaths in the country. The use of caution not to naturalize or sensationalize stories of completed suicide should be maintained, in our understanding, as should the other recommendations in the WHO suicide prevention manual and its updates.

In summary, these recommendations, which we reiterate as a whole, are: that the sensationalist coverage be avoided, especially when it involves the suicide of celebrities or people who arouse admiration and identification; that articles which present suicide as an epidemic or an uncontrollable problem should not be published; that suicidal people are not portrayed as heroes; that pictures of the suicidal person, the scene, letters or details about the method are not published; that no visibility is given to theories that explain suicidal behavior as an answer to the degradation of society; that suicide is never shown as a way of dealing with problems,

It is also recommended that reports do not lose sight of the impact of suicide on the victim’s relatives and survivors, in terms of stigma and family suffering, and that support services contacts be made public. It

is recommended to publish articles on how to identify risk behaviors and how to deal with stress factors and negative thoughts. To this set, we added new items, inspired by the idea of generating the so-called “Papageno effect”, to deter suicidal ideas. In this way, we hope to contribute to bringing alternatives of responsible journalistic content to the daily approach on the subject:

- Not to base the subject on the occurrence of suicides, but on the perspective of recovery regarding the moments in which the person thought of taking his/her own life, and the support service;
- To give visibility to stories of people who gave up on the idea of taking their own lives and are doing well; to develop in these stories elements of identification between these people and the reader who eventually has suicidal ideas;
- To avoid extensive coverage of the same suicide – a practice that was associated by Niederkröthaler *et al.* (2010) with an increase in the number of occurrences of this kind of death;
- To interview professionals who can help in the multidisciplinary understanding of the problem, providing potentially useful content in the fight against suicide;
- Not to limit coverage to the General/Cities sections, but to address the issue from the Health/Science or even the Varieties, Behavior and Culture sections, always with the intent of giving visibility to care and the possibilities of recovery.

As noted by Dapieve (2007), the thin line between public interest and the right to privacy is often tensioned in debates involving the newsworthiness of suicide. The phenomenon is at the same time intimate and social, since in its social facet, it represents a serious public health problem. It demands constant ethical reflection from journalism, which, in turn, requires critical thinking.

Noting that there is an inversely proportional relationship between the number of suicides in Brazil and the number of references to the topic in newspapers, at least in the last two decades, suggests that the

press rethink its editorial procedures, in order to assume a more active role in fighting this problem. The central issue in this case is not to report or not, but how to report – as Émile Durkheim already noted in 1897. Our proposal is that the subject be exposed, with the media assuming its pedagogical function more strongly (VIZEU, 2009) in regard to helping people deal with feelings or problems that may lead to suicide.

Finally, we remind the reader that daily media coverage must take into account the susceptibility of certain age groups, especially young people, to news about deaths and diseases – a feeling that we observed to have been intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic (FELIX *et al.*, 2021; CONJUVE, 2020). Therefore, we recommend an effort to, as far as possible, counterbalance in the news the extremely heavy articles about death and suffering with others that show stories of recovery, solidarity and hope, in order to avoid that the experience of news consumption accentuates even more the traumatic fantasies of the moment we are living.

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