

SUICIDE SENSITIVE JOURNALISM

REPORT OF ACTIVITIES – AUGUST 2003

CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES
&
PRESSWISE TRUST (UK)

Introduction

The media can play a powerful role in educating the public about suicide prevention. Stories about suicide can inform readers, listeners and viewers about the likely causes of suicide, its warning signs, sources of help and advice, trends in suicide rates, and recent treatment advances. They can also highlight opportunities to prevent suicide. Media stories about individual deaths by suicide may be newsworthy and need to be covered, but they also have the potential to do harm. Implementation of recommendations for media coverage of suicide has been shown to decrease suicide rates. There is evidence that sensitive media coverage of suicide can help to save lives.

Although many countries have already begun to address the problem of reporting suicide in the mainstream media, and have formulated voluntary Codes of Ethics to govern guide such reporting, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) found that there was a need to raise awareness among media professionals in Sri Lanka about the importance of reporting suicides sensitively needed to be raised.

CPA worked in close collaboration with The PressWise Trust for this project. Set up in 1993, this media ethics charity, based in the United Kingdom, has undertaken research and training on a variety of media issues in the UK and elsewhere and, over recent years, has developed special expertise on Suicide Sensitive Journalism worldwide.

The CPA study of media coverage in Sri Lanka was conducted from March-May 2003. As part of its programme of activities, CPA invited the Director of PressWise Trust (UK), Mr. Mike Jempson, for two workshops in Sri Lanka based on the draft version of the report written by Mr. Sunanda Deshapriya (Head, Media Unit, CPA) and Mr. Sanjana Hattotuwa (Coordinator, Media Unit, CPA).

Workshop in Colombo

The first workshop on suicide sensitive journalism took place on 23rd August 2003 at Hotel Renuka in Colombo. Participants to this workshop were drawn from a spectrum of mainstream and alternative media, covering both print and electronic media.

After presentation by Mr. Mike Jempson and Mr. Sunanda Deshapriya, participants were encouraged to participate in the discussions which centred on examples of suicides reporting in the mainstream media. It was agreed that given the history and culture of suicide coverage in Sri Lanka, media professionals needed to develop their capacity to report with sensitivity, respecting the emotions of those connected with the story and readers, listeners or viewers who might have experienced similar traumas.

Drawing from the report prepared by CPA, participants discussed the following issues:

- Evidence of a tendency towards extreme sensationalism in reporting suicides.
- The media in Sri Lanka is aware that the country has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, but seems to be unable or unwilling to explore the root causes. This inability or unwillingness has resulted in a media which is numb to the effects of sensational and irresponsible reporting. Coverage of the complex issues associated with suicide is extremely rare.
- Every single article on suicide in the newspapers monitored clearly specified the method used in each case. There seems to be a trend towards use of vivid and explicit detail when reporting suicide methods.
- The mainstream media seem happy to rely upon offering a single, simple cause as an explanation of suicide. Little or no interest is shown in exploring the series of events and personal circumstances that led to a suicide.
- Coroner's Reports or Police Reports are the primary sources of information for media stories about suicide. It is almost impossible to find any article in the mainstream media that goes beyond these primary sources of information, and examines the circumstances of from an analytical perspective.
- A tendency to downplay the seriousness of suicides. Some headlines appear to treat suicides lightly - a stark reminder of the incapacity of mainstream media to handle suicide reports with sensitivity.
- According to the majority of reports on suicide the most common suicide methods are the consumption of pesticides, hanging or jumping in front of an on-coming train.

- Many of the reports reveal the exact details of the method used in attempted or actual suicides; including the name of the pesticide, the location, the ingredients of a fatal concoction etc — details which could have easily been left out. There appears to be little or no appreciation of the effects of such reporting.
- A tendency in the print media to announce the cause and method of a suicide in the headline. This has the inadvertent and undesirable effect of promoting suicide as a solution to certain problems.

During the course of the discussion, participants deliberated on whether the market forces had a role to play in the portrayal of suicides in the media. While the English and Tamil media believed that market forces did not have an impact on the reportage of suicides, the Sinhala press believed that it had a key role to play.

Using the story of the suicide of a teenage girl in the UK, Mike engaged participants on the best practices of reporting suicide. In particular, attention was given to the following guidelines:

1. Avoid sensational headlines, images and language
2. Publicising details of suicide methods can encourage imitation
3. Avoid speculation, especially about ‘celebrity’ suicides
4. Suicide is a complex issue, often linked to mental illness
5. Consider context – suicides in institutions deserve investigation
6. Challenge ‘myths’ about suicide
7. Censorship or misinformation about suicide is helpful
8. Put people in touch with suicide prevention agencies
9. Journalists are vulnerable too – support colleagues

All participants were given copies of the draft report on Suicide Sensitive Journalism and were asked to provide feedback on the report in time for its final publication.

Workshop in Jaffna

The second workshop on suicide sensitive journalism took place on 27th August 2003 at Bastians Hotel in Jaffna. Participants to this workshop were drawn from a spectrum of mainstream media in the region.



Mr. Mike Jempson with translator



Some participants at the workshop

Most of the points discussed reflected the issues brought up in Colombo. Mike Jempson was aided in his presentation by two other resource persons from Jaffna, who gave presentations in Tamil on suicides in the North-East and the problem of psychological trauma faced by many inhabitants in the region.

Media Coverage of the Workshops

Media's contribution to increasing suicides

by Nadira Gunatilleke

Most of Sinhala language newspapers do not consider feelings of relatives of victims when publishing suicide cases. The same news reports publish descriptions of suicide methods not acknowledging the complexities of suicidal behaviour. Most of the time the news reports rarely provide information about where help and advice can be found, admitted several local journalists who took part in a workshop on 'Suicide sensitive journalism' held in Colombo recently.

During the workshop the participants raised a number of questions on different styles used by Sinhala language newspapers to report suicide cases. Several Sinhala reports which carried different types of suicide cases were examined during the workshop. A study done by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) on the same subject was also presented to the journalists to develop a 'Suicide-sensitive journalism handbook'.

According to the study, the tendency towards an extreme sensationalism when reporting is evident. Articles which deal with the complex issues surrounding suicides are extremely rare. Every article on suicide in the newspapers monitored clearly stated the method used in the particular suicide. In fact there seems to be a tendency to be as clear as possible when reporting the method. Mainstream media show no interest in exploring the series of events that led to the suicide but instead explain the suicide as a result of a single event or at best a simplistic chain of events, the report says.

The coroner's reports or police

reports are the primary sources of information for media reports on suicide. It is almost impossible to find any article in the mainstream media reporting suicides that goes beyond these primary sources of information and examines the cause for the suicide in an analytical perspective. Another common phenomenon are headlines that take suicides lightly - mainstream media shows a tendency to downplay the seriousness of suicides.

This in turn is a stark reminder of the incapacity of mainstream media to sensitively report suicides, says the report.

According to the same findings many of the reports clearly explain the method used in the suicide or suicide attempt. The name of the pesticide, the location, the detailed method, the ingredients of a fatal concoction are all laid bare, with little or no understanding of the effect of such reporting. These details could have easily been taken out of the reports.

Another clear tendency is for articles on suicides to report the ostensible cause and method in the headline itself. This has the inadvertent and undesirable effect of promoting suicide as a solution to certain problems. For instance 'man commits suicide because his wife left him', 'woman commits suicide because husband abuses her', 'student takes cyanide and dies because her friends got to know about her secret love affair', 'mother kills child and then takes poison herself', 'lover takes poison after argument'.

Sensationalism, fabrication of true events, male centric perspective, false heroism, erroneous portrayal of love, lack of sensitivity to victims or the families of the vic-

tims, no exploration of alternatives and suicide portrayed as solution to certain problems and an act of martyrdom are some of the salient points that were observed in two suicide cases (where a boy killed his girlfriend, her father and killed himself and a story of a woman who killed herself inside Inland Fisheries Department) appeared in one of the leading Sinhala medium newspaper recently.

According to some useful guidelines developed by the PressWise Trust with the contribution of journalists, sensitive reporting includes consideration for the feelings of relatives, avoiding detailed descriptions of suicide methods, acknowledging the complexities of suicidal behaviour, providing information about where help and advice can be found, acknowledging that sudden death creates problems for family and friends.

The same guidelines say that publicising details of suicide methods can encourage imitation. It is also recommended to avoid speculation, especially about 'celebrity suicides'.

The media can play a powerful role in educating the public about suicide prevention. Stories about suicide can inform readers and viewers about the likely causes of suicide, its warning signs, trends in suicide rates, and recent treatment advances. They can also highlight opportunities to prevent suicide. Media stories about individual deaths by suicide may be newsworthy and need to be covered, but they also have the potential to do harm.

Implementation of recommendations for media coverage of suicide has been shown to decrease suicide rates.

Daily News 15th September 2003

தற்கொலைகள் சம்பந்தமான செய்திகள் அதனை ஊக்குவிப்பதாக அமையக்கூடாது

-பத்திரிகையாளர் பயிற்சிப்பட்டறையில் மைக் ஜெம்சன் உரை

மனித குலத்தின் மாட்சிமைக்காகவே பத்திரிகைகள் செய்தி வெளியிட வேண்டும். நாடகம் தற்கொலைகள் சம்பந்தமான செய்திகளை பத்திரிகையாளர் வெளியிடும் போது மிக அவதானமாகவும் பொறுப்புணர்வுடனும் நடந்துகொள்ள வேண்டும். 1983 ஆம் ஆண்டு யாழ்ப்பாணப் பத்திரிகையில் அலரிவிதைகளை உண்டு தற்கொலை செய்ததாக செய்தி வந்தபின்னரே நாடு முழுவதும் அலரிவிதை உண்டு தற்கொலை செய்யும் முயற்சிகள் அதிகரித்தன. உண்மையின்வயை தெளிவுபடுத்துவதாக பத்திரிகையாளர்கள் செய்திகளை வெளியிட்டாலும் அது பாதகமான விளைவுகளை சமூகத்தில் ஏற்படுத்துகின்றது.

பத்திரிகையாளர் பணி கடினமானதுதான் ஆனால் பத்திரிகையாளர்கள் சமூகத்தின் நலன்களைப் பேணும் பொறுப்பாளிகள் என்பதை மறந்து விடக்கூடாது.

இவ்வாறு, வண்டனில் இயங்கும் "த பிரஸ் வைஸ் ஏஸ்ட்" நிறுவனம் மாற்றக் கருத்துடைய நிறுவனத்துடன் இணைந்து "தற்கொலை மரணங்கள் ஏற்படுத்தும் தாக்கங்கள்" என்ற பொருளில்

நடாத்திய இதழியலாளர் பட்டறை நிகழ்வில் நிறுவன இடக்குதர் மைக் ஜெம்சன் தெரிவித்தார். இப்பயிற்சிப்பட்டறை பாழ், மாவட்ட செய்தி யாளர்களுக்கு வந்திடபன் விருந்தினர் விடுதியில் இடம்பெற்றது.

அவர் அங்கு தொடர்ந்து உரையாற்றுகையில் "மாறி வரும் உலகில் தற்கொலைகளின் எண்ணிக்கை அதிகரித்துவருகின்றது. குறிப்பாக இலங்கையிலும் தற்கொலை செய்வோர் தொகை கணிசமாக அதிகரித்து வருவதாக ஆய்வுகள் தெரிவிக்கின்றன. தற்கொலை முயற்சிகள் அதிகரிப்பதற்கு ஒரு காரணியாக பத்திரிகைகள் தெரிந்தோ தெரியாமலே தற்கொலை செய்திகளை மக்கள் மனத்தில் தவறான சிந்தனைகள் உருவாக வெளியிட்டு வருகின்றன. தாம் வெளியிடும் செய்தி அதே உணர்வுடன் இருப்பவர்களுக்கு துண்டுதலை அமைந்தவிடுகின்றன. இன்றைக்கு தற்கொலை செய்வதற்கான காரணங்கள் முழுமையாக அறியப்படவில்லை. இருப்பினும் கணவன் மனைவி பிணக்கு, மன உணர்ச்சல், வறுமை, தாய் தந்தையர் கட்டுப்பாடு, வாழ்க்கைப் பிரச்சினை, இட்படியாக

பல காரணங்கள் கூறப்பட்டு செய்தி வெளியாகி வருகின்றன. இம்மாதிரியான பிணக்குகளுக்கு ஒரேவழி தற்கொலைதான் என்பதை வெளியிடப்படும் செய்திகள் மூண்டப்பாக காட்டி நிழல்கின்றன.

தற்கொலை சம்பந்தமான செய்திகள் வெளி வரும்போது அது இறந்தவரின் பிள்ளைக்கு "வடு"வை ஏற்படுத்தலாம். குடும்பத்தில் கய கொளவதற்கு பங்கம் ஏற்படலாம். மற்றவர்களுக்கும் தற்கொலைசெய்த துண்டுவதாகக்கூட அமைந்துவிடலாம். எனவேதான், தற்கொலை செய்திகளை வெளியிடும்போதும், அதனை எழுதும்போதும் "மனிதநேயம்"பொண்படுவது அவசியம். இங்கு உரையாற்றிய வைத்திய கலாநிதி கருத்துத் தெரிவிக்கையில் இருப்பது பனடோல் விழுங்கினால் தற்கொலை செய்து கொள்ளலாம் என்றால் அது விபரீதமாகக் கூட வந்துவிடும். இன்றைக்கு பனடோல் எங்கு விற்கலாம் என்ற நிலைமாரி எங்கும் வாங்கலாம் என்ற நிலை காணப்படுகின்றது. இதுகூட மக்களுக்கு அறிவுரையாக இருப்பதால் அது மக்களுக்கு சென்றடைய வேண்டுமென்றார்.

Ilanadu – 28th August 2003

யாழ்ப்பாணப் பத்திரிகையாளருக்கு ஒரு நாள் பயிற்சிக் கருத்தரங்கு



கனந்த தேசப்பிரிய, மக்ஜெம்சன், டொகிரத் சிவதாசன் ஆகியோரைப் படத்தில் காணலாம்.

மாற்றுக்கொள்கைகளுக்கான நிலையத்தின் ஏற்பாட்டில் யாழ். மாவட்ட பத்திரிகையாளர்களுக்கான கலந்துரையாடல் ஒன்று நேற்று நடைபெற்றது. யாழ்ப்பாணம், பஸ்தியான் ஹோட்டலில் இடம்பெற்ற இக்கலந்துரையாடலில், ஐக்கிய இராச்சியத்தைச் சேர்ந்த பத்திரிகையாளர் மக்ஜெம்சன், வைத்திய கலாநிதி சிவதாசன் ஆகியோர் கருத்துரைகளை வழங்கினர். இரு அமர்வுகளாக இடம்பெற்ற இக்கலந்துரையாடலில்,

காலை அமர்வில் "தற்கொலை தொடர்பாக பத்திரிகைகள்" எனும் விடயத்திலும், மாலை அமர்வில் "சிறுவர் பாதுகாப்பு" தொடர்பாகவும் கருத்துரைகள் வழங்கப்பட்டன.

இக்கலந்துரையாடலில், பிரபல தென்னிலங்கை பத்திரிகையாளர் கனந்த தேசப்பிரியவும் கலந்துகொண்டது குறிப்பிடத்தக்கது.

Thinakkural – 29th August 2003

Annex 1

Participants list for workshop in Colombo 23rd August 2003

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| P. Nagolan | Eezhanadu (Paper) | 021-222-5107 |
| S. Joseph Bala | HUDEC | 021-222-2571 |
| T. Premananth | Uthayan | 021-222-2030 |
| S. Vasanthukumar | Uthayan | 021-222-2030 |
| G. Kenneth | Aathma | |