Media Forum 2018

Reporting Mental Health & Suicide: Challenges Facing Journalists

Research presented by Dr. Anne O'Brien, NUI Maynooth & Sara Bartlett, Mindframe Australia

Followed by Panel Discussion chaired by RTÉ's Evanne Ní Chuilinn
The following research was conducted by Dr. Anne O’Brien, Department of Media Studies, NUI Maynooth, on behalf of Headline.

About Headline
Headline is Ireland’s national media programme for responsible reporting and representation of mental ill health and suicide. Headline operates under the remit of the current national suicide prevention strategy, Connecting for Life, as set out by the National Office for Suicide Prevention.

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“We confirm that our organisation complies with the Governance Code for the community, voluntary and charitable sector in Ireland”

Registered Charity Number: 20011512 | CHY Number: CHY 6380 | Companies Registration number: 70462
# CONTENTS

4  FOREWORD: JOHN SAUNDERS, CEO HEADLINE

5  MESSAGE FROM ÁINE O’MEARA, HEADLINE PROGRAMME LEADER

6  INTRODUCTION

8  LITERATURE REVIEW

10 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

12 PART I: REPORTING ON MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE

Sensitivity to the topic of suicide
Balancing public and private interests
Challenges to reporting - facts, sources & platform specifics
Guidelines - awareness and language
The relative absence of mental illness stories

26 PART II: EDITORIAL APPROACHES TO MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE

Balancing public and private interests
Challenges to reporting - facts, sources & platform specifics

32 PART III: CARE FOR MEDIA WORKERS

38 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

40 Summary of Findings from PART I

42 Summary of findings from Part II

44 Summary of findings from Part III & Recommendations

46 BIBLIOGRAPHY
As a national voluntary mental health organization, Shine has always been conscious of the influence of the media in shaping Irish public opinion. This is particularly relevant where social attitudes have a significant bearing on how people and their family members cope with mental ill health.

Ireland is undergoing a dramatic change in social attitudes and this is clearly illustrated in its response to mental health matters. We have emerged from a time when mental health (and ill health) was not spoken about and treated very much as a social taboo, to a place where there is more open discussion both in the media and in the population generally. Shine has played its part in starting this conversation.

This process of change is part of the ongoing task of reducing the stigma and discrimination associated with mental ill health. In that context, Headline is an essential partner in See Change, the National Stigma Reduction Partnership.

Since 2006 Shine has hosted Headline, a specific programme aimed at supporting media in the ongoing mental health debate. Headline supports and mentors the media industry, provides educational input to media students, and monitors and responds to media content. Headline also promotes good practice guidelines for the reporting of mental health and suicide topics.

I am pleased to present this specific research report on the challenges facing journalists.

This is the first research report of its kind in Ireland. It examines the activity of Irish reporting and identifies specific challenges facing journalists, editors and the industry generally. The report goes on to make recommendations for change which it is hoped will assist media publications and broadcasters to significantly increase its contribution to the ongoing national conversion.

We hope this research will stimulate debate, not just in the media industry but in the wider population and serve as a benchmark for the future of reporting on mental health and suicide matters in Ireland.

On behalf of Shine I would like to thank specifically Áine O’Meara, Headline’s Programme Lead, and her team at Headline, Dr. Anne O’Brien at Maynooth University and her research team, and of course the journalists and editors who gave freely of their time to contribute to the composition of this report.

John Saunders
CEO - SHINE
Supporting People Affected by Mental Ill Health
Over the last decade, Headline focused primarily on monitoring the Irish media in their application of guidelines on suicide and mental health reporting. 2018 marks a shift in that practice. Headline is now redirecting its focus towards more collaborative practices with the media sector, redesigning our training materials, and providing increased resources for supporting media workers who cover suicide and mental ill health.

Having worked in the industry for over a decade, I understand the immense pressures placed on frontline journalists and the crews that support them. Media workers are often faced with situations that call for quick thinking, tenacity and emotional resilience. For those covering difficult content around suicide, and mental illness, the pressure to “get it right” cannot be underestimated. While mental health organisations have a duty of care to their service users, they also have a duty to help the media, and ultimately audiences, better understand the story of mental ill health in Ireland.

This research has uncovered a plethora of learning opportunities for both sectors. Headline is indebted to Dr. Anne O’Brien for the patience, curiosity, and insight shown throughout this process. The Reporting Mental Health and Suicide: Challenges Facing Journalists research marks a critical step towards better understanding the needs of those covering these important issues, and the needs of those who chose to share their story with them. With this shared understanding, the potential for positive change in attitudes and behaviours towards those affected by suicide and mental ill health is immense.

I’m delighted to be leading Headline in this new, more collaborative direction and look forward to working closer with journalists and producers across the country.

Áine O’Meara
Headline Programme Lead
INTRODUCTION

Efforts to implement guidelines on suicide reporting in Ireland have largely been effective (Flynn, 2017). This offers a solid rationale for shifting focus away from media monitoring and reacting to negative reporting, in order to better develop outreach activities with media professionals. This will help to further encourage and support increased and more responsible reporting on mental health and suicide. In terms of designing a policy approach to proactive engagement with media industries, very little research attention has been paid to date to the broader media context in which stories on mental health and suicide are produced. The institutional, organisational, cultural and practical dimensions of media work, which shape the coverage that journalists offer, are all under-researched. In short, there is a need for a national study to unpack why coverage of mental health and suicide in Ireland occurs in the way it does, across print, broadcast and online media. This project addresses that gap by focusing on journalists’ understandings and experiences of mental health and suicide coverage in Ireland in order to assist Headline in developing a strategy towards increased engagement with media industries to better support responsible reporting.

Dr. Anne O’Brien, NUI Maynooth
VERY LITTLE RESEARCH ATTENTION HAS BEEN PAID TO DATE TO THE BROADER MEDIA CONTEXT IN WHICH STORIES ON MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE ARE PRODUCED
Limited research on representation of mental illness in new media (Griffiths and Christensen, 2000) finds that websites can contain useful information on mental health but overall quality is poor because of failure to verify the sources of data.

As much as there are problems with representations of mental health in the media, academic literature on depictions of suicide in the media shows that there is still cause for concern. These studies can be divided into two distinct fields, the media’s treatment of the topic and analyses of how media reports influence suicidal behavior (Cullen, 2006). With regard to the former, the media has tended to report suicide in a way that depicts it as resulting from personal circumstances or clinical or medical reasons, rather than as a product of anomic resulting from profound social change (Cullen, 2006). Moreover, suicide tends to receive coverage in the context of live media, where the language used tends to present incidences of suicide as shocking and extraordinary (Cullen, 2006). As Sudack further observes with regard to newspaper stories, they are “further complicated—even if the reporter tries to not overdramatize an account—the reporter is frequently different from the headline writer. Headline writers are charged with the task of attracting the reader’s attention so that over-dramatization becomes a virtue,” (Sudack, 2005: 497). As a result, Sudack observes, “It is easy to cite examples of poor reporting of suicidal deaths; it is difficult to find the converse,” (2005: 497). It may now be time to shift attention away from further cataloguing of media representations to the more challenging prospect of how to better use the media to improve depictions of mental health and suicide.

With regard to the issue of how the media impacts on suicidal behavior, despite ongoing debate (Stack, 2005) there is some evidence that “media portrayal of both fictional and real life suicides may in some circumstances lead to small increases in overall suicide rates and larger increases in method specific suicide rates,” (Gunnell, 1994: 1447; Gould, 2001). Caution with regard to the mention of methodology are thus inserted into most guidelines on reporting suicide. However, despite evidence of that influence there were nonetheless frequent instances in Irish print media of failure to observe guidelines on language (Cullen, 2006). More optimistically in recent years, Flynn (2017) has noted that the trajectory of observation of guidelines is towards improvement in terms of compliance. The monitoring and documentation of coverage of both suicide and
IT MAY NOW BE TIME TO SHIFT ATTENTION AWAY FROM FURTHER CATALOGUING OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS TO THE MORE CHALLENGING PROSPECT OF HOW TO BETTER USE THE MEDIA TO IMPROVE DEPICTIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE.

As Philo et al (1994) observes, media has the potential to de-stigmatise as well as to stigmatise and there is no evidence that media professionals are resistant to proactive lobbying on these issues. There is research evidence that media can be influential in deterring suicidal behaviors (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998; Martin, 1998). Despite some negative patterns in representation, journalists have been found to be no more “authoritarian, distant or restrictive than other groups, and they do not consider that the mentally ill are more dangerous than the general population,” (Stuart, 2006). In fact, some of the positive dimensions of media coverage include the fact that often media material contains some form of personal narrative from people who have experienced mental health problems, such as celebrities, or members of the public sharing stories about themselves and their lives (Clement, 2013). These first-person accounts have been shown to reduce stigma (Couture & Penn, 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Corrigan et al, 2012) by increasing awareness of the variation amongst members of out-groups and in-groups, increasing social identity complexity, and increasing tolerance (Schmid et al, 2009) with this empathy then being translated into a commitment to social justice (Kumagai, 2008; Clement et al, 2013). These facts point to the importance of gaining “more experience in how to work together with media professionals to improve the quality of suicide reporting,” (Michel et al, 2000:78).

In working more closely with the media it is important to understand why the patterns of coverage occur in the ways that they do. Perhaps the persistence of negative coverage may arise as a result of broader industry pressures to adopt sensationalist angles or story lines in order to gain a competitive edge. They might predominate because “common sense” understandings of mental illness prevail in media production (Nairn, 2007). They might resist change because of a lack of time for journalists to conduct thorough research or due to a dearth of access to mental health experts, or a tendency to avoid first person accounts (Nairn & Coverdale, 2004).

These problems might prevail as a result of gate-keeper effects from editors, or indeed as a product of a myriad of other industry constraints. The key issue to note is that very little research has been conducted on the production of media representations of mental health and suicide. It is to this lacunae in knowledge concerning why reportage occurs in the way that it does that this study is addressed.
This case study explores the institutional, cultural and practical challenges that journalists and media producers face when representing suicide or mental health issues. A key consideration regarding a small-scale, interview-based, Irish study, is the extent to which generalizations can be made.

Extrapolating broadly on the basis of a small, nation-specific sample is not recommended and the research offers no such universalizing generalizations. Instead the emphasis here is on insights into media producer’s experiences and expertise regarding coverage of a sensitive topic in an Irish context. While the case study methodology clearly carries with it documented contingencies of working from a small sample, with a single nation case approach in terms of limits on the explanatory range (Yin, 2014); nonetheless, well-chosen case studies can provide opportunities to produce important exemplars, generate practical, context-dependent knowledge and have merit in their proximity to studied realities (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

As such, findings outlined below are not offered as a comprehensive account of the complex factors that shape media practice, but instead the findings offer knowledge on the experiences and understandings of a specific group of practitioners as they navigate the explicit and implicit procedures that shape representation of suicide and mental health in this specific national context.

Data was derived from semi-structured interviews with a purposive, snowball sample of 18 key media professionals from radio, television, print and online outlets.

The breakdown of platform and roles pertaining to each contributor is described in the table below.

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...THE CHALLENGES RESPONDENTS NAMED VARIED CONSIDERABLY ACCORDING TO THE GENRE OF OUTPUT THAT THEY WORKED IN...

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and anonymized. Confidentiality was assured, with any details that might reveal the identities of participants changed, this included changing gendered pronouns for some respondents and omitting programme titles and on occasion descriptions of programme content. No distinction was made as to whether respondents worked for a public service or commercial, broadsheet or tabloid outlet, this was to prevent identification of participants. During interviews respondents were asked about the constraints that shape how they approach the issue of mental health and suicide, in terms of the availability of sources, the guidelines and context, the market logics of media production and the professional norms and culture, which informs their practice. Respondents were also asked about editorial position and attitudes towards these topics. Finally, respondents were questioned on organizational care practices in the context of reporting mental health and suicide.

A key point to note is that the challenges respondents named varied considerably according to the genre of output that they worked in, whether this was news and current affairs production or whether they worked in features or documentary. Many news reporters spoke in particular about covering murder-suicides whereas features producers spoke more to the topics of mental illness and mental health, as well as suicide, rather than murder-suicide. There was also some variation across platforms, that is, between radio, print, television and online, but perhaps surprisingly these were not as significant as the differences accounted for by generic conventions and requirements. Features producers were more likely to cover individual suicide stories and mental health issues whereas news journalists were more concerned with coverage of critical incidents.

Finally, recommendations were sought on how challenges might be better addressed. Data was coded and an analytical framework for examining journalists’ experiences was structured around the three key areas of challenges, editorial and care, and each constitutes an individual section of findings outlined below.
PART I:

REPORTING ON MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE
Firstly, the research explores the key challenges named by journalists working in print, radio, television and online, who cover suicide and mental health stories. Despite various generic differences, in general terms producers noted that their output was shaped by a number of factors, which included:

- Sensitivity to the topic of suicide
- Balancing public and private interests
- Challenges to reporting- facts, sources & platform specifics
- Guidelines - awareness and language
- The relative absence of mental illness stories
SENSITIVITY TO THE TOPIC OF SUICIDE

Journalists were cognisant that suicide was a sensitive topic and they claimed that they approached the issue carefully. Sometimes this sensitivity involved not reporting a death. As one radio reporter noted, “A typical ordinary suicide we wouldn’t cover... For instance, if a body is found in a river, we would try to find out if it’s a suicide and if it is then we won’t report on it. Because a suicide of itself is just like a natural death you just wouldn’t report on it,” (Radio Reporter 3). As another radio reporter noted, “I would say most of the journalists I deal with would handle it very responsibly....”, (Radio Reporter 1). A radio editor agreed, “The main challenges would be to ensure... that we report on it appropriately and sensitively. Obviously, there’s a need to cover a story but there is a way to cover it,” (Radio Editor 1). An online editor concurred that the topic should be treated sensitively and that the attitude and approach within media to suicide, but also to mental health, had improved in recent years. As he put it, “I think suicide and mental health are treated more sensitively. There would be an understanding that it’s a very sensitive thing for a family, a tough thing to deal with. So, I think that the tone and language that we use would be very different to what we would use with, for instance, a gangland shooting.... I think the coverage has improved in the last few years that there is more consideration given and that people are more thoughtful,” (Online Editor 1). Another print journalist concurred with regard to reporting on mental health, “I think there is more sensitivity around it... There’s no getting away from that... people are sensitive to it and you have to be respectful of the sensitivity that family might have, or individuals might have, or people suffering with mental health issues and how it’s spoken about,” (Print 1).

The reasons journalists offered for being sensitive included avoiding stigmatisation. As an online journalist noted, “Any media organisation that I’ve ever worked for strictly avoided using the phrase “committed suicide” so as not to stigmatise suicide,” (Online 1). A print journalist concurred with regard to mental health, “I think that would just be a natural human inclination (to treat it sensitively) because there is a stigma around mental health,” (Print 1). An online journalist also offered concern for family as a motivator towards sensitive reporting, “You’d be conscious of the family reading the column,” (Online 2). A television news editor agreed, “Where does the caution come from, defamation, getting it wrong, your own reputation? No. I just think it’s the sensitivity to the people involved, the case itself,” (TV News Editor 1). In addition, there was acknowledgement from a number of respondents that contagion could be an issue if suicide reporting was detailed as regards the method. “Contagion is the biggest challenge, you don’t want to be giving people ideas, so you don’t want to mention here’s how someone did it.” (Online 2). Another respondent concurred, “I’m always aware of the sensitivities with a topic like this that you have to be careful of the impact this could have. It could be a story someone is relating to. With suicide, it could give people ideas,” (Radio Reporter 1).

BALANCING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Respondents were clear that they needed to be sensitive in their reporting on suicide but they were also insightful that there was a dilemma to address between reporting the fact of the death clearly as a suicide or choosing to protect the privacy of a family and individual. This dilemma manifested in terms of language. Some frustration was expressed with the use of euphemisms such as “died suddenly” or “died tragically” to describe deaths that were suicides. There was a sense that the obfuscation potentially added to stigma around the nature of the death. As one journalist explained, “When we were covering the case of Amanda Gilbert’s funeral... I noticed that other papers spoke of her ‘dying tragically’, ‘dying suddenly’, ‘dying in tragic circumstances’ and I talked to the editor...
DO THEY NEED TO KNOW HOW SHE DIED? MAYBE THEY DON’T AND THAT’S A CHALLENGE

(Online Editor 1)

and he said I think we should say straight out that she took her own life. And it was so much part of the narrative at the funeral, the priest talked about it, her partner talked about it... the family are very clear and quite open about it, I think maybe we should say it was a suicide instead of all of this kind of ‘died suddenly’... There’s no shame in it, when that’s the story, that’s what it’s about,” (Print 1).

However, on the other hand, an online editor offered an equally clear and valid rationale for not naming the death of a particular celebrity as suicide. “She passed away and there would have been legacy issues with mental health for her. You have a woman who has 100s of millions of followers... and people want to know what was the cause of her death. Like that is the big balance between someone who is well known and people want to know about her and it’s a tricky balance because she also has friends and family and that’s hard, the balance between the public and private. What do the public need to know? Do they need to know how she died? Maybe they don’t and that’s a challenge, to protect privacy,” (Online Editor 1).

For features writers balancing public and the private interests was also an issue. As one respondent put it. “You always want to steer yourself onto the responsible side while being a journalist as well, and providing some insight into what’s happened, in some detail, where you’re not censoring the subject to within an inch of its life. So, it’s a tricky balancing act,” (Print 2). For features writers different types of suicides led to different approaches to getting the balance right. As a journalist explained, “Let’s say there’s a suicide in a school, people will walk on eggshells and treat it really sensitively and it may not even be reported. But with a murder-suicide you’d treat it more like a murder, where a crime has been committed, so there’s an argument that those rules should apply. That’s where there’s a tension predominantly. Editors would look for more detail in murder-suicide, more around the background of individuals... Method, did the person suffer from mental health problems, the sheer prominence of the story, these are issues where you’re treating it differently and where the tensions arise,” (Print 2). A television producer agreed “it’s always a fine balance between getting the strongest story and your duty of care to the people that you’re dealing with,” (TV Producer 4). She explained how she addressed that balance between getting the story and minding contributors. “Throughout we make sure that the people we choose... have a very defined reason why they want to do it, so that we’re not just pulling them along, without being straight with them, or in any way trying to feature people that are in a precarious position in terms of their own mental health,” (TV Producer 4).

As well as caring for individual contributors another part of the effort to balance privacy and public interest was explained in terms of concern for the families of sources. As a producer of a programme, which included children’s mental health, noted, “There were many stories that we would have liked to tell but we couldn’t because it was either the families themselves didn’t think it was suitable for their stories to be featured, or they were fearful of a backlash from the services... that it might come back on them in a negative way, or we chose not to tell the story because we didn’t feel that we would be able to protect the duty of care to that child, that by putting them up on screen that might in some ways make it worse for them,” (TV Producer 4). That producer was clear that this duty was not something she found onerous. “I don’t find that challenging. It comes down to your own integrity and conscience and your own instinct... about how would I like them to be treated. I fundamentally believe that it is their story that we are borrowing, where they are coming on air to raise awareness about mental health it is their story and we are borrowing it for a while,” (TV Producer 4).

Balancing public and private interest was also
attempting to carefully balance public and private interests nonetheless, they faced numerous conceptual and practical challenges in covering the topics appropriately. The main challenges that they named as relevant to them are outlined below.

**CHALLENGES TO REPORTING—FACTS, SOURCES AND PLATFORM SPECIFICS**

As noted in the methodology section above, respondent’s approaches to coverage of mental health and suicide was heavily influence by the genre of media in which they were engaged. Many news reporters when asked generally about covering mental health and suicide spoke specifically about covering murder-suicides. Features and documentary producers spoke more to the topics of mental illness and mental health, as well as suicide as a social problem, rather than as a critical incident. Each of these two approaches, news and features, are described separately below in terms of the challenges that both cohorts faced in covering the topics. In addition, there were some challenges that were more specific to the platform in question these are summarized at the end of this sub-section.

**News reporting - Facts and sources**

A primary concern for news reporters working on a (murder-)suicide story was on limiting all discussion to verifiable facts about the story. As an editor said, “In general... from a news point of view we have to cover all mental health and suicide stories factually and that’s the thing for us we can’t allow commentary to seep in... we just have to tell the facts as they are,” (TV News Editor 1). This meant that news reporters were reliant on a limited number of sources for their story, particularly for a breaking news story. The main source at a murder-suicide was
...THE OFFICIAL CHANNELS WHO YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO GO THROUGH GIVING YOU NOTHING AND THAT’S FRUSTRATING

(Radio Editor 3)

Gardai, who were problematic for journalists in a number of ways. The Gardai were highly reluctant to engage with journalists. As a radio reporter explained, “The guards can be very closed... and they’ll barely confirm something for you, even though there could be 20 journalists outside a house they’ll barely tell you you’re in the right place... you’ve got the official channels who you’re supposed to go through giving you nothing and that’s frustrating,” (Radio Reporter 3). As an editor explained, “We have to be guided by what the guards will tell us on the scene... so the guards might say - we are not looking for anyone in relation to this incident - you can use that and more or less give the viewers credit of reading between the lines to know what has happened... For us to put a label of a murder-suicide on something, we would be quite reluctant to do that,” (TV News Editor 1). Or as a reporter noted, “In the case of a suicide they would have said ‘this is a family tragedy’ and that becomes the reported definition of the murder-suicide,” (Radio Reporter 1).

Journalists were generally not positive about the role of the Guards as the main source in these types of stories. Many respondents felt that “they’re very cautious, too cautious sometimes,” (Radio Reporter 2). Another respondent put it more strongly, “The Garda press office are terrible. They’re probably the least helpful press office in the entire country... they’re not getting the information from the Gardai at the scenes back to the press office. So that’s kind of an obstacle,” (Online 1). Another editor explained further, “They’re so reluctant in case they... say something wrong and they don’t have the media training to be able to deal with the media briefing, or to be able to deal with being asked difficult questions. But they just seem to shut down on any sort of comment... They don’t give you anything that will speculate as to what the motivation might be behind the crime... even if they said they’re ‘Investigating possibilities’ or ‘We’re not looking for anyone else in relation to this,’ at least then you can leave it up to the viewer to infer that the crime was committed by someone within the house who then took their own life...,” (TV News Editor 1).

Because the guards were slow to offer specific and clear information, journalists then proceeded to talk to bystanders, who can add little by way of fact or understanding or overarching context to the story of a murder-suicide. As one reporter described, “When you land at a scene like that you talk to neighbours, you would usually talk to people in the local GAA club... In that situation you would usually talk to the parish priest, you would talk to local counsellors. You’d talk to everybody and anybody I suppose that’s involved in their community that they might have had a link to at some stage. It’s kind of doing a broad sweep of as many people as possible because the more you talk to the more information you get, and that’s the same in any kind of a story you’re covering, so you do chat to as many people as possible while you’re there,” (TV Reporter 1). Another dimension of covering the story was depicting the grief and emotional response of the community, which adds to the dramatic nature of the coverage. “You go to the scene and cover the initial trauma and shock in the community,” (TV News Editor 1) which means that stories are presented as emotional and inexplicable isolated incidents rather than part of a larger social problem and pattern.

The final main source for journalists covering a murder-suicide was the inquest, which often occurred much later on. During the inquest, journalists finally had verifiable facts about
the case that they could relate with some authority and substantiate with reference to the court findings. As an editor described, “Like the Hawe inquest, a lot of things came out there over three days... really harrowing stuff. The family were fully on board (and) they came out afterwards and said their piece. I mean, in that sense, the court legitimises the coverage of it and it’s in a proper structure of the inquest as well, rather than just going after the speculation,” (TV News Editor 1). For practical reasons, as well as a tradition of doing, the guards, neighbours, bystanders, GAA club members and local clergy became the main sources that journalists use when reporting a murder-suicide. This left little opening for any alternative sources, such as experts in suicidology, who might offer greater context to these incidents.

Journalists expressed an ambivalence about the usefulness of experts or data as sources for their reporting, which they sensed an audience might not relate to so easily. As one reporter put it, “You need the context as well but without it being too statistic heavy because people don’t understand that,” (Radio Reporter 1). Respondents generally found data and reports somewhat inaccessible in terms of the detail and scale offered by agencies and also in terms of the time available to them to go through large reports. As a television news editor put it, “In terms of news production, no we wouldn’t use experts, not to a great extent. It’s the style of news we have, tell the story quickly and move on. We don’t go for the very big in-depth analysis. Now, we have done particular feature pieces, but with an inquest we’d have a 2-minute package, and a live with the reporter to flesh it out more, which would be about 3.5 minutes and that’s about as much as we’d have,” (TV News Editor 1). Another print journalist explained how statistical information was not given in a way that was accessible in a short reporting timeframe. “I did get in touch with experts, if there’s a big report out on trends you’d go to the experts on it, but... so and so in the National office will come out with a load of stats and it’s a bit of a turn off to be honest. A line on the larger trends could be useful but then the experts say they’ll send you on something and they send links to six reports...” (Print 1).

In sum, the main challenges for news reporters working on a suicide story are sources and context. News journalists have a short turnaround time for a story, so they are constrained in terms of the depth of context they can offer to frame the story. In addition, because they are dependent on either institutional sources such as the guards or random sources available at the location of an incident, the content of their output often does not name incidents clearly nor connect them with broader patterns in society.

Features Production - Sources

Beyond the immediacy of news production, feature and documentary writers and producers dedicated more time and resources to their coverage than news, but this brought an additional responsibility to cover the issue well. As one producer put it, “When you come to (suicide) as a producer on a big documentary you know you won’t be coming to it again in the next year... so there’s a bigger responsibility on our shoulders to make sure that we use the time well to say something relevant and of benefit to the subject itself,” (TV Producer 4). A print journalist was similarly alert to the importance of his work in covering suicide. “These stories are the most difficult of all to cover because you are grappling with informing the public about what’s happening but also being sensitive to the unique circumstances that surround suicide as well. I think it’s the most complex and challenging of all stories,” (Print 2). Features and documentary producers were cognisant of the importance of sensitive coverage because of its potential impact on members of the public. “The more you’re aware of how the impact of reporting can influence behaviour, that kind of puts you under pressure to get it right. You would be familiar with the studies that show the protective effects that responsible reporting can have and the dangerous effects that irresponsible reporting can have,” (Print 2). Awareness of the need to handle the topic sensitively mapped into how respondents approached sources and their families and how they managed to maintain editorial control while nonetheless taking due care with participants.

In features production, sources were not difficult to find for mental health stories. A television producer noted with regard to mental health, “It’s very easy to find the case studies, it’s too easy to find case studies to come on air.... there are literally so many people that you can talk to. It’s horrific that there are so many people you can talk to...” (TV Producer 2). An executive producer agreed about covering suicide, “I don’t really struggle with sources, not really. But a lot of experience goes into this, a lot of sensitivity, a lot of wanting to do the right thing by people. All of
I THINK IT’S THE MOST COMPLEX AND CHALLENGING OF ALL STORIES

(Print 2)

to address the difficulties of bringing sensitive topics to air, very experienced workers used expertise and effort to ensure that the topics were covered. “In my experience the producers and researchers that I work with do this all the time so they approach it in a certain way and they work hard and work through the agencies, who can often be very helpful, because you can’t knock on the door and ask people about suicide in their families. There are time consuming steps to eventually get there and people do eventually get there,” (TV Exec Producer 1). This was equally the case for mental illness programming, as a producer explained, “I’m in the game a long time with a lot of experience so there was a lot of trust there,” (TV Producer 3). In addition to building a relationship of trust with the participants, producers on mental illness programming had to also reassure broadcasters who “were very nervous and cautious around the whole thing. They had this idea that we would get the person’s psychiatrist to sign off that this person was capable of understanding the process and doing and interview, (but) you wouldn’t be asking a consenting adult who wasn’t suffering from any mental health issue to get their doctor to sign off... In the end they got that point when I explained it but that gives you an idea of what you’re dealing with initially,” (TV Producer 3).

Across all platforms respondents were cognisant of the need to build a relationship with potential participants. Producers in live television sometimes had relatively fleeting engagements with participants but nonetheless they made a point of acknowledging contributors. “I always make a point of going out (from the control room) to say thank you for coming in, we’ve a manic show but if someone has put their heart and soul out I always want to acknowledge that,” (TV Producer 2). Radio producers were clear that they emphasized collaborating with participants and being mindful of their limits around discussing suicide and mental health, “for an interview we’ll talk about areas that they don’t want to get into or can’t get into,” (Radio Editor 1). Print journalists were equally cognisant of and careful with the trust and wellbeing of the participants, as one journalist put it, “When families are willing to talk about it, it’s such a privilege that they’re willing to trust you with that,” (Print 1). A television producer agreed, “My view is I don’t do anything to upset the person. We have a good chat in the beginning, I’m very honest with the people very straight, and I’d tell them what’s going to happen... what we need to do in order to tell the story properly,” (TV Producer 1). The particular pressure...
of that relationship when it came to participants with mental illness were openly acknowledged, by another producer, “You’re there for your participants, so you would be getting phone calls, a couple from the hospital, and it’s a very tricky situation because you’re not a professional but you are their confessor for a while. That can be tricky...” (TV Producer 3).

In addition, extraneous relationships can have a bearing on the production. As a producer explained, “What I find a lot, is people themselves who take part in our programmes have issues with their own families, there are divisions, and disagreements about taking part in media... they have to deal with that and then I have to deal with them... I will talk them all the way through the process... I would always want to make a very responsible programme that is sensitive to the needs of everybody involved,” (TV Producer 3). A producer on the mental illness documentary added that sometimes families were willing to talk but potential participants were not. “We were interested initially in talking to families as well, that was really difficult because while the family might have spoken they needed the permission of their loved one and in many cases, they weren’t willing to speak,” (TV Producer 3).

However, the trust and care in relationship has to be balanced with retaining control over the editorial content and direction of the programme, which can be a tricky balance to maintain. As a documentary producer explained, “The person can’t have editorial control over the programme... I’d give them an early viewing but they can’t be in the edit suite, they can’t have any part of the editorial process, and there’s good reason for that, because they’re emotionally involved and they’re not necessarily the best person to tell the whole story...” (TV Producer 1). Another producer concurred, “We have to retain editorial control, but you have that conversation up front. You tell them that they don’t get to decide how to tell the story, we get to tell it. So, it’s about them deciding to trust us to tell that story. So that they’re aware up front...” (TV Producer 1). Retaining control while maintaining participation and good will can be challenging for producers and again requires their time, effort and expertise.

In addition, with hard topics there is a fear that despite all of the effort brought to a production, viewers might switch off if the programme is too intense or difficult to watch. As a documentary maker put it, “You’re not just doing a series of interviews with people who are terribly sad, because it’s hard to watch, just uniformly melancholy,” (TV Producer 1). As another producer put it, “We are competing with entertainment shows so we do have an onus not only to cover the subjects but to get people to watch them. If your ratings are terrible it doesn’t bode well... people do care about ratings but they do really care about doing things that are important,” (TV Exec Producer 1). She responded to the challenge of making material watchable by including some solutions in the programme. As she put it, “It doesn’t all have to be bleak... and that’s a conversation in general for journalism, to show that there’s a problem but to also maybe show that there’s another way of handling this...” (TV Exec Producer 1). As another television producer put it, “We need what we would call an uplift, an inspiring event, people are inspired by people who are trying to move on to help others,” (TV Producer 1). A similar challenge was expressed by a documentary maker working on mental illness programmes. “I know it’s not easy to watch so you try to balance subject matter and do it justice and try to keep people engaged,” (TV Producer 3). Beyond trying to keep people engaged with difficult subject matter there were other challenges that were unique to various platforms.

**Platform specific challenges**

A number of different issues arose depending on the platform to which respondents were referring. For instance, an additional challenge pertained to the live nature of broadcast output, where editors prepared and scrutinised as much as possible beforehand. As one editor explained, “If they’re doing a live, we’d go through what information they’re going to give in the live and what language they’re going to use in the live. I’d say, ‘No, that’s straying into the sensational, or you’re a bit graphic in that, let’s steer it back this way and say it like that,’.... You can suggest a lot and let the viewers draw their own conclusions as to what happened without saying how gruesome it was,” (TV News Editor 1). Whether for live radio or live television, there was less control over shaping the story than in print, online or pre-produced features. As one radio producer put it, “Whenever a news story breaks... in those instances, you don’t have as much time to prepare the researchers or producers or presenters... so for us we need to have producers aware of the issues (in advance) so that if they’re in studio with the presenter then they can guide them along,” (Radio Editor 1). A live television producer agreed “When you’re in a live studio situation you have no control over presenters... you’re trying to point...
YOU CAN SUGGEST A LOT AND LET THE VIEWERS DRAW THEIR OWN CONCLUSIONS AS TO WHAT HAPPENED WITHOUT SAYING HOW GRUESOME IT WAS

*(TV News Editor 1)*

out ‘No you don’t say it like that’, it’s my main challenge… presenters, you know they’re really sympathetic and everything, but it’s still hard to keep on it all the time… When people are sitting for an interview for ten minutes on the couch and the presenters almost forget that they’re sitting there doing an interview and it’s to keep that momentum going that they know they’ve to keep the wording correct all of the time…” *(TV Producer 2)*.

However, many news journalists noted that the main pressure on them in relating a story came from the *rapidity of turnaround*, which has increased in the last decade as a result of the networked and instantaneous nature of social media, its ubiquity and its 24/7 content cycle. As an online editor explained, “We are not under pressure to be sensational, the pressure is to get information out and as quickly as you can. You’re still trying to double and triple check everything you can, but realistically, if you have 7 or 8 websites and they’re all pushing to be first then… of course people will make mistakes. I don’t think the problem is sensationalism, it’s the speed with social media and a few people all confirming they heard the same thing but that doesn’t mean that it’s true,” *(Online Editor 1)*. An additional issue that online outlets had to address in balancing public interest with protecting story subjects was the *role that commentary now plays for media audiences*. As one respondent noted, “Another challenge is comments that we get under our articles,” *(Online 1)*. As another online journalist explained, “Generally the online comments are just people paying tribute… The way we operate here is that comments that are distasteful would be brought to our attention when they’re flagged so we wouldn’t moderate or check content… there is no policy on closing comments for suicide stories,” *(Online 2)*. But comments were not a pressure experienced by more traditional outlets even in their online presence. “A lot of other outlets cut down on their comments, or wouldn’t have comments open. We would generally have comments open on every story…” *(Online 1)*. As a result, online outlets felt that they “get criticized a lot more than other places would because of the comments,” *(Online 1)*.

In addition to dealing with commentary as a dimension of their production, online journalists also had a clear sense that their material was digitally searchable, replicable and *existed in perpetuity*, which was another subtle pressure on them when covering sensitive topics for news. As one journalist related, “An aspect of working online is that it’s there forever if someone does a report on suicide or mental health or anything else for that matter, it’s not like the newspaper, where it gets published the day before and if that paper is circulating or in a person’s possession a year later that’s incredible. But now people go online and google and see your suicide reports and it’s there for them to see. It’s not something that I’m conscious of when I’m reporting on these issues but it is an interesting one to be aware of…” *(Online 2)*. In addition, digital journalism facilitates constant updating, as a ‘print’ journalist described, “We’d see ourselves increasingly as a broadcaster that you’re updating online constantly,” consequently “when stuff is breaking online, you’re making those decisions” on how much detail to include in a story “much more frequently, under time pressures and that does elevate it and put pressure on the decisions… That’s where
While all respondents were aware of the existence of guidelines, variously ascribed as sourced from the Samaritans, RTE, the Press Council, Headline and the NUJ, some respondents admitted that they did not necessarily have them to hand, nor did they consult them frequently. As one online journalist said, “We don’t have written guidelines and we don’t have set-down guidelines,” (Online 1). Another reporter concurred, “So, I was actually interested with doing this interview to see was there specific guidelines, and to be honest, I couldn’t find the ones on suicide, but I’m thinking they’re there somewhere, because I had ones from the Samaritans once upon a time…” (Radio Reporter 1). Another print journalist also agreed, “I’d hope I’m aware of them but I don’t think I’ve looked at them in a long time. I know the NUJ issued some maybe 10 years ago or more…. but they’re not something that are issued,” (Print 1).

Although some journalists had a rather generalised sense of the existence of guidelines, others were very clear that they did use guidelines and frequently consulted them. In television production, there was an awareness that “Guidelines are important…and we’ve always abided by the guidelines… they were always distributed to us in news…” (TV Producer 2). Another executive television producer agreed, “Guidelines, while they do sit in the background, they do inform people,” (TV Exec producer 1). In online journalism, there was a positive reception to guidelines. “I think the guidelines are quite good, so that people are treated properly and that it’s reported fairly,” (Online Editor 1). An online editor concurred, “Yeah we look at the guidelines around once a month or every six weeks just for a refresher,” (Online Editor 1). And also in the context of radio production there was a sense that “The media guidelines that have been put out over the last number of years, journalists are generally more aware of them so that has helped improve coverage,” (Radio Editor 1).

Whether they used them frequently or infrequently, the main thrust of respondents’ understanding of the guidelines was the same. This was that they should be careful in how they named suicide, they experienced heads are important, editors who... know there’s a point to which you go and no further and then have the confidence to make a call like that,” (Print 2).

For producers in television there was the additional burden of visualizing issues that are not intrinsically visual in nature. As one television documentary maker commented on making a programme about mental illness, “We kept saying this would be a lovely radio documentary. It’s not the most visual documentary...” (TV Producer 3). An executive producer stated that she “knows that the story comes first and the visuals may come last...you get the story and then think about how we are going to tell the story visually... And people say, ‘Oh don’t do a lot of that rain on windows and sad images,’ but you do have to visualize it. People will not just watch a bunch of talking heads, people don’t want talking heads actually, they want real stories from real people that they can relate to...” (TV Exec producer 1). Television producers were clear that while it was hard for people to show their faces on television, speaking about a stigmatizing topic, nonetheless it was important that they appear, as one producer observed, “Because if you blur people out it dehumanises them and puts a barrier between the audience and the story,” (TV Producer 4).

In sum, the key claims journalists made regarding sources were that they were more sensitive to stories of mental health and suicide than other topics. They were conscious of balancing privacy with public interest but context dictated the emphasis for each story. In news production, institutional sources such as the Gardaí shaped the availability of information in murder-suicide stories and resulted in journalists seeking commentary from local sources. For features production, sources were available but required expertise, time and effort to develop relationships that would allow the editorial to be shaped.

Specific platform challenges included the live nature of some broadcast output, television’s need to see images and the immediacy of response and production required for online and social media output. On many of these issues journalists were cognisant of the existence of guidelines to assist them in reporting on mental health and suicide.
WE WERE TOLD BY EDITORS TO MENTION SUPPORT NUMBERS AND THAT, BUT IN THE PRINT VERSION OF NEWSPAPERS THERE WASN’T THAT KIND OF APPROACH TO SUPPORT NUMBERS... SO THAT’S SOMETHING THAT HAS CHANGED OVER THE FORM OF DELIVERY, THE ONLINE IS MORE TUNED IN

(Online 2)

should not include details on suicide method, that there was a risk of contagion and that they should include references to helplines. In addition, there was some discussion of how guidelines helped to shape the use of language in reporting on both suicide and mental health. One of the most salient issues raised by respondents was the wording that should be used to describe deaths where people who took their own lives. Journalists were clear on best practice here, “The language around suicide is fairly straightforward, I think, died by suicide or took their own life,” (Print 1). A television producer corroborated “You don’t want to say things like ‘committed suicide’,” (TV Producer 2). An online journalist agreed “any media organisation that I’ve ever worked for strictly avoided using the phrase ‘committed suicide’ so as not to stigmatise suicide. I’ve always been guided to write ‘took his/her own life’,” (Online 2). A radio reporter noted “trying to never talk about ‘successful’ or ‘failed’ suicide attempts,” (Radio Reporter 3). Respondents were also clear on the recommendation not to mention the method of suicide. As one journalist said, “The guidelines that I’d be aware of are that you don’t go into specific stuff on how it was done,” (Print 1) and “you don’t want to mention here’s how someone did it,” (Online 2).

In addition, journalists were clear that they should refer to helplines in connection with content on suicide and mental health stories. As a print journalist said, “We would always put at the end of a piece, ‘If you’ve been affected by this talk to Pieta House or the Samaritans’,” (Print 1). One radio reporter spoke to the ubiquity of helplines in terms of covering suicide stories, “The Samaritans, I mean it is a bit clichéd, but it’s rolled out for everything. Sometimes I do kind of think, oh god, the poor Samaritans, they have to deal with everyone. People including the Gardaí and journalists seem to use it as a get-out clause, but it is seen as the responsible thing to do, to offer some way or direction towards whatever help you might need,” (Radio Reporter 2). One journalist observed that a benefit from the convergence towards online publication was an increased practice of referencing support lines in online content. As he put it, “We were told by editors to mention support numbers and that, but in the print version of newspapers there wasn’t that kind of approach to support numbers... so that’s something that has changed over the form of delivery, the online is more tuned in,” (Online 2).

When discussing guidelines, respondents engaged in a further consideration of one of the key challenges they faced in complying with guidelines, which was their use of language within their productions. As a radio producer noted, “If we’re booking an item in this area, we would discuss it and direct people to a couple of handy quick guidelines that are available as to the language to use,” (Radio Editor 1). With regard to breaking news stories
of murder-suicide, journalists were led by the language that sources used. As one editor described, “We would always try to attribute language, so if a family member comes out and says this is a ‘tragedy’ and such a such was being treated for depression or other mental health illnesses… then we feel perfectly comfortable saying that and using that,” (TV News Editor 1). Editors described how they monitored the use of language closely throughout the cycle of a murder-suicide story and referred back to guidelines. “We would have guidelines about the sort of language we should use. Reporters would be on to me a couple of times a day about the words they can or cannot say, and I’ll say no don’t say certain things. They’ll email in a script if they’re on location or read it back to me over the phone. We will run through the script and I’ll say ‘No change that wording, we can’t say that’,” (TV News Editor 1).

There was less discussion from respondents about the appropriate language to use when discussing mental health and less sense of a clear cut “rule” about language, the dos and don’ts of mental health or illness reporting relative to the clarity around suicide reporting. Only three journalists spoke to the issue of guidelines specifically for mental health stories. As a radio editor noted, “There are a lot of more detailed guidelines in specific areas, so for instance the guidelines on mental health and that is something that we are highlighting more frequently by saying we need to watch our language here,” (Radio Editor 1). Interestingly, one journalist pointed to a possible generation gap in understandings of the importance of sensitivity in reporting on mental health and suicide. As he put it, “Younger journalists tend to be a bit more aware of how to approach things but people who might be covering mental health issues for years might not realise that there are certain things that you should not say or do on air. I think there can be a gap there. It can be an issue if colleagues aren’t aware that you can’t talk about a suicide note for instance, there can be a gap there,” (Radio Editor 1).

One producer who worked on a mental illness documentary did speak more specifically to the issue of language. While the producer followed best practice in naming the illness clearly, the programme still needed to address the fact that the word “Schizophrenia” itself was laden down with stigma. As the producer put it, “It’s such a sensitive issue… we had a lot of to and fro with (a participant) around the use of the word and I was making a point we have to use that word, that’s what people know it to be and then we can make that point that there are concerns around the use of the word,” (TV Producer 3). Again, as with news producers on location being led by official sources, the same applied within documentary production. As the producer pointed out, “We were led by our contributors. Some of our contributors refer to the word ‘Schizophrenia’… and we tried to reflect that thinking around that word is changing. (But) because of the connotations that are associated with that word maybe it is time to let it slip away, we tried to get that (contradiction) across,” (TV Producer 3). Interestingly, the producer on mental illness programming was clear that participants were very engaged on the question of language and how it should be used. As she said, “There’s a real willingness, an eagerness amongst our contributors to talk about (language). The more you explain the less you get that label ‘crazy’ when you really break down what (mental illness) is...” (TV Producer 3).

Some other feedback on guidelines was that they were difficult to apply to the specifics of a particular story and that a point of contact for ongoing, active engagement from within an expert organisation would be useful. One producer commented in the case of a “murder-suicide, we were issued with guidelines as to how to talk about it. But they’re too generic. Like it would help to call someone and get more guidance on the specifics,” (TV Reporter 1). Increased, ongoing and more frequent engagement with expert organisations in mental health and suicide was something about which journalists were receptive. In terms of print, one journalist commented, “More proactive contact from NGOS on guidelines yeah, I’d be open to that, it would be no harm,” (Print 1). Journalists valued the provision of copies of guidelines, “It would be worth having (guidelines) stuck up in every newsroom and if they were on a card, like something you could have in your wallet, that you could look at them again, that would be great,” (Radio Reporter 3). An online journalist agreed, “We would always be open to agencies approaching us, it’s a big issue and it’s only going to become bigger as people become more aware of it... it’s great that now people will say ‘Oh here’s an idea for a story’, that’s great,” (Online 2). Further discussion of how agencies could increase their collaboration with journalists is contained in Part II. While attitudes to guidelines and engagement with agencies were positive, much of this discussion was framed in terms of the topics of suicide and mental health. Throughout the research, mental illness was not raised as much as a focus for discussion.

The relative absence of mental illness stories
In most of the responses to questions about mental health and suicide the respondents focused either on dramatic murder-suicides or common mental health issues. This response varied by genre, with news journalists tending to discuss the relatively dramatic stories of murder-suicides, while features producers often tended to speak to mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. In many ways, mental illness was framed out of the discussion and so there is a
The stigma is massive, that’s what everybody who didn’t want to talk, talked about

‘missing piece’ around discussions of mental illness. Schizophrenia, psychosis and other mental disorders did not achieve the same level of recognition amongst producers or journalists as important topics that required coverage. This corroborates an analysis of reports to the StigmaWatch programme in Australia, which found that Schizophrenia is often represented in an inaccurate, sensationalised way, promoting an association with violence, while depression is far more likely to be reported responsibly and positively, with other conditions receive little coverage (Stigmawatch Report, 2013: 10). A key challenge that journalists admitted they faced with regard to this type of reporting was a limited understanding of mental illness. Understanding the complexities of mental illness, maintaining an awareness of information relevant to the story, the emotional nature of the subject matter and the stigma attached to it, all made mental illness harder to cover. As one journalist put it, “I think there’s still a bit of stigma, people don’t understand it, people are still slightly scared about it. And it’s probably the next step, to lift the veil around some of this. Even explaining these conditions and how they affect people is difficult,” (Print 2).

As another print journalist described, “Mental illness is something that, unless you have someone who has mental illness or you have it yourself, it’s very hard for people to get their heads around. And you see the behaviour that goes with it rather than the person that is acting out… just from my own perspective, I’m not fully confident that I would understand it, actually I’m absolutely confident that I don’t understand it and I would need to go and read about it and hear about it before I was going to talk about it,” (Print 1). A producer on a documentary described how mental illness and violent crime are presumed to be connected. Having produced a documentary however about intimate-partner murder-suicides he concluded, “in fact it’s kind of interesting... because I set out to analyse these stories, not just tell the stories but to analyse how this happens, what drives people to it and once I got into the analysis it got incredibly complex and incredibly vague... there’s a huge debate as to whether these things are a result of mental health or not, that was the challenge I faced in that programme...” (TV Producer 1).

In a similar vein, there was an additional bias in coverage of mental illness, whereby in many cases it was only the success stories that were told, while ongoing struggle receives less coverage. As one journalist said, “You are kind of perpetrating the stereotype by only interviewing the person who’s way further down the line and has come through the other side. And it’s if I can do it he can do it but that’s not the reality. If you’re always speaking to the person who did get better, you know, there are people who can’t even imagine getting to that point. So, there is certainly a spin on that, there’s a ‘positivity’ to it,” (TV Journalist 1). This situation occurs perhaps because of the difficulties of “capturing” ongoing illness in a neat way for media content and perhaps also because of very genuine concerns for vulnerable adults receiving media exposure while still in the process of addressing their illness.

Despite the challenges posed by covering the topic of mental illness, there was some expression of willingness to consider undertaking more and better coverage. As one journalist said, “We probably should be covering more about people with a severe mental illness in a way that doesn’t impinge on their privacy, or demonize them, so you can see the person in the middle of the illness... All we hear is Dundrum Central Mental Hospital, or prisons, or mothers being attacked by sons, and they’re people who are sick...It would be good if we heard a bit more about it,” (Print 1). One producer who had successfully made a documentary about mental illness summarized the challenge in terms of the stigma that participants face. “It’s hard to cover because there’s so much fear out there. The stigma is massive, that’s what everybody who didn’t want to talk, talked about. Wanting to hide it, most people can’t hide it, but it’s very personal, it’s very private. People come to it with misunderstanding and stigma but the upside of that is that there is a fascination that people will watch it.....” (TV Producer 3).

Clearly there was support amongst journalists for sensitive and improved coverage of mental health and suicide, and this enthusiasm was also mirrored in the reported approaches of editors.
PART II:
EDITORIAL APPROACHES TO MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE
This section of the report examines the role that senior decision makers are seen to play in shaping content. It explores respondent’s understandings of editor’s attitudes to carrying content on mental health and suicide, as well as a discussion of how the relationship between journalists, editors and expert suicide and mental health organisations can influence coverage.
With regard to whether senior decision makers respond to mental health or suicide stories as good for viewership, as ‘worthy’, or as a turn off, many respondents spoke of support at the editorial level for work on this issues. As a print journalist said, “There is a genuine engagement there from editors, they want to do the right thing and the responsible thing. Editors will try to follow the guidelines and responsible approach,” (Print 2). As another television producer put it, “We do see it as a worthwhile topic…. anxiety is a huge topic for us, we do it so often but it’s very worthwhile to do. Mental health is a standalone topic on our programme… it’s that important,” (TV Producer 2). A documentary producer concurred, “There’s a huge appetite for doing these stories in here because we are mindful of our reputation we need to do all the big commercial stuff but we also need to do stuff about what’s going on in the world,” (TV Producer 1). A print journalist agreed about the positive attitude to stories on mental health and suicide at her outlet, “There is great support for it as a topic in my workplace and the editor is enthusiastic about it and in doing more on it,” (Print 1). In terms of radio production an editor was also positive about covering the topic. “No, the topic of mental health is not a turnoff. In fact, there are so many facets to it and there’s such an awareness of it, of the number of people who are dealing with their mental health and seeking help, that we would say that it is something that is happening and the statistics back that up, so therefore it’s important that we cover it,” (Radio Editor 1). Equally, in online outlets there was a sense that “Editors are certainly open to it… I’ve never had an issue of an editor saying ‘Oh no we are not covering that’. I think it’s one of those things that is recognised as a huge issue… it’s the tip of the iceberg what we’ve covered so far… and there’s more to cover. Editors are always open and happy to say ‘Yeah we’ll go with that’, ” (Online 2).

Despite positive attitudes to the topics, from an editorial perspective there was some acknowledgement however, that mental health and suicide could be a potential turn off topic and needed to be handled carefully, in order to attract and maintain viewership. As an online journalist pointed out, “You’ve to be sensitive and there are certain ways of covering it,” (Online 2). The same applied with radio “as with any story, you want to cover it the right way, thoroughly but not overdoing it,” (Radio Editor 1). As another documentary producer put it more bluntly, “Yes, well it is and it isn’t a turn off topic. We would want to cover it but we would be careful how we would do it… the programme must be watchable and must give something to the viewer… other than tearful people, telling a sad story,” (TV Producer 1).

A print journalist agreed that the topic needs to be dealt with from more creative and newer angles. “Do people get sick of hearing about mental health? I think it probably is a bit of a turn off sometimes and I think there could be better ways of telling it sometimes, better ways of getting into it, of telling the full story, the story of the person, or the community sometimes,” (Print 1). While there was evidence of caution and support for these topics there was also a general awareness of various organisations working in the field and a willingness on the part of journalists and editors to engage with organisations in various ways.

One television producer pointed out that the sheer volume of organisations working in mental health and on suicide “was overwhelming… it’s cumbersome trying to find your way around so many supports and various different organisations for information, for support, for the provision of the service… it was a quagmire for a journalist coming to it …it could have been easier to navigate,” (TV Producer 4). Despite the diversity, many of the journalists spoke positively about their engagements with various agencies, civil society organisations, or charities, engaged in the areas of mental health and suicide prevention. As an online journalist commented, “There are people you’d go to for a particular story, like a medication story, you go to someone like Mental Health Ireland, they’ll have ideas based on what
As the programme evolved, guidance from the organisation was invaluable. They know and they are helpful,” (Online 2). Another online journalist observed positively, “I do think Headline is good, you will go to them and they will say, look, we have this woman who’s twenty-six, and she will talk about having Schizophrenia, or a person that will talk about depression in the workplace. They’ll train people as spokespeople, and it’s actually really helpful to know that because it’s such a sensitive area. It’s so smart of them, it makes so much sense. From our point of view, we know these people are willing to talk, and we’re not exploiting them, or it’s not the first time they’ve told their story so they know what they’re doing. I think stories should be told...” (Online 1). Another documentary maker commented, “I have to say I thought Shine were brilliant... I get that people in those organisations are concerned about the people involved and how vulnerable they might be,” (TV Producer 3). The programme maker valued was the organisation “just being really straight and really honest,” (TV Producer 3). This created a positive dynamic where she was “really determined that we would work closely with them from the get go,” (TV Producer 3). As the programme evolved, guidance from the organisation was invaluable. As the respondent puts it, “We touched base several times, when one person had just come out of hospital and was very vulnerable and I just wanted to ask if we were still OK to go ahead with interviewing the guy. And they were great, just the right sort of mix of understanding the importance that people would speak out, but that they weren’t too vulnerable to do so either,” (TV Producer 3).

While many responses to agencies work were positive, respondents did note that there was scope for improvement. As a radio editor noted, “It’s pretty good but it could be better... it would be good to have a more frequent check in...it is always useful if someone comes forward and says... we have a story here... if the agencies do have someone available then that’s always beneficial... The organisations are always good they’re always helpful but it might be the case that it’s always us contacting them. More approaches from them would be welcomed,” (Radio Editor 1). In addition to welcoming a more proactive response, many respondents felt that relationships with organisations were strained if the organisation was unclear there was any benefit to them from engaging with the media. As a print journalist noted, “I think the media comes quite far down the list for NGO’s,” (Print 1). As an executive producer put it, “Often the organisation has its own mission and is busy and stretched and we are not their priority. And I don’t know that organisations see that getting the story in the media helps their cause. Some feel they don’t want to deal with the media,” (TV Exec Producer 1).

If organisations did want to deal with the media then they needed to understand better the variety of media needs in covering these stories. As one respondent put it, “For us we might need statistics, and we can’t be given a tonne of stats without context. We might need people to talk off the record and on the record, people who can show you trends, who might be able to introduce you to individuals and... help you get to that story. It’s about dialogue, like it’s really helpful if you can observe things, even if it’s not something you can film,” (TV Exec Producer 1). An online journalist agreed, “If we get a press release in from an organisation, we may want to cover it, but we want someone’s voice. Maybe people don’t realise that, how important that is. We need people to be able to hear someone else’s story and understand what they’re going though, instead of percentages and reports and everything. We need the human-interest stories,” (Online 1). Another TV producer agreed, “We would try to humanise issues a bit... I think that sometimes the organisations don’t want to ask people to go public and they can be reluctant to ask clients, but it really adds something to the story if someone rings us and tells us about their AGM or a launch and if they say they have a case study it will always leapfrog up our news agenda for that day,” (TV News Editor 1).
Television producers didn’t sense that agencies always understood their motives with needing access to film with participants. As a television news editor put it, without participants who are willing to be filmed going about their daily lives there is a limit to what television news producers can cover. “If there’s a launch on in (a hotel) what can you do? Shoot it in the foyer or be artistic about shooting shots from outside through the window? ...The ideal is that someone will agree to do an hour before at their home, or at another venue, where it’s not just them walking down the street...” (TV News Editor 1). One producer felt that agencies didn’t understand that even though an organisation might help producers find someone, subsequently they then “need to step away, they have an anxiety about how we are going to deal with it,” but producers needed to keep editorial control and couldn’t negotiate that with an organisation (TV Producer 4). Journalists noted that agencies didn’t always understand what their needs or motivations were. “Some understand what we want and some don’t,” (TV Exec Producer 1). As regards their motives, some journalists felt that agencies did not view them positively. “We would be really careful about our reporting, but maybe they just think ‘Oh, the media are sensationalist’, instead of looking at previous coverage, or looking at particular reports, and thinking ‘Well actually, they’re a good reporter, and they wouldn’t try and sensationalise this’,” (Online 1).

A key factor in successful engagements for the respondent was having someone placed in the agency who understood what she needed and why. As she put it, “It’s often easier if there’s a former journalist involved in the organisation because you can speak very directly to them, or explain that you want to approach it this way. They trust you a little bit more, so you can say, ‘This will be off the record’ or ‘This will be in the background’ or ‘We are going to need someone to speak on camera and here’s why’. It’s because people need to relate. We know that people listen to stories more closely, and it resonates more if it’s a real human being telling a story. If it’s a life they can relate to, if they know it’s a person they can relate to trying to deal with whatever issue, all of those things matter... and so if you don’t have to explain that to the agency that makes a big difference....” (TV Exec Producer 1). While being keen to retain the media’s impartiality and independence, nonetheless respondents were open to the idea of a more proactive engagement with agencies. As the executive producer put it, “I think it’s about having an open conversation and being able to have a dialogue about what each needs,” (TV Exec Producer 1).

Interestingly, a number of journalists pointed out their enthusiasm for increased engagement between journalists and agencies. “I think the more widely circulated the guidelines are and the better briefed journalists are on this issue, the better off they are. The more people are aware of how to approach these topics the better the journalism will be. And the more people know about it in the industry the better,” (Radio Editor 1). One producer warned against an observed tendency for agencies to be more reluctant to engage with media. As she explained, “We find more and more that the leaders of organisations that deal with people are becoming overprotective of people they’re working with... They are much more aware and rightly so of media relations, dealing with media, how to protect people when dealing with media, but I think it’s in danger of going too far to the other side. We’re getting a lot more ‘Nos’... it’s like you have to allow people their voice, even if it’s difficult, because what they might get from it, and more importantly what they might be able to give in terms of changing attitudes, is so important...” (TV Producer 3). While there was support for the idea of increased engagement between editors, journalists and organisations around mental health and suicide stories, there was more ambivalence evident in response to questions about the care of journalists who are covering these difficult topics.
...MAYBE THEY JUST THINK ‘OH, THE MEDIA ARE SENSATIONALIST’, INSTEAD OF LOOKING AT PREVIOUS COVERAGE, OR LOOKING AT PARTICULAR REPORTS, AND THINKING ‘WELL ACTUALLY, THEY’RE A GOOD REPORTER, AND THEY WOULDN’T TRY AND SENSATIONALISE THIS’
PART III:

CARE FOR MEDIA WORKERS
This section outlines how journalists respond to working on stories of suicide and mental health. It documents ambivalence in responses to the idea that there are psychological, emotional or self-care challenges that arise as a result of working in this area. The nature of the impact on journalists is shaped by how much exposure their role in production, their platform or their genre of programme, requires them to have to the primary sources within the story. This section also examines how journalists and editors typically approach issues of care at informal levels, as well as outlining the formal provisions that are available to media workers at an organisational level.
On the one hand, some respondents had a sense that they were generally not affected by the coverage of mental health or suicide stories. As one producer put it, “I was very hardened by news.... I’ve never felt the need for any support, I don’t.” As sad as these stories are you get very inspired as well by the strength of the people you’re working with,” (TV Producer 1). Another print journalist speculated, “Maybe there’s a kind of a macho thing in journalism - ‘Why would you be looking for support, aren’t we dealing with difficult things all of the time and how is this any different?’,” (Print 2). Respondents also proposed that there was an attrition of people who felt the impact of news reporting at a personal level. “I think people that are maybe not as well equipped as others to deal with those situations will remove themselves from covering those kind of stories,” (TV News Editor 1).

On the other hand, some respondents reported that the topics they covered did affect them. As one journalist related, “I think if you care about a subject you’re going to be distressed by it. The Amanda Gilbert case I was thinking about her for days and lying in bed thinking what kind of a dark place was she in and it does upset me when I hear it, but that’s the kind of person I am... I don’t feel vulnerable out there. I feel I can cope with it,” (Print 1). Another television producer agreed, “You get to live their life for a little bit and they tell you the darkest, most horrific part of their life on camera and off camera and I carry that away with me. You get connected to the subject, the people on a personal basis....” (TV Producer 4). A radio producer agreed that stories had an impact. “Sometimes we get harrowing stories... somebody could ring my phone here, or my colleagues, and give them a personal story. It might not make it to air. But... it can be distressing and it can have an impact on people, absolutely,” (Radio Editor 1). Another print journalist was clear about the impact. “I think (suicide) is the most complex and challenging of all stories. So my heart would sink whenever there was a high profile suicide. I’d have been on the road often to cover it and you just know that these things aren’t simple they’re often complex and no matter how many times you’ve done it the details are very hard....” (Print 2). A radio reporter was clear that suicide and mental health were topics that took a toll. “I’ve definitely become more inured to tragedy than I used to be, it’s gradual but I realised I’ve listened to details in murder cases and you could be talking about packing a box. It’s terrifying when... now you see that the details of it are not affecting you at all,” (Radio Reporter 3).

There was some ambivalence as to how much reporting on mental health and suicide affected journalists. This ambivalence was determined sometimes by how much time workers spent on the story because of the rapid turnaround to their next story, sometimes how their particular genre required them to engage with sources on location and sometimes by the nature of their role in production, which determined how close they got to source material related to a story. With regard to ambivalence and rapid turnaround, one reporter explained, “More often than not... you’ll move on to something completely different the next day, and people deal in that sort of way. We’re guilty of that definitely in the media, moving on to the next story,” (Radio Reporter 1). A radio editor agreed, “Yes, it’s affecting but I wouldn’t say that it would ever become too much for me, because I’m churning out stories on a daily or a weekly basis, it’s not like I’m going in-depth, I’d say if I was covering a story over two or three weeks, or a huge story broke then I’d say yeah it would happen with a mental health story,” (Radio Editor 1). As well as rapid turnover shielding them, sometimes news reporters were also insulated from the impact of a story by virtue of remaining at their desks to cover it. “A lot of our contact would be over the phone or online, occasionally you’d meet people but only occasionally,” (Online 2). While this was the situation primarily for print and online workers, for radio and television reporters they were often required to go to the scene of a story.

Working for radio and television meant news workers were exposed very directly to the sources of a story and over a period of days, by virtue of travelling to the location of a major incident and remaining there to cover, for instance, a murder-suicide. However, it is not just journalists who are exposed to the potential adverse effects of dealing with mental health or suicide stories. As one news editor pointed out, “It’s the cameramen as well, they’re there first and they’re taking pictures of blood on the ground, even if we don’t use them, they take the pictures anyway. We would be sensitive about the shots that we’d use in cases with a mental health element scene shots of bloodied items being brought out, we don’t use that stuff, but crew are seeing it anyway,” (TV News Editor 1). Television news crew explained that they were both very present and very visible during a traumatic time for communities. As one camera-operator explained, “With news you’re coming into it live, when it’s happening... so you’re at the scene, maybe waiting for the Coroner to arrive.... you’re generally there for 8-10 hours, or you end up there for a couple of days...over that time it starts to trickle down or to sink in, the seriousness of it,” (Camera-operator 1). As he...
“I THINK (SUICIDE) IS THE MOST COMPLEX AND CHALLENGING OF ALL STORIES. SO MY HEART WOULD SINK WHENEVER THERE WAS A HIGH PROFILE SUICIDE.

(Print 2)

noted, “The biggest issue for me is that the first day is fine, the community is in shock, they’ll talk to you because they’re in shock. But…on day two they get angry, so if you hang around long enough you get the ire,” (Camera-operator 1).

Television crew were also more exposed to the reactions of local people than any other media worker. Camera-operators are more visible, “We are the ones that are standing there,” (Camera-operator 1). As he explained, “The reporter will go back to the car to write up a script or they might be on the phone or in the SAT van editing. We are the ones that have to stand there on site, until someone comes, the Coroner, or someone brings flowers. You’re there to get a shot of something that moves the story on… so you’re standing there for hours on end at this site, with your big huge camera... It isn’t pleasant,” (Camera-operator 1). Working on news in particular often meant that there was an impact on reporters and crew but also a delay factor in them processing their responses to stories. As a TV News Editor explained, “That frantic activity at the scene (means) staff don’t have time to even think about the appalling tragedy that they’re covering. It doesn’t even sink in initially or even until they’re on the way home...” (TV News Editor 1). A crew member confirmed, “Generally you’d have a reporter in the car with you coming back from a story, and that’s where the self-care happens between you and the reporter... the whole way home you’re talking about it, so by the time you get home you’re back to normal and that’s the only way that we process it... you debrief it together,” (Camera-operator 1).

While radio and television producers who worked on longer term projects such as documentary, were less exposed to the immediacy of a live news incident they were conversely engaging over a more protracted period on stories. In some ways they were as exposed to a potential emotional impact as their colleagues in news. As one executive producer put it, “Suicide is a terrible area to cover and you cannot help but take this home when you’re talking to a family of a child who has killed themselves. People have a job to do but they are not covered in armor and you are living with that story. And you’re not only doing a story, you have a relationship with them (in order) to build that trust with them,” (TV Exec Producer 1).

For documentary producers, this relationship could extend over a period of months up to a year. In the context of those extended relationships documentary makers felt responsible for their own well-being but also for managing the expectations of participants and the impact of the programme on them. As one producer explained, “The most difficult things are that the people we’re featuring will be happy with the final product, that’s a constant worry. You’re dealing with vulnerable people no matter how strong they are, and I’m worried that there will be some kind of impact from the documentary or the reaction to it that will impact on them. That keeps me up at night, it really does. Then there’s an expectation from participants that this will change everything. That this is going to be their moment and that isn’t always the case,” (TV Producer 3). Another producer similarly spoke of the dual responsibility of hearing the story at a personal level but acting professionally to give that story maximum impact. As she said, “At a personal level... some stories stay with you, because of the sheer depth of pain that the families go through and the depth of the tragedy that happens. And on a professional level, that’s the challenge, that they feel looked after and that we are respectful to their story but
making sure that their story is ...(more than) just another story for a television documentary. But that the story tries to make a change,” (TV Producer 4).

Respondents spoke to the repetition involved with engaging with sources directly in television production and again in post-production. As the executive producer put it, “You meet with them and then you’re transcribing the notes so you hear it again, and again when editing the piece,” (TV Exec Producer 1). Similarly, in post-production, crew are still affected. As an executive producer pointed out, “The editor... they’re sitting there watching it all - hours of depressing or upsetting material some of which will make the final cut some of which won’t so they’re flooded with information,” (TV Exec Producer 1). Due to their less visible presence in post-production, editors can often be overlooked in questions of care, which can focus on journalists rather than media workers more broadly.

When asked about the potentially negative repercussions from reporting on mental health and suicide some respondents reported a dearth of supports within their workplace. When asked if a print editor would be tuned in if something was upsetting a journalist the answer was a short and definitive “No.” (Print 1). Similarly, when asked if there were formal engagements around the impact of stories in the context of print workers the response was also “No.” (Print 1). Another print journalist commented, “I don’t recall there being supports as such,” (Print 2). A television producer agreed, “No, there’s nowhere to go for care within the organisation... we don’t get any help, there’s nothing and no suggestion of care.... I would take younger workers aside and ask if they’re OK, and just check in with them.... There is counselling available through our healthcare but there would be no engagement from management to say, ‘Oh you had a very traumatic morning this morning’ or anything like that, nothing,” (TV Producer 2). A radio producer concurred, “Nobody’s ever asked me, to be honest... no, as regards coming out of a bad situation where you’re feeling a bit low about it, no, nobody ever says how did you find that? Sometimes they might, but I would find it rare,” (Radio Reporter 1). A crew member confirmed “There are no supports. I’ve never been directed towards any kind of care support,” (Camera operator 1).

Nonetheless, some other respondents pointed to de facto care supports that they experienced. The main type of supports that respondents identified were those that were fairly informal. As an executive producer described a culture of support amongst co-workers, “People mind each other... there is a camaraderie thing. You recognise that people are on a difficult project and you might just give them the extra time of day... cups of coffee... if you know somebody is on a difficult subject,” (TV Exec Producer 1). Editors were clear that staff often spoke to each other about their experiences. “They’ll talk to each other about the stuff that would never get to air, who was saying what, and that seems to help the process... it lightens the mood for them from the grim surroundings, and the things that happen in the middle of it all,” (TV News Editor 1).

The informal supports could also be more direct or probing, and carried out at the editorial level. As a television editor described, “We would be checking with them throughout to see how they’re coping with the demands and when they come back you’d pull them to one side and say, ‘Well done and how are you?’,” (TV Exec Producer 1). A radio editor agreed, “There isn’t a formal network as such, I’d deal with it on a case by case basis and depending on how distressed a person was I’d take different actions. I’d chat to my editorial colleagues as well to discuss it and it could range from someone heading away home early to clear their head... (to) getting the person the help they need. And we have HR as well so we’d tick-tack with them, but there isn’t a formal procedure, it’s more informal as such,” (Radio Editor 1). Similarly in print, a journalist observed, “I did a series on suicide and... the editor at the time said ‘Take some time out after that, I know it’s been a tough station’. So there is an awareness that stories like that can carry an extra toll. But I wouldn’t be aware of any formal supports that would be available or that you’d be offered,” (Print 2).

Some respondents were clear that formal supports were available to them. As a television producer noted, “We have a number for supports that we can avail of at any time, which is very good... That’s something that has changed within (the broadcaster) in the last 20 years,” (TV Producer 3). One respondent pointed to the need for continued change in the industry towards more openness to engagement on questions of care for staff, “I think it would take a cultural shift for people to engage with care... a lot of people just suppress it and accept it as part of the job that they do because
PEOPLE MIND EACH OTHER... THERE IS A CAMARADERIE THING.

(TV Exec Producer 1)

there’s never been support or care, so like it’s just part of the job,” (Camera-operator 1). Editors did seem open to the possibility of the need for a formal provision for staff, and were sensitive to how this should be provided. As one respondent put it, “if someone feels it’s had a deep effect on them there’s a formal counselling service here for staff and it’s anonymous... And as well, if staff wanted it the newsroom would organise and pay for counselling as well, separate to the company. But there hasn’t been a case of that yet but it is available to staff. It would be offsite and not on any personnel file,” (TV News Editor 1). However, there was also some vagueness as to how aware staff or freelance workers were as to the availability of these formal supports. As the executive producer explained, “I wouldn’t know if people are accessing counselling services, obviously that’s private, but my sense is that people wouldn’t talk about it a lot, so (either they) don’t access it or don’t talk about it. If someone asked for it, it would be handled, an editor would make it happen, but it wouldn’t be widely advertised either,” (TV Exec Producer 1).

Despite the uncertainty around formal provisions undoubtedly some producers and editors showed concern for their staff and some openness to the idea of engaging more on the issue of care. As an editor explained, “I think there would be an appetite for that. We put on the tough exterior and say that we’re not affected by stuff we see out on the road but nowadays with social media we hear things so quickly we are on the scene as quickly as the guards, when the body is still on the ground...” (TV News Editor 1). A radio editor was similarly conscious that the absence of supports was something that should be addressed. “We also need to start asking that question a bit, are we looking after people who are hearing these stories as best we can? And for sure more could be done there,” (Radio Editor 1). A print journalist noted, “I’d see no harm in the option of (care workshops) being available, but it would be hard to know what the demand would be and these things can be very episodic,” (Print 2). A camera operator was clear that any approach to engagements on care needed to be cognisant of the pressures workers already faced. As he put it, “With news, the shifts are so fast and time is so full the first question about a care workshop would be are you going to make me do that on my time off? If you gave people a morning off and it happened on-site then sure they’d go to it...” (Camera-operator 1). He was clear that the lead needed to come from the organisation. “One reporter went to a rape case for six weeks and no accommodation was booked, so they’re not going to organise a psychiatrist if they can’t book a hotel room,” (Camera-operator 1). A radio reporter was clear that engagement with editors to change the work culture towards one of acknowledging the need for care was to be recommended. As she put it, “I think it would be great to do some work on care with editors... I’ve worked with some very kind editors but they’d never say look make sure you’re ok... I certainly think editors need to check in with reporters after a story like that and see if they need time off (and not) because you’d worked up so much time off in lieu... (but) It would be so much better if she said, ‘Take the time off, do something nice and try to process it a little if you can’,” (Radio Reporter 3).

In sum, there was ambivalence about the existence of care challenges as well as ambivalence about whether these were addressed by media organisations or not. Most care occurred in informal ways with a mixed understanding of the availability of formal responses. The potential appetite for further engagement on the question of greater care for journalists remains ambiguous but was located by most respondents as best placed as a duty of editorial staff.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The media does have the potential to constitute an important ally in “challenging public prejudices, initiating public debate, and projecting positive, human interest stories” (Stuart, 2006:99) about people who live with mental illness, who suffer mental health issues and whose stories concern suicide. This research has provided a production studies analysis of the processes through which journalists and producers of news and factual programmes produce messages related to mental health and suicide as topics. This study has examined the sources of information provided to producers, their personal attitudes to the issues that they cover, and the variety of influences that shape the messages that producers create as well as the language that they deploy to shape their content. The key findings from the three key parts of the study are summarised below.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM PART I

In sum, journalists were clear that they did treat suicide and mental health more sensitively than other stories. The reasons for that were, out of deference to individuals or family members, in order to reduce stigma and to avoid a potential contagion effect. Journalists noted that they faced a dilemma between reporting a suicide as such or using euphemisms to protect the details of an individual’s death. There were no clear cut “rules” that journalists followed as to which approach was more appropriate, rather the choice was shaped by the individual context. It was also shaped by an appreciation of the balance to be struck between the public interest and privacy rights, which was connected by journalists to their ideas of their audience’s expectations and sensibilities, with a trend towards online journalism having a levelling effect on some coverage.

With regard to sources for stories, respondents who worked in news proposed that they are limited to providing the facts on any incident. This in turn meant that only a limited number of sources could offer facts about the situation. The main source thus was the guards, who were problematic because they offered limited and vague commentary. In response to the dearth of information, journalists were subsequently incentivised to approach neighbours, bystanders, sports club members and local clergy for inexpert commentary on a murder-suicide story. This was further aggravated by the truncated time or space allocated to any individual news story, which meant there was little scope to include alternative sources, such as, for instance, experts in suicidology, who might frame murder suicides in a broader social context, rather than as an isolated and inexplicable incident. For respondents working in features, sources required more in-depth engagement. This took the form of more editorial discussion and greater relationship building with both participants and their families. In addition, producers had to maintain relationships with sources while also retaining editorial control of the programme. Television brought additional challenges to visually narrate an issue as well as cover the story. In a competitive screen production environment, producers were under pressure to maintain an audience despite the challenging nature of the topic.

Most notably with regard to the challenges that were specific to particular platforms, the shift to online platforms has raised additional problems for producers, the main one of which was the rapidity of turnaround expected in an “always on” digital news culture. The scope for audiences to engage, in the form of commentary, also left journalists open to criticism, not in terms of their own words but in terms of the responses from the public to their articles. Finally, the digital replicability, searchability and endurance of material published online was a background consideration for online journalists who were conscious that their work could be found in other times, places and contexts.

With regard to guidelines, respondents noted that they should take care in naming deaths by suicide, they were not to include details on method of suicide and that references to helplines should be offered. Discussions on the use of language in reporting on both suicide and mental health pointed to a desire for increased engagement between media and agencies as a response to the complexity and changing nature of reporting and use of language on these issues. In effectively implementing the spirit of guidelines media producers were open to the idea of increased, ongoing and more frequent engagement with expert organisations in mental health and suicide. To achieve that end, organisations need to be clear about whether they saw any benefit to engaging with media, that they understood what media wanted and why, and that they employed people who had a working knowledge of media production.

Finally, in Part 1, a key finding was that mental illness did not achieve the same coverage as mental health or suicide. Journalists noted that they had a limited understanding of these topics. In addition, coverage of mental illness often presented recovery stories rather than ongoing struggles. However, journalists did express a willingness to consider undertaking more and better coverage.
WITH REGARD TO GUIDELINES, RESPONDENTS NOTED THAT THEY SHOULD TAKE CARE IN NAMING DEATHS BY SUICIDE, THEY WERE NOT TO INCLUDE DETAILS ON METHOD OF SUICIDE AND THAT REFERENCES TO HELPLINES SHOULD BE OFFERED.

In addition to exploring these challenges to journalists, this research also examined the influence exerted by organisational hierarchies and structures, such as editorial approaches, on those responsible for producing various media outputs. Findings on that issue were discussed in Part II.
There was support at the editorial level for coverage of mental health and suicide across print, online, radio and television platforms. However, there was also an acknowledgement that these topics can be challenging for viewers and that content needed to be mindful of keeping the audience on board. With regard to their engagement with agencies, most respondents spoke positively and saw agencies as helpful. Scope for improvement centered on more frequent approaches to media, more regular postings of guidelines and more story suggestions from agencies. Better understanding of how media works and the rationale underpinning their needs were clearly named as key areas for further work. Employing agency staff that had previously worked in media production was presented as a key enabler of better engagement.

Finally, the research examined the question of care for workers who engage with challenging topics in the course of their work.
WITH REGARD TO THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH AGENCIES, MOST RESPONDENTS SPOKE POSITIVELY AND SAW AGENCIES AS HELPFUL
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM PART III

The research documents some ambivalence with regard to the idea that there are psychological, emotional or self-care challenges that arise as a result of working on the topics of mental health and suicide. Responses to this issue varied according to how much exposure respondents had to locations and people involved in stories because of their role in production. Print and online journalists engaged less directly and for shorter periods of time with their key sources. Radio and particularly television news reporters and crew were more exposed to the impact of location-based reporting, while documentary makers were exposed to sources and information over a more extended period and so experienced a greater impact because of relationships with sources. On the question of care for media workers, journalists and editors typically approached the issues of care at informal levels while there were some claims that formal provisions for care existed, there was a sense that media workers were not entirely attuned to their availability.

Recommendations
This research has offered an understanding of how production procedures contribute to positive and responsible representation of mental health and suicide, as well as helping to account for the distorted images and stereotypes that can occur in the mass media.

This kind of analysis can offer possibilities for better understanding how change can be encouraged. To challenge journalists and producers to change, their current practices, needs, values and working realities must be understood, critically interrogated and engagement for change needs to be incubated. To that end respondents had a number of specific and general recommendations for how they saw a media engagement organisation operating to better help them.

These include:

- **Operating to production timelines more effectively.** As a television producer put it, “Let us know about events earlier... and we need fresh case studies as well, not people who are rolled out every year...” (TV Producer 2)

- **Advocacy for better engagement with official sources.** As one TV news editor said, referring to murder-suicides in particular, “There’s much more the guards could do for us... getting a particular spokesperson on mental health for these cases... have them all trained to deal with it, put in a national figure, like the national press officer... or someone with the specialist training to come in and take all the media queries and handle them...” (TV News Editor 1).

- **Addressing the need for training.** As a radio reporter noted, “There isn’t training that I know of.... Every journalist will say ‘Oh well I’m too busy for that’, but I think if you sat them down, they have loads to say...and yes, pausing for thought on one of those cases might help me or someone else to do it better the next time,” (Radio Reporter 2).

- **More guidance than guidelines.** While the guidelines were generally well received, there was a demand for more guidance. As a print journalist put it with regard to stories on “Serious mental illness, I would like to look at that more and guidance rather than guidelines on how to do that... someone to call and short information, because every case is specific,” (Print 1).

- **Make experts, statistics and reports more accessible.** As a print journalist put it, “the experts say they’ll send you on something and they send links to six reports...” (Print 1).

- **Mapping mental health and suicide organisations.** As a producer pointed out, there are quite a lot of service providers so “It’s hard to find your way around so many supports and various different organisations,” (TV Producer 4). Mapping the organisations would help media workers with getting a sense of the field, finding specific contacts and sourcing participants for programmes at a grass roots level.
TO CHALLENGE JOURNALISTS AND PRODUCERS TO CHANGE, THEIR CURRENT PRACTICES, NEEDS, VALUES AND WORKING REALITIES MUST BE UNDERSTOOD...

- Find the balance between protecting people and supporting people. As a documentary producer put it, “You won’t hear people’s voices anymore because of an over-protective attitude and it’s a very delicate thing - supporting people while protecting them,” (TV Producer 3).

- The provision of a national awards project to reward good journalism. As a print journalist put it, “If people get awards they are proud of themselves and do strive to keep up good coverage, there is a place for rewarding excellence in journalism,” (Print 1). A television producer agreed, “I think a national award for coverage of mental health is really good, it’s nice to have it marked, everybody likes to be rewarded if you do it right,” (TV Producer 2).

- The provision of workshops on care for journalists was met with mixed responses. Some respondents felt they “would do no harm” but noted that demand might be episodic. Others felt they should be delivered in-house when staff were given free time while paid to attend (Camera-operator 1).

- Further research on media effects. As one reporter noted, “It would be interesting to hear how the families of those who are affected by suicide feel about this kind of reporting. You’re reporting and it’s so tragic and you have to report it but are you just heaping more misery on them,” (Radio Reporter 3).
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