

THESIS

COLORADO JOURNALISTS' APPLICATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF GUIDELINES  
FOR REPORTING ON SENSITIVE TOPICS: SUICIDES

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### COLORADO JOURNALISTS' APPLICATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING ON SENSITIVE TOPICS: SUICIDES

Research suggests news reporting on suicides that does not follow recommended guidelines can cause vulnerable people to imitate suicidal behavior. Reporting guidelines for suicide have been created and disseminated with mixed success rates. This study used structured in-depth interviews with Colorado newspaper journalists to examine the ways local journalists report on suicides and the extent to which they follow recommended reporting guidelines, as well as explored the influences and ethical decisions journalists encounter when covering suicide. Findings indicate journalists view guidelines as suggestions not requirements and that they violate them based on their morals or personal connection to suicide. The Hierarchical Model framework suggests various influences shape media content, which can explain the guidelines journalists consider and why they create content the way they do. The results of this study echos literature showing collaborative guideline creation and implementation is key to minimizing harm, destigmatizing mental illness, and changing suicide reporting practices.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Research suggests exposure to sensationalized media reports on suicide can be contagious to people at risk for suicide, especially adolescents and young adults, and lead to a copycat effect (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). My study examined the extent in which journalists in Colorado use recommended reporting guidelines when they cover sensitive stories related to suicides. I chose this topic because I was interested in the ethical decisions journalists make when covering these incidents. The state of Colorado has a disproportionate number of suicides compared to most of the rest of the country (Colorado Health Institute, 2021). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Colorado ranks in the top 10 states for the highest suicide rates with 22.1 deaths per 100,000 people (CDC, 2019). In 2019, Colorado had a record 1,287 deaths by suicide, the highest number ever recorded in the state (Colorado Health Institute, 2021).

Coverage of suicides often cite mental illness as a possible contributor, which further perpetuates the negative stigma surrounding mental health. As a journalist, I am committed to the SPJ Code of Ethics which states to “seek truth and report it” but even more importantly to “minimize harm” (SPJ, 2018). Reporting guidelines from a variety of credible sources exist to facilitate minimizing harm on the public in relation to coverage of these sensitive topics. I utilized the theoretical frameworks of the hierarchical model, Social Cognitive Theory, and Parasocial Interaction to examine the phenomenon of suicide contagion. By referencing the existing reporting guidelines for suicides, I studied the ways in which journalists understand these guidelines, and how journalists are applying these guidelines in the field.

According to the Reporting on Suicide (2015), inattention to standards in reporting can contribute to a dangerous and often overlooked public health issue known as contagion. The recommendations for Reporting on Suicide are based on more than 50 studies on suicide contagion and were developed by suicide prevention experts who collaborated with public health and media organizations (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2014), suicide contagion is defined as the “exposure to suicide or suicidal behaviors within one's family, one's peer group, or through media reports of suicide and can result in an increase in suicide and suicidal behaviors.” Research suggests that covering sensitive topics responsibly can literally save lives (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998). There have been recorded spikes in suicide rates following highly publicized suicides, such as actress Marilyn Monroe’s death in 1962 (Phillips, 1974), and more recently actor Robin Williams’ death in 2014 (Fink, 2018). Media professionals can strive to improve upon their coverage of sensitive topics like suicide to prevent the likelihood of contagion.

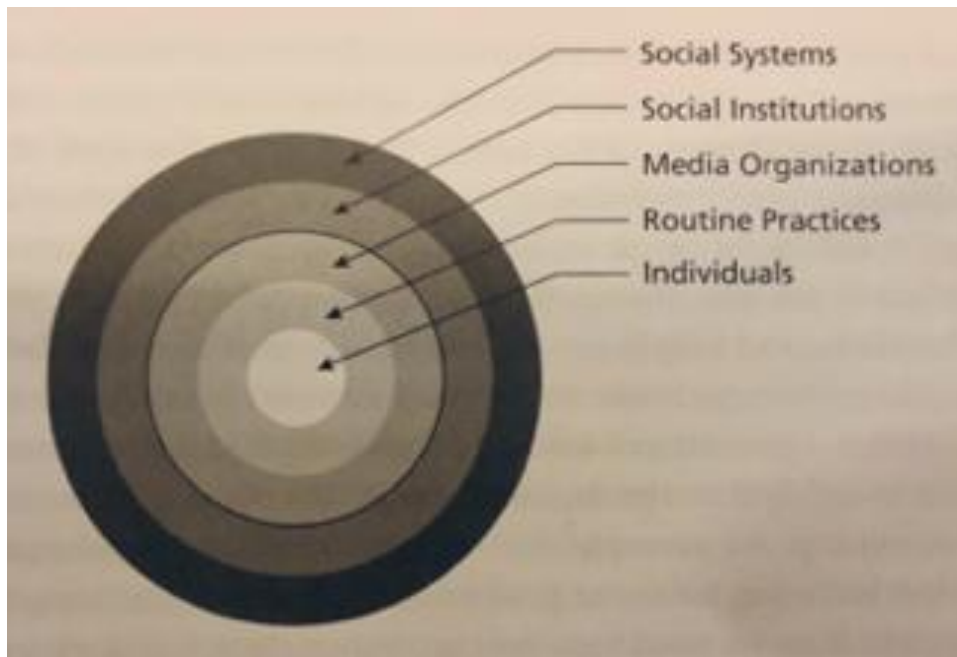
I compiled reporting guidelines from four well-known journalistic and public health entities including the *Associated Press*, the Society of Professional Journalists, the Poynter Institute and *reportingonsuicide.org*. After reviewing the commonalities across the guidelines from these four resources, I developed questions to ask journalists to better understand their rationale for utilizing, or not utilizing, these reporting recommendations. Then, I conducted in-depth interviews with practicing journalists who had covered a local suicide in Colorado, to further understand the reasons particular guidelines are being overlooked, as well as to teach media professionals about the importance of this coverage to minimize the risk of contagion on the public. Future research should expand upon this study by examining the impact of national coverage of suicides and celebrity suicides on the public.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The Hierarchical Model**

To understand the media's role in contagion on the public, I examined this phenomenon from a media sociological perspective through the lens of the hierarchical model. As shown in Figure 1, this model includes five levels of influence ranging from macro to micro: "social systems, social institutions, media organizations, routine practices, and individuals" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p.8). Shaped like a bullseye with five rings, the social systems level is the outer ring of the model that encompasses ideological influences on content, such as the United States government (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Moving inward to the social institutions, this level describes both outside institutions like public health entities, as well as the overall influence from the journalism field (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Next, the media organizational level is surrounded by a thicker border to differentiate between the norms, ethics, and influences within media organizations, and the forces outside their bounds (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Then, the routine practices level includes the patterns in the practices that journalists follow when performing their jobs, which are both restrictive and empowering structures, such as objectivity and deadlines (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Finally, the center of the model is the individual level, which incorporates the specific characteristics of the journalist (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This is a powerful level because it includes the training, education, values, ethics, and personal experiences of individual journalists, which influences how they cover sensitive topics.



**Figure 1**

*The Hierarchy of Influences Model (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014)*

No single level is more powerful than the others combined, but some levels can have more of an effect on media professionals. For the purpose of this study, I focused primarily on the institutional, organizational, routine, and individual levels to explore the various influences shaping media content and explain why journalists create content the way they do. Some influences, such as routine news practices may affect the quality of content journalists are able to produce, as well as the reporting guidelines they might consider. Even the levels beyond the individual can explain the organized actions of journalists and impacts on news content. Overall, this model aims to explain press performance.

### **Social Institutions**

The social institutions level of the hierarchical model includes the various forces outside of the formal media structures. Within society, the media has relationships with outside institutions that can also influence their content including audience, advertisers, and health

organizations (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The more powerful the outside entities, the more likely a collaborative relationship will occur (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). However, within the realm of journalism, there may be social institutions that media professionals are resistant toward while reporting.

McManus (1997) examined ethics in newsrooms and the idea that journalists control what becomes news. Although journalists are considered professionals, their influence has never exceeded the influence of owners, such as corporations who own news media, nor markets for advertisers, consumers, and sources (McManus, 1997). As media organizations aim to maximize the return to investors, journalists' autonomy decreases, which causes journalists to become "decisions takers" instead of "decision makers" (McManus, 1997, p.5). Codes of ethics in the realm of journalism need to include the decision makers who influence journalists outside of the newsroom (McManus, 1997). This article argues national codes of ethics are based on the idea that journalists solely control what becomes news instead of the reality that news is also controlled by owners (McManus, 1997). This article proposes the need for a structural framework for journalism ethics that considers the growing influence of outside forces, which is where the hierarchical model comes into play (McManus, 1997).

### **Media Organizations**

The media organizations level of the hierarchical model encompasses the influences within the confines of each media operation. These influences include the collective goals, rules, and ownership of specific news outlets that distinguish one organization from the next (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). A media organization's standards, ethics, and norms create their own unique identity, which becomes recognizable to the public (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). However, all media organizations must compete for audience attention and advertising revenue

(Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Pressure from editors within a news organization can influence the content created by an individual journalist. The influence of the media organization on individual journalists and their routines cannot be fully grasped without recognizing the technological innovations that lead to the diffusion of news content online (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). To stay profitable, many news organizations have adapted their business models to include an internet presence (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

Breed (1955) considered why journalists follow policy, but also why they might not choose to follow certain policies. Leaders in news organizations, such as the newspaper publisher, make policies and maintain conformity to these policies at lower levels within the organization (Breed, 1955). As owners, they have the authority to set the newspaper's policies and oversee staff decisions to ensure these policies are being enforced (Breed, 1955). However, according to Breed, conformity is not automatic because of the existence of journalistic norms and ethics. Also, reporters tend to have more liberal attitudes and perceptions than their publishers and could invoke the norms to justify writing against policy (Breed, 1955). Lastly, the ethical taboo preventing publishers from forcing reporters to follow policy needs to be considered (Breed, 1955). Like most formal organizations, news organization policies can be maintained or avoided based on the hierarchy of influences (Breed, 1955).

### **Routine Practices**

The routine practices level of the hierarchical model examines the rules that guide media professionals. These routines can explain the ways in which journalists do their job, and the rules their news organizations impose upon them (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). News content is shaped by the three sources of routines: "organizations, suppliers, and audiences" (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p.164). Like any organization, the media works to remain successful, therefore, content is

more likely to align with audience needs (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Content suppliers can either facilitate or limit the information flow to the media (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The “cues, processes, and relations” of news production lead to engrained routine practices, which is why journalists organize their work around the overarching social system (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p.165). For example, experts and officials are often the central characters interviewed or discussed within journalism content.

## **Individuals**

The individual level of the hierarchical model includes all the content creators, their personal traits, and experiences, and how these traits and experiences impact the production of media. The more prominent a person is within a media organization, like the editor-in-chief, the more relevant their individual characteristics become (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). For example, a journalist who has prior experience with suicidal ideation might consider the impacts of sensitive coverage, and the guidelines that aim to minimize harm. Prominent media professionals can enact social institutional influence, especially if they join forces with powerful outside organizations (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), such as the *Associated Press* and the Poynter Institute collaborating with the National Institute of Mental Health and World Health Organization among other public health and suicide prevention entities to create recommendations for reporting on suicide (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). Also, if these outside influences, such as public health entities have similar ethics to the individual journalist, the more likely their practices will become engrained into the journalist’s routine behavior (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). However, the power of the individual journalist cannot be fully understood without the context of the media setting in which they are operating and the various influences impacting their content (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

## **Media Landscape and Gatekeeping**

Reese and Shoemaker (2016) utilized the hierarchical model to explain the complexities shaping media content in the public sphere. Technological advancements have blurred the lines between each level of influence on the media, such as the dynamic between professionals and the public, as well as the partnerships between organizations (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Digital platforms have inspired more effective forms of journalism but changed what it means to be a journalist, which impacts the coherence within news organizations (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). However, the authors argue this model remains applicable today because it can take on these new journalistic shifts and adjust accordingly (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Despite changes to the media landscape, the hierarchical model continues to organize the networks and fields within each level and explains their interactions across the levels of influence (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

Shoemaker & Vos (2009) explored the related concept of gatekeeping, which traditionally ascribed the responsibility of decision-making to journalists and their media organizations. Gatekeeping showcases that information flows across channels with the source channel having the most influence in the beginning of the process and then the media channel transforms that information into news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). For example, the source channel could be the media organization, the journalist who is creating the story, or a source used in the story. However, without sources, media professionals would not be aware of many of the newsworthy events happening in their communities (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Therefore, the two channels where information flows from include mass media and their sources (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The third channel in this process includes event information circulating from the audience (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), such as social media posts journalists can use to contact

sources. All these channels have gates that control access from one channel to the next (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Gatekeeping follows a similar structure to the hierarchical model, which is helpful for understanding content creation.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

In order to interpret the selected reporting guidelines, I examined them through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). I not only wanted to discover how journalists were influenced when reporting news but also recognized that journalists can influence their audiences through the content they create. Therefore, I also took a media psychology approach in addition to a media sociology approach to fully understand this phenomenon. By exploring how different influences encourage or discourage adherence to these recommendations, part of this study aimed to understand reporting guidelines based on their psychological impacts.

SCT has been a basis for many media effects theories and often appears in media effects literature, including the study of media violence (Bryant & Thompson, 2001). This theory analyzes the mental functions that cause certain behaviors in humans, as well as the internal processes happening while people are learning (Bryant & Thompson, 2001). Lastly, the vicarious capacity involves learning through other mediums beyond direct experience, such as mass media (Bryant & Thompson, 2001).

SCT emphasizes observational learning, which is the idea that humans watch each other's actions, can learn those actions through modeling that they see, and based on the rewards or punishments they see others receive for enacting those actions and their level of motivation to enact those actions, decide if they want to model that behavior (Bryant & Thompson, 2001). Modeling is a form of reenacting a learned behavior, and includes four processes: "attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation" (Bryant & Thompson, 2001, p. 70). Attention is

people's ability to focus on and understand a behavior to model it (Bryant & Thompson, 2001). Retention is people's capacity to remember a behavior (Bryant & Thompson, 2001). Motor reproduction means that people can enact a behavior they have seen modeled (Bryant & Thompson, 2001). Motivation plays a huge role in people's decisions to model learned behaviors and can be increased with incentives (Bryant & Thompson, 2001).

According to SCT, the more steps given to vulnerable members of the public, the more likely they will learn the modeling described in sensitive media coverage and kill themselves, which is an example of mimicking behavior related to the characters of these news stories. If coverage is perceived as rewarding and lacking punishments, this is a concern and can lead to contagion. Direct modeling is when people model exactly what they have seen versus abstract modeling occurs when people utilize an idea or object that they know will achieve a desired outcome (Bandura, 2001). Vicarious modeling can result in the abstract behavior of a suicide through the amount of media coverage, which then can amplify the likelihood of contagion (Bandura, 2001). The more the public identifies with these characters in the news stories, the more likely they will copy the suicidal behavior (Bandura, 2001).

The influence of suicide coverage in the media on the subsequent increase in suicide rates has been researched for years (Fu, Chan, & Yip, 2009). A study in China also relied on SCT, particularly the vicarious capability to study suicide contagion by operationalizing media influences on suicidal ideation (Fu, Chan, & Yip, 2009). The study created and tested a theoretical model to explain the media's influence on suicide and found a relationship between media depictions and suicidal ideation in a random sample across different age groups (Fu, Chan, & Yip, 2009). Vicarious modeling explains how journalists can contribute to contagion based on how they cover sensitive topics, which is why guidelines are key.



## **Self-Efficacy and Response Efficacy**

Within SCT is the concept of self-efficacy, which is defined as a person's belief in their own ability to succeed in situations or complete a task (Bandura, 1977). Media reports about suicide can provide information that can influence vulnerable individuals' self-efficacy toward dying by suicide. Also, within SCT is the concept of response efficacy, which is defined as the belief that the recommended behaviors, such as following suicide reporting guidelines will be effective in reducing or eliminating a perceived threat (Bandura, 1977). In this case, the perceived threat is the possibility of suicide contagion on vulnerable members of the public. Both of these beliefs, along with their assessments of rewards and punishments, and their level of motivation influence whether a person will attempt suicide (Bandura, 1977).

## **Identification**

Another concept within SCT is identification, which requires an observer and a model, and occurs when the observer adopts the behaviors, values, beliefs, and attitudes of the model whom they identify with (Bandura & Huston, 1961). In this case, the model would be the suicide victim in the story, and the observer would be the audience consuming the media report about the suicide. The more the audience identifies with the suicide victim, the higher their self-efficacy for dying by suicide (Bandura & Huston, 1961).

## **Strengths and Weaknesses of SCT**

One of the main strengths of Social Cognitive Theory is its causal link between behavior and media use (Baran & Davis, 2015). Media outlets like television have been shown to affect viewers' behavior (Baran & Davis, 2015). Also, this theory can be applied to various viewing situations including movies and video game influence on individuals. SCT focuses on environmental and content cues while effectively explaining the subject matter (Baran & Davis,

2015). However, SCT underemphasizes how active people are while engaging with media because individuals make their own decisions and form their own opinions about the media they consume (Baran & Davis, 2015).

### **Parasocial Interaction**

The more prominent sensitive news coverage becomes in our society, the greater the likelihood parasocial interaction will occur, and parasocial relationships will be developed between vulnerable members of the public and these victims of suicides. Parasocial Interaction (PSI) was originally coined by Horton and Wohl in the 1950s (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Within the concept of PSI are parasocial relationships and Horton and Wohl define parasocial relationships as the “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer,” which are typically one-sided and controlled by the performer (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.215). An example of the performer could be media professionals and the spectator could be the audience consuming the media. However, people do not form parasocial relationships with every character in media, these relationships require repeated exposure in order to occur, and can lead media users to develop illusions of friendship, intimacy, and identification (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationships can be enhanced by trust and self-disclosure from the media professional causing the audience to feel connected by observing and interpreting their appearance, voice, and gestures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). If spectators feel the experience with the performer is unsatisfactory, their only option is to withdraw (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, with the prominence of mass media in recent years, the public may find it difficult to completely withdraw from these messages, such as coverage of celebrity suicides.

To describe this theory in a more modern context, a 2008 study examined ways PSI can be adapted for mediated interpersonal communication involving new media characters, such as

video chats or online role-play games (Hartmann, 2008). The nature of these interactions depends primarily on the perceived authenticity and social distance from the media characters (Hartmann, 2008). The audience's perception of the social distance to the media character impacts their interpretation of the nature of the interaction, such as being playful or serious (Hartmann, 2008).

A study on the effects of celebrity involvement examined the impacts celebrities have on audiences (Schuh, 2010). Utilizing both SCT and PSI, this study found PSI is positively associated with knowledge changes (Schuh, 2010). The belief that media figures can be influential to audiences is in agreement with Bandura's SCT as well (Schuh, 2010). Celebrity involvement in parasocial interaction can have a direct impact on interpersonal communication, an indirect impact on behavior, and both direct and indirect impacts to knowledge and attitude changes (Schuh, 2010). Through informing, motivating and guiding audiences, celebrities can promote behavioral changes (Schuh, 2010).

### **Reporting Guidelines for Suicide**

Researchers have been studying the relationship between suicide reporting and copycat suicides for decades (Phillips, 1974). Several journalistic, health, and educational organizations have existing guidelines for the media to follow, some of which were created to minimize the likelihood of contagion (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). The four reporting guidelines I selected and referenced were compiled from *reportingonsuicide.org*, the Society of Professional Journalists, the *Associated Press*, the Poynter Institute.

These reporting guidelines agree that media organizations should avoid are using sensational language, such as "commit suicide," speculating that mental illness is a cause for the suicide and focusing the narrative on the suicide method. Instead, these guidelines suggest media

professionals should focus the narrative on the lives of the victims and provide support resources for those impacted by the incident. These guidelines are vital because of the large body of research supporting the negative impact insensitive coverage can have on vulnerable members of the public, which I dive into more deeply in the coming sections of this paper. Both Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and the Parasocial Interaction perspective also support that following these guidelines should lower the number of copycat suicides. For example, SCT says the more steps a news article details, the easier people at risk for suicide, especially adolescents and young adults can model the behavior in relation to how to achieve a particular suicide method. Furthermore, SCT says people weigh the rewards and punishments when they read news articles and get information on whether they will be rewarded or punished for a particular action, which is part of observational learning. Parasocial Interaction goes one step further and says the more vulnerable members of the public relate to the suicide victim, the more likely they are to mimic their behavior.

This study aimed to discover whether the journalists who are following reporting guidelines know the impact of sensitive coverage or whether other influences affect their decision to follow or not follow recommended guidelines. Furthermore, the study tried to understand what the most powerful influencer was in causing journalists to adopt these guidelines. According to the Hierarchical Model, reporting guidelines would be considered a social institution, which is considered less influential than editors within the media organization. Since there is evidence of a cause and effect, i.e., sensitive coverage can lead to contagion, it is important to understand what influences are central to how suicides are reported on.

These guidelines are attempting to prevent contagion because they were created through collaborative efforts in response to issues with self-efficacy, observation, and self-regulation in

terms of trying to discourage certain reporting behaviors. When reading a news story with specific details and descriptions of how to enact a suicide, vulnerable audience members may be encouraged to emulate that behavior. However, the goal through these guidelines is to avoid providing enough information to give vulnerable people self-efficacy and to discourage the violent act by providing additional information and resources to susceptible individuals. Through collaborative efforts, the media can learn to adapt and implement universal guidelines for covering sensitive topics like suicide to avoid a copycat effect in at-risk members of the public. *Reportingonsuicide.org*, which stems from several journalistic, public health, and suicide prevention organizations, including the Poynter Institute and the World Health Organization, lists the following tips for media professionals to follow (Reporting on Suicide, 2015):

- “Avoid reporting that death by suicide was preceded by a single event, such as a recent job loss, divorce, or bad grades. Reporting like this leaves the public with an overly simplistic and misleading understanding of suicide.”
- “Consider quoting a suicide prevention expert on causes and treatments. Avoid putting expert opinions in a sensationalistic context.”
- “Add statement(s) about the many treatment options available, stories of those who overcame a suicidal crisis, and resources for help.”
- “Include up-to-date local/national resources where readers/viewers can find treatment, information, and advice that promote help-seeking.”

This online resource also provides the dos and don'ts when reporting on suicide, suggestions for online media, warning signs, examples of effective stories and support, which serves as a valuable tool for journalists everywhere.

Diving into the supporting research now, after the subway system was introduced in Vienna in the 1970s, it became a popular method for people to kill themselves and those deaths were followed by dramatic media coverage (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998). However, a campaign was launched with media guidelines, which in turn created a change in media reports and saw a decrease in subway suicides (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998).

Media reports can influence vulnerable people's actions, including in the area of suicide. The Australian government was concerned about the copycat effect caused by media portrayals and funded a project to study how suicide was framed and found an increase in suicide rates following media reports on suicide (Pirkis, Blood, Skehan & Dare, 2010). "The effect was accentuated when stories were prominent, glorified or sensationalized suicide, and/or described the suicide method in explicit detail" (Pirkis, Blood, Skehan & Dare, 2010, p.576). Journalistic practices, such as informing without sensationalizing and including local crisis hotlines and warning signs in stories can help avoid these outcomes (Reporting on Suicide, 2015).

Evidence continues to be compiled about the significant impact of suicide coverage in the media. The existence of suicide contagion should no longer be questioned (Gould, 2001). "We should refocus our research efforts on identifying which particular story components promote contagion under which circumstances and which components are used for preventive programming" (Gould, 2001, p.200).

A study analyzing 42 studies on the impact from suicide reporting found that studies focused on celebrity suicide were about 14 percent more likely to find a copycat effect than studies on suicide reporting in general (Stack, 2003). Also, the copycat effect was higher from newspaper coverage than television coverage of suicides (Stack, 2003). Also, a South Korean study found high media coverage of celebrity suicides was associated with an increased suicide

rates in the public (Choi & Oh, 2016). “These findings shed light on the importance of media policy in the prevention of copycat suicides” (Choi & Oh, 2016, p.92).

A Gandy (2014) study found responsible reporting guidelines for suicide have been created and administered worldwide but with mixed success rates based on the extent journalists perceived the media to be involved in the creation of those guidelines. Guideline uptake might be more successful if health professionals collaborated further with media professionals to make the guidelines more applicable and credible (Gandy, 2014). This study suggests to change suicide reporting practices, guidelines need to be developed and implemented as part of a collaborative effort (Gandy, 2014).

Award-winning journalists were interviewed about their stories on mental illness and how coverage could be improved in the future (Subramanian, 2014). The journalists encouraged sensitive wording, such as not describing the method of suicide in detail, and providing positive mental illness information, such as stories of recovery (Subramanian, 2014). In the study, journalists attributed their story’s success to various factors including the support of their editors, exposure to mental illness, and empathy (Subramanian, 2014).

In the changing world of technology, information is being disseminated faster and easier than ever before. Websites play a huge role in providing vulnerable individuals with suicide-related information (Arendt & Scherr, 2016). The search engine Google has started creating results that present suicide-prevention information when concerning keywords are searched by the public (Arendt & Scherr, 2016). “Search engines are increasingly used to seek suicide-related information online, which can serve both harmful and helpful purposes” (Arendt, & Scherr, 2016, p.1403).

The existence of contagion has been shown across several studies, and media recommendations for suicide coverage have been included to minimize copycat behavior (Schäfer & Quiring, 2015). However, there is still knowledge lacking on how suicide is actually being reported in the media (Schäfer & Quiring, 2015). “It concludes that German media do not respect the recommendations in a substantial number of their articles, in addition, a significant increase in suicides and similar suicides is found” (Schäfer & Quiring, 2015, p.1149). The key to reporting on sensitive topics, such as suicides includes avoiding sensationalizing, adding resources, and providing context in stories.

### **Suicide Contagion**

According to the CDC (2021), suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages 10 to 34, the fourth leading cause of death for ages 35 to 44, and the tenth leading cause of death in the United States overall. In 2019, more than 47,500 people died by suicide (CDC, 2021), and research shows the media has the power to change that. Suicide and suicidal behavior are caused by many complex factors; therefore, reporters should not offer oversimplified explanations such as “recent negative life events or acute stressors” (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2014).

In the field of psychology, suicide contagion is known as the Werther effect, named after a fictional hero who died by suicide (Phillips, 1974). The Werther effect explains the increase in suicides that follow a highly publicized suicide in the media (Phillips, 1974). Celebrity suicides, such as actor Robin Williams in 2014 (Fink, 2018), and Marilyn Monroe in 1962 (Phillips, 1974), all had a dramatic impact on the public.

A 2018 study found an excess number of suicides in the U.S. during the four months following the death of Robin Williams (Fink, 2018). Also, the greatest increase of suicides were



men aged 30 to 44 with a disproportionate amount using the method of suffocation (Fink, 2018). These spikes in suicides “paralleled the time and method of Williams’ death, and a dramatic increase in news media reports on suicides and Robin Williams during this same period, suggesting a connection between Williams’ death and the subsequent increase in suicide deaths from August to December 2014” (Fink, 2018, p.5). These findings highlight possible contagion effect from news media reports of this celebrity’s suicide, as well as possible parasocial relationships members of the public may have developed with Robin Williams.

Given the contagious impact that media coverage of suicides can have on vulnerable members of the public, further research is necessary to learn how journalists consider guidelines to help prevent contagion. The following research questions attempted to better understand how journalists consider these guidelines.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: In what ways are suicide reporting guidelines understood by journalists?

RQ2: How are journalists influenced by these guidelines as compared to other influences, including organizations, routines, and individual characteristics?

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

After an extensive review of the relevant literature related to my topic, I researched journalists' coverage of these sensitive topics using the qualitative research method of in-depth interviews. My rationale for choosing in-depth interviews is an attempt to enter the mindset of journalists who have covered sensitive topics and gain insight on their understanding and application of reporting guidelines. “Qualitative interviews provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation” (Tracy, 2013, p.132). I set out to interview at least six Colorado journalists who have covered a local suicide through purposeful sampling of selected landmark cases, which I will explain further in the next sections. After identifying 26 Colorado journalists who fit this study’s criteria, I ended up interviewing seven journalists. I selected suicide coverage between June 2014 and October 2018. Regarding the interviews that were conducted, the coverage ranged from November 2015 to August 2018 to avoid the most recent incidents during the time of the interviews. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, I avoided interviewing journalists about suicide coverage they had written within a year or less of the interviews. Purposeful sampling selected participants thoughtfully within the constraints of the study’s goals and research questions (Tracy, 2013). The style of interviewing I utilized was structured interviews incorporating an interview script with instructions to guide my questioning, as well as probes to help me compare and contrast themes across the various interview transcripts (Berger, 2000).

To answer my research questions, the interview design I utilized was the hierarchical model as the guiding framework. This model examined the influences impacting journalists’ coverage, the role of personal ethics, the perceptions of outside institutions, and their overall

considerations while covering these sensitive stories. I was curious to see if journalists view contagion as speculation or a public health crisis. I used accepted reporting guidelines on how to avoid contagion to interview journalists about how they covered suicides in Colorado.

The broader themes I expected to emerge from the interviews relate directly to the hierarchical model such as discussions of truth, reporting, breaking news, minimizing harm, acting independently, accountability, transparency, and resistance (SPJ, 2014). Suicide contagion and Social Cognitive Theory provide additional literature dealing directly with the topic I was trying to understand through in-depth interviews with journalists. The themes I expected to emerge related to contagion were awareness, prevention, stigmatized victims, searching for answers, loved one's perspectives, sensationalized tragedy, and most importantly, a discussion surrounding mental health and mental illness.

### **Population and Sampling**

Regarding my sampling plan, I engaged in purposeful sampling, the process of thoughtfully choosing participants within the restrictions of my project's research purpose (Tracy, 2013). Specifically, I sampled local Colorado journalists who had covered one of the identified landmark cases based on the news articles they wrote. In order to locate the most comprehensive sample possible, the keywords I used to search for those cases included "suicides in Colorado," and "suicide deaths in Colorado." Then, I compiled news articles based on those keywords that were written by one of the top ten Colorado daily newspapers, based on circulation, as of 2018. These newspapers include The Denver Post, The Colorado Springs Gazette, Pueblo Chieftain, Greeley Tribune, Boulder Daily Camera, Grand Junction Daily Sentinel, Fort Collins Coloradoan, Lakewood Sentinel, Daily Times-Call, and Loveland Reporter-Herald (Agility PR, 2019). However, my interviews came directly from four of these

newspapers. The two search engines I used to narrow down relevant Colorado news articles were Google, specifically Google News and News Bank through the Colorado State University library. I collected these articles and the journalists' bylines based on the prominence of media coverage from the major local news outlets. Prominence was determined based on the top results that appeared in the online search engines. I chose cases that occurred between June 2014 and October 2018. My cut off was October of 2018 due to the sensitivity of the topic and the possible trauma caused by covering these incidents in the recent past. All these cases were studied via the medium of online news articles to properly highlight emergent themes and guidelines. After identifying 26 journalists who fit my study's criteria, my goal was to interview at least one-tenth of my population. I ended up interviewing seven journalists, which equals more than a quarter of my identified population. To give some background on the participants in this study, their experience in the journalism field ranged from two years to 22 years at the time of the interviews. After conducting all the interviews, I believe I reached data saturation because I started hearing many of the same concepts and ideas from multiple journalists (Tracy, 2013). Journalists were identified through an overview of existing news articles via Google search of these landmark cases on Colorado suicides. Next, I added the potential participants to a contact information sheet with their first and last name, their email, media outlet, and the URL link to the news article. Each participant received a recruitment email, as well as an IRB consent form to fill out on Qualtrics prior to participating in my study.

### **Interview Format**

I used a structured interview format to compliment my interview schedule, which is the list of questions and probes I prepared based on the commonalities across reporting guidelines. Guided by the hierarchical model, I asked questions about how journalists perceive individual,

routine, and organizational influences that might impact how they cover suicides. My interview questions were repeated in the same order for each participant to compare and contrast responses across the sample. Regarding interview types, I approached this from a respondent perspective because I am a journalist who interviewed fellow journalists about their reporting experiences. “Respondents are relied upon to speak primarily of and for themselves about their own motivations, experiences, and behaviors” (Tracy, 2013, p. 141). I took a deliberate naive interview stance, which is one of the most common stances because it sits in the center of two extremes, being completely open about my motivations for the study versus keeping that information confidential (Tracy, 2013). This stance allowed me to remain open to new or divergent findings that I may not have considered before. Finally, reflexivity also played a role in this study, which takes into account the researcher’s own beliefs, assumptions and experiences that may have influenced the research (Tracy, 2013). As a qualitative researcher, I acknowledge my background as a student journalist and experience with losing loved ones to suicide affected what I perceived. The interviews were conducted through phone calls. I recorded the interviews via equipment, such as my phone and H1 Zoom recorder for transcription purposes to ensure accuracy of quotes. The participants agreed to the recording component of the interviews in the consent form they signed via Qualtrics before participating in my study.

## **Procedure**

First of all, commonalities across the reporting guidelines and the hierarchy of influences informed the creation of the interview questions I asked participants. Then, I conducted a pilot study and tested the structure of my interview questions to address any problems through a convenience sample of student journalists at Rocky Mountain Student Media Corporation of Colorado State University. I purposefully sampled the journalism population using search engine

results of news articles on the landmark cases identified to find coverage following the particular incident. Then, I sent participants a recruiting email explaining the purpose of my study and the terms of use. I asked interested participants to visit my Qualtrics link containing a consent form and obtained signed and scanned consent forms for confidential interview participation. Then, I scheduled phone interviews with local journalists for approximately an hour or less.

Moving on to the data collection, using a structured interview format with my accompanying interview schedule, I conducted and recorded the interviews and debriefed participants about the study at the end of each interview. Next, I compiled audio files from respondents to transcribe interview responses by organizing, preparing, coding, and conceptualizing the data to identify broader themes in interview responses. Since I collected personal information from the journalists, including their first and last names, email, phone number, and news organization, I concealed their identities using pseudonyms. When reporting and sharing the data, I combined the data from all participants. To keep the journalists' data confidential, their names and information were kept separately in an encrypted file on a password protected computer accessible only to the research team. Lastly, I interpreted how journalists described their understanding and application of guidelines for covering suicides through coding the emergent themes within the transcriptions.

## **Materials**

The materials I used for this study were a set interview questions for suicide coverage, and a series of related probes crafted for the type of sensitive coverage the journalists had reported on in the past. Additionally, I had a short questionnaire that was distributed via Qualtrics for journalists to fill out prior to their interviews. These questionnaires provided me

with background information on each respondent including their first and last name, news organization, and contact information.

### **Data Analysis**

To collect empirical data on the responses to the interview questions from journalists, I also used the codes related to influences from the hierarchical model to code the data. The hierarchical model helped me transcribe, and analyze the in-depth interviews, as well as provided background and emergent themes. After recording, transcribing, and coding the interviews, I divided my interview responses into two subcategories. The first category looked to answer my first research question regarding how journalists understand these reporting guidelines. The second category was a set of codes for the different influences on journalists, such as organizational, routines, individual, and the guidelines, in line with my second research question. The final phases of my data analysis for this study were to identify the broader themes within the journalists' interview responses and report them in my results section. I interpreted how journalists described their understanding and application of guidelines for covering suicides. I also analyzed the themes of how journalists consider the influence of reporting guidelines in comparison to institutional, organizational, routine, and individual level influences to see which are most influential in how journalists report on suicides. In accordance with these steps, I took the overlying codes from the interviews' responses in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which journalists cover sensitive topics. Although, interviews involve a great deal of time and effort, they are a fundamental technique for researchers because they provide a glimpse into the human experience (Berger, 2000).

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The following chapter examines the emerging themes from the seven structured in-depth interviews I conducted. I divided my themes into two major categories based on my research questions: understanding of guidelines and influences of guidelines. Within the understanding of guidelines category, I defined four levels: journalist role, nature of suicide, journalist practices, and outcome. Using the hierarchical model as my guiding framework, I identified influences within each of these levels: social systems, social institutions, media organizations, routine practices, and individuals. This chapter describes each theme and elaborates on any sub-themes found within those major themes. To keep the confidentiality of my participants, the journalists are identified by their first and last initial only, news organizations were omitted, and all pronouns are they/them/theirs.

### **Understanding of Guidelines**

#### ***Journalist Role***

The following level of understanding includes the role of the journalist in storytelling and the expectations surrounding quality journalism, such as accountability, accuracy, and commitment to public service. Journalistic norms direct journalists to engage in ethical behavior that holds powerful individuals and institutions accountable.

**Journalist's connection to community.** Suicide coverage is often centered around the community impacted by the loss, which prompts journalists to put more consideration into the way they cover this topic. Journalism is written for the community, by the community and journalists have the autonomy to pursue stories that interest them. If a journalist covers a topic like suicide regularly, it can become their beat and lead to a better understanding of the overall



issue. J.P. said, “The community needed to see something more, and so I had definitely taken some of the initiative early on with that and wanting to tell the story of this girl and this family.” Participants discussed the personal responsibility they feel to inform the community about this topic in a way that is helpful and respectful to the loved ones of the victim. D.R. believes the guiding principle for journalists when covering suicide should always be to minimize harm. “You empathize with the person that’s gone through this and has done this ... but at the same time you have to hold a responsibility to help the community that experienced it along with them.” As a member of the community themselves, journalists covering sensitive stories can create lasting connections with contacts and a deeper bond to the shared experiences within that community.

**Accurate and ethical.** Journalists want to be right both accurately and ethically, especially when covering suicide. Writing about suicide can be more complicated and complex than covering other forms of death because the facts are unclear and there’s rarely a simple reason behind someone’s decision to die by suicide. If journalists make the mistake of oversimplifying or speculating on the cause of the suicide they’re covering, it can increase the possibility of contagion in vulnerable members of the public (Reporting on Suicide, 2015).

Participants highlighted the different ethical decisions journalists make when covering sensitive topics because the desire to report on it first and be transparent can outweigh the time and consideration needed to cover it carefully. “I want to be first, but I also want to be right, and not just right accurately but right morally and ethically and someone might beat me to it because they make a different ethical decision.” S.K. is explaining that journalists often have access to more information about the suicide than the public does, and it’s up to them to decide which details get reported. J.B. said, “You have to take it with a grain of salt and not paint this rosy

picture like someone was completely, perfectly happy, and no warning signs at all, and then also they're dead." Presenting suicide as a common or acceptable response to hardship can also be dangerous and contribute to contagion, which is why including resources is vital in stories about suicide.

**National contagion effect.** Local journalists often feel national suicide coverage is more likely to disregard guidelines and contribute to contagion. Typically, for a suicide to be covered at the national level, it involves a celebrity or some other high-profile person that the audience already knows a lot about. Some of these public figures who die by suicide are open about their mental health struggles along the way; other times their death comes as a shock. Participants talked about the difference between covering a suicide of a local person versus a celebrity. S.K. highlighted a lack of sensitivity and privacy in national coverage of high-profile suicides. "You read those stories and it's like no one needed to know this. I think the higher profile the person is, the less humanity we think about." The connection people make with celebrities through media can lead to parasocial relationships which are one-sided relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and if the audience respects and relates to a celebrity who kills themselves, it only increases the risk and reach of contagion in the public sphere.

### ***Nature of Suicide***

The following level of understanding includes the major types of suicide journalists can encounter while covering breaking news or writing about sensitive topics, such as public suicides and youth suicides. Journalists acknowledge that some types of suicides require more caution because of the news value and expectations from the public to report on these issues.

**Contagious suicide clusters.** Journalists are especially concerned about contagion effect following suicide clusters among youth in their communities. Journalists cover tragedy

constantly, it's the reality of breaking news but even the most seasoned journalists tend to pause when a young person dies by suicide. Participants in this study did acknowledge that contagion is a possibility when covering sensitive topics. D.R. said, "Especially with younger people that suicide contagion is a big concern, but on the other hand it almost feels wrong not to acknowledge that someone so young has died." With youth suicides comes the concern of spread of suicide clusters in schools and spread of the incident on social media. J.B. explains a suicide cluster they were covering at a local school and the role social media played in circulating that information that then warranted a story. "One boy jumped off a parking garage at a mall in a very public area and did it while on Snapchat ... another boy Snapchatted a picture of the gun, and a message to all of his followers." J.B. goes on to explain their reasoning for going against reporting guidelines and the advice of health experts in cases of youth suicides. "Experts will often tell you just to vaguely say someone took their life. But I thought it was important in that instance to say how they did it ... I have gotten in pretty intense fights with experts." As a participant whose perspective differed from most in this study, J.B. was willing to stand firm and pushback against reporting guidelines and the advice of mental health professionals when it comes to discussing method in suicide coverage. J.B. holds a strong belief that transparency can help prevent youth suicides because in their experience, younger generations want to release the stigma and openly talk about suicide. Another participant expressed that it's a journalist's duty to hold districts accountable when there's a string of suicides in their schools. K.L. said, "We had a suicide cluster at a local high school, and we reported on that in the context of what the school district was doing in response to that and to prevent that." Whether journalists agree with it or not, studies suggest the risk of contagion is real and responsible reporting can reduce the risk of additional suicides (Reporting on Suicide, 2015).

**Suicide by firearm debate.** Suicide by firearm is the most common suicide method in the United States, but it's not necessarily the most reported on method because it typically doesn't happen in a public place, it happens inside the victim's home. However, when a suicide by firearm does prompt news coverage, it often raises bigger societal questions from access to guns in this country to the stigma surrounding mental health. There's a debate among participants in my study about the extent to which firearms should be discussed in stories of suicide. J.P. argues that mentioning method is important for future stories and understanding the role firearms play in them, "Not even indicating whether it was a handgun or drugs ... I take issue with that because as we know, it's very difficult to get good data and good reliable information about the role of handguns in all this." On the other hand, D.R. believes it depends on the wishes of the suicide victim's family. "His mom, after he shot himself kind of took her grief and formed it into a support system, and an education awareness effort for teenagers suffering from depression, and we did a big follow up on her." Reporting guidelines cite contagion, which is also known as copycat effect, as a concern when reporting on suicides and these guidelines promote responsible reporting on sensitive topics to minimize harm on vulnerable members of the audience.

### ***Journalist Practices***

The following level of understanding includes practices central to covering sensitive topics, including avoiding sensationalizing and minimizing harm. Reporting guidelines generally agree on these practices for suicide coverage but the ways in which journalists understand them varies.

**Minimize detail to minimize harm.** Journalists generally agree that minimizing detail about the suicide itself in stories can help minimize the potential harm on the audience, including

contagion. However, journalists disagree on whether or not to mention the method in stories of suicide. Participants shared concerns that detailed suicide coverage can lead to sensationalism and negatively impact people in a vulnerable state of mind. D.R. said, “Those people are in a really dark place when they take their lives, and for us to splash it over headlines and in stories I think is problematic, and also might also obviously contribute to contagion.” Participants who support including the suicide method in their coverage also tend to disagree on the detail in which to present that information. “Saying someone shot themselves is very different from saying someone picked up a loaded handgun, pointed it at their temple and pulled the trigger ... glorifying it and going into exorbitant details only does more harm than good.” J.P. highlighted that it’s not simply what journalists write but how they write it when it comes to suicide coverage. The reporting guidelines suggest journalists should report on suicides using facts and language that is sensitive to a grieving family (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). Furthermore, the code of ethics from the Society of Professional Journalists includes minimizing harm. “Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect (SPJ, 2018).”

**Context and resources.** Another source of agreement among journalists is the need for mental health resources in suicide coverage to help protect vulnerable audience members, such as including hotline numbers. Resources can also help the audience recognize the warning signs of suicide and potentially prevent more deaths. S.K. explained their newsroom practices when it comes to resources in stories of suicide. “We have both a video and a breakout box that we put with stories referring to mental health resources, signs of someone who may be suicidal, what to do if you need help.” Participants also discussed the need for context in suicide coverage to avoid oversimplifying the issue or speculating on the cause. J.P. said, “When you talk about it in

a responsible way, and you provide connections and resources for people and context, then that ultimately does accomplish what we as journalists should be doing, which is to inform our community.” J.P. goes on to say responsible reporting can lead to a better understanding of the world around us and overcome misinformation about suicide.

### ***Outcome***

The following level of understanding includes the potential positive and negative impacts of reporting on suicide. Reporting guidelines on sensitive topics like suicide were created in an effort to minimize harm and reduce the risk of contagion in vulnerable member of the public.

**Story impact goes beyond the medium.** Most journalists share the sentiment that suicide coverage goes beyond the victim and can impact the audience’s mental health. Participants discussed the ways in which these types of stories are covered dictates if that impact is going to be more positive or negative. K.L. explained that they always keep the possibility of contagion in the back of their mind when handling stories of suicide. “I’m very aware of the idea of suicide contagion, and the fact that reporting on suicide in a sensational way or romanticizing or glamorizing it can cause more people to consider suicide.” There also seemed to be a shared goal among participants reporting on suicide to create environments of open discussion about mental health. J.S. said “It would be nice for people to understand that this is an issue, and to speak more openly about mental health and suicide.” Reporting on suicide can result in help-seeking when resources and messages of hope and recovery are included in the coverage (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). However, much like J.P., J.S. expressed feeling stifled by reporting guidelines and the fear surrounding this topic. “I think sometimes they’re used by people, whether it’s adults or public health officials, sometimes to stifle conversation, a very public conversation, about mental health and about suicide.” Not every participant believes

reporting guidelines on suicide are helpful or necessary, but they do all believe that reporting on suicide is vital to release the stigma. It's not just the families impacted by these stories, it's the journalist covering the story, those reading the story, all while simultaneously highlighting an issue which pervades our society at every level.

### **Influences of Guidelines**

Moving on to the next major category of themes, we now shift from understanding the guidelines to the analysis of the influences on journalists' work.

#### ***Social Institutions***

The following level of the hierarchical model includes forces outside of formal media structures, such as social media platforms and public health entities.

**Social media enables source accessibility.** When journalists can interview families connected to suicide victims, it can inspire empathy and influence the overall coverage. This interaction is often made possible through social media platforms, which allow the journalist to reach out. J.P. said, "I had really, really wanted to talk to the victim's mom, and I'd been Facebook messaging her, and a family friend, and we'd been getting close to her consenting to an interview." Source access is also enabled for journalists when the family is posting about the loss online. Participants discussed seeing outspoken family members of the victim post on social media emphasizing their mental health struggles, and in some cases experiences with bullying, which made the journalist more willing to reach out and write a story to provide context for the affected community. J.S. explained their interaction with a family member of a suicide victim online. "His mother had just posted on Facebook; I'd reached out about it. And we ended up doing a story about it, a breaking news story because the mother was so outspoken about it." J.S. highlights a pattern of behavior where the mother is often the most vocal family member of a

suicide victim, and how social media and transparency online makes stories like this possible by connecting the source with the journalist. Before social media created direct access to sources, journalists mainly cold called sources if they could find their phone number or started their investigation by calling the funeral home of the suicide victim to get more information about their loved ones.

**Health professionals provide coverage direction.** Health professionals can guide suicide coverage for journalists when suicide guidelines aren't present in newsrooms. Those working in public health also have considerations when it comes to rhetoric surrounding suicide coverage. Participants were having two very different discussions when it came to the role of public health in suicide coverage. J.P. aligned with the majority, supporting a collaboration between health professionals and journalists when it comes to writing about suicide. “We constantly had discussions both with ourselves in the newsroom but then also mental health providers across the city about how to do this in a responsible way, how to make it a resource and not just a story.” On the other hand, J.P. and J.S. felt strongly in standing their ground against criticism from health professionals and justified breaking guidelines when they believed it was necessary. A commonly disagreed upon guideline is to not include the suicide method, and when journalists chose to mention it, they felt attacked by health professionals who were concerned about contagion from their detailed coverage.

### ***Media organizations***

The following level of the hierarchical model includes the influences within each media operation, including the influence of owners, editors, and peers in the newsroom.

**More mentorship and guidance needed from editors.** New journalists often aren't getting quality mentorship or guidance from editors needed to cover traumatic events. Since



suicide coverage often falls under the breaking news category, journalists new to the field often get thrown into covering these events without preparation. At the time of the interviews, participants in this study had experience in the journalism field ranging from two years to 22 years and both seasoned and newer journalists recalled their experiences early on. S.K. said, “Sometimes it takes an editor too to be like hey, don’t forget to do this, don’t forget to add that box, hey we have this video let’s make sure we add that there.” Participants discussed how being pushed into covering suicide can lead to breaking guidelines because the awareness isn’t always there, and discussions with editors aren’t always possible. K.L. explained the dichotomy in newsrooms between editors and journalists. “I don’t include the method of suicide that’s used, I mean in my own paper that’s been reported and that’s something I disagree with but there’s only so much influence I have as a journalist, I’m not an editor.” K.L. highlighted shared experiences among participants where their own autonomy as a journalist was overshadowed by an editor without explanation, even though their understanding of guidelines differed. Due to the hierarchy in newsrooms, editors typically edit or sign off on a journalist’s story before it is published, which is why the suicide coverage may change from the journalist’s original intent, such as resources being added or removed.

**Limited staff limits conversation.** Limited staff creates shorter conversations about suicide. With more and more newsrooms facing staffing cuts, guidance and discussion on covering sensitive topics like suicide may not be possible. Participants described dramatic changes to staffing and newsroom dynamics even during a short period of time working at a particular newspaper. For example, J.P. gave insight into their staffing when they received a suicide tip. “We found out about it during one of my Saturday reporting shifts and Saturdays in newsrooms, as you know, are empty, very, very slim staffing.” J.P. is explaining a common issue

in newsrooms exacerbated by short staffing, when a tip comes in on a suicide, there aren't many coworkers around to discuss best practices and potential impact. Also, since reports of suicides often fall under the breaking news category, there isn't always time for journalists to consider the suicide guidelines, especially if they don't know they're covering a suicide until they arrive.

**Youth suicide creates discussion.** Journalists are more likely to discuss suicide coverage and seek guidance from editors when the victims they are writing about are adolescents. The younger the suicide victim, the more likely journalists are to consider the impact of their coverage. Participants shared similar thoughts on youth suicide as an incident that made them stop and question the best practices for writing about it. J.S. said, "The age he was, was so shocking to everyone, here in the newsroom ... like, this seems really young." Also, the experience of covering a youth suicide often led to beat coverage on the topic, where journalists created long-form pieces about the issue within their communities. J.P. highlighted their shock after learning a suicide victim's age. "I called my boss and said there's an 11-year-old who killed himself ... what do we know, is it news that this happened, potentially, but how do we frame the story in a way that actually pushes it forward." Of all the types of suicide, participants like J.P. noticed youth suicides most commonly appeared in clusters, which heightened their consideration of contagion. Suicide is already a sensitive subject to write about but having a young victim can add an extra layer of complexity because it increases the likelihood of contagion since adolescents and young adults fall under the population vulnerable to suicide.

### ***Routine Practices***

The following level of the hierarchical model explores the rules that steer media professionals, such as objectivity and deadlines. These routines can explain how journalists do their job, and the expectations of their news organizations.

**Hesitancy toward suicide coverage.** Since many newsrooms don't have specific guidelines for suicide, coverage is often avoided or minimized. When suicide is covered, journalists are often looking to outside resources for guidance. J.B. said, “Our policy was to follow AP guidelines, and to review the guidelines provided by the expert guidelines.” Participants often agreed that avoiding suicide coverage completely is a disservice to the community impacted, but they differed on the best ways to approach this sensitive topic. For example, K.L. said, “Many newsrooms don’t really know how to handle it, and so it’s just handled as, let’s deal with this as minimally as we can.” K.L. is highlighting how the sensitivity and intricacy of topics like suicide are often shied away from in newsrooms unless it’s happening publicly or in a cluster and must be acknowledged. This hesitancy toward suicide can cause conflict between journalists and other professionals because there is no agreed upon standard for writing about suicide or even a consensus that contagion is a concern for this type of coverage.

**Public suicides prompt questions.** Most journalists agree that public suicides need to be covered to answer questions and provide context for the community. The community is more likely to be aware that something happened if the suicide occurs in a public place. K.L. said, “Typically we don’t report on suicide, like individual suicides unless it happens in a public place so like if it’s in a park or in a jail.” Participants acknowledged public suicides are consistently covered because they often have witnesses who want more information about what happened or the suicide itself disrupts the daily lives of others, such as train suicides. S.K. emphasized this when they explained when a suicide happens in a public place with many witnesses, it’s an incident they cannot avoid covering. Covering public suicides can be an opportunity to better the situation and conversation surrounding mental health, especially for witnesses or family members who may be impacted. This is especially true in local journalism, when the community

is asking questions after a tragedy, and journalists are filling in the blanks and providing mental health resources.

**Preventable suicides.** Journalists often cover jail suicides as a newsroom policy because they are public and should be preventable. No matter the manner of death, journalists often cover inmate deaths to help the community understand why this happened in a place that is supposed to be monitored. Jails, much like schools, are places where suicides are supposed to be preventable, which is why participants shared similar sentiment on wanting to follow up and write a story to hold officials accountable. K.L. explained getting an email from the county jail about an inmate suicide. “The cause of death had been suicide, and we would write about that anyway because whenever an inmate dies, we write about it under kind of suspicious circumstances ... then we had noticed this was not the first time.” Through that investigation, K.L. discovered a string of suicides had occurred at that same jail, which led to a larger story on lack of oversight. It’s a journalist’s job to hold officials accountable and that includes those working in jails when an inmate dies or in schools when a student dies, which is why these incidents are reported. On the other hand, if it were a suicide inside a home, that would not be reported.

**Interest in suicide guidance increasing.** Suicide coverage continues to evolve and even without specific suicide guidelines, journalists are looking for guidance to further the discussion. Beyond the language surrounding suicide coverage, journalists are often looking to editors and health professionals to understand this sensitive topic. Since reporting guidelines on suicides are recommendations not requirements, participants varied on how they interpreted them, and how closely they followed or deviated from them. J.B. explained their newsroom policy on suicide. “Our policy was to follow AP guidelines, and to review the guidelines provided by the expert guidelines ... we would always refer to them and follow most of them.” The expert guidelines

J.B. was referring to were from the combined public health, suicide prevention and journalism effort, including the Poynter Institute and the World Health Organization (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). J.P. said, “I don’t think there were any guidelines written down, we definitely referenced AP a lot ... I guess the biggest thing was an editor had to sign off.” Journalists are looking to editors, fellow journalists, health organizations, social media, and personal experience to make decisions on suicide coverage.

**Journalists consider reputation.** Journalists are often concerned about the way suicide coverage reflects on them and their news organization. Whether from a place of concern for the audience or their own reputation, journalists recognize this is a sensitive topic for everyone involved. D.R. said, “When a person decides to die by suicide in a place that needs to be reported, there’s already a feeling of you want to protect the family but at the same time you have to report on it.” Participants discussed various reasons behind their desire to cover suicide thoughtfully but recognized that anything they wrote is not only connected to them as a journalist but also their news organization’s integrity as a whole. J.B. explained their intentions behind suicide coverage. “It’s a thing that makes journalists nervous, and something that changed for me, two things: One, I lost somebody really close to me to suicide, and, secondly, I became more confident in my journalistic abilities.” In a time of social media and digital newspaper access, mistakes in reporting don’t simply disappear, and older versions of stories can resurface even after corrections are made. This adds pressure on journalists and news organizations to balance journalistic ethics during suicide reporting, such as seeking the truth and reporting it with minimizing harm, as the threat of contagion persists.

**Ethics over deadlines.** Journalists in my sample are less concerned about deadlines when it came to suicide coverage because they would rather be ethical than first. Although, suicides

often start as breaking news coverage, once it is confirmed that the incident is a suicide, journalists either don't cover it or take more time to publish the story. S.K. said, "We don't cover every single suicide, we really weigh, what is the value of one, the public's need to know and right to know." Deadlines are critical to journalism because getting information out quickly can be vital to public safety, but participants shared that they were less concerned about deadlines when it came to suicide coverage. For example, J.B. said, "Not letting your editor, or deadline dictate when your story about suicide is done, or your fear about somebody else might get the story before you. Because at the end of the day, those stories last forever online." The desire to be the first to report about the suicide often didn't outweigh the desire to cover this sensitive topic ethically, which can come from the journalist's personal experience, morals, or empathy.

### ***Individuals***

The following level of the hierarchical model encompasses all the content creators, their attributes, and how these characteristics impact media production. An individual journalist's role cannot be fully grasped without considering the various influences impacting their content, such as public health professionals.

**Suggestions not requirements.** Journalists often view guidelines as suggestions rather than requirements and violate them based on personal ethics or connection to suicide. Some journalists who have personal connections to suicide feel they know how to cover the topic sensitively without the need for guidelines. J.S. said, "I've learned is to trust myself, and to push back on people. And what we can report, and what we can say, because if we don't cover this issue, then who will?" A lot of the time, participants are basing their decisions on personal experience with loss when reporting on suicide and feel they can make the call to follow or ignore guidelines. J.B. highlighted their autonomy as a journalist. "There should be guidelines,

and some people who maybe haven't been touched by it or don't know much about it, need these guidelines, but in general like when I write about this stuff, I'm trying to do good." Just like any beat, journalists who consistently cover suicide will have their own set of guidelines they chose to follow based on their experience with the topic.

**Supporting proper suicide rhetoric.** The most agreed upon guideline by journalists when it comes to suicide coverage is the language surrounding it. Since well-known journalistic guidelines like those from the *Associated Press* agree on ways to refer to suicide, journalists rarely disagree or deviate from these practices. Participants not only highlighted the need to write about suicide using specific terms, such as 'died by' versus 'committed' but also talked about it using those terms and educated others when they weren't using the correct language. For example, S.K. said, "Not saying "committing suicide," which is huge and that's something I'll even correct in conversation now, it's like no, "died by," and our conversations with younger reporters and with older reporters." Since there are minimal guidelines for reporting on suicide provided directly from well-known journalistic entities such as the *Associated Press*, the Poynter Institute, and the Society of Professional Journalists, rhetoric is the simplest and most consistent way for journalists to abide by the existing journalistic guidelines unless they pursue referencing more extensive guidelines created as part of a collaborative effort with public health and suicide prevention experts such as *reportingonsuicide.org*. J.S. said, "Some things that we won't deviate from, like the language we use in saying dying by suicide." This change in verbiage often stems from a desire to minimize the stigma surrounding suicide. Journalists are being cautious about their language because certain words and phrases can further stigmatize suicide, undermine prevention efforts, and contribute to contagion. For example, phrases like 'died by' or 'killed himself/herself' are more inclusive with other forms of loss. Participants in this study shared

concerns about the impact sensational wording could have on grieving families of suicide victims, the possibility of contagion on vulnerable members of the public, as well as how it could poorly reflect on them as journalists or their news organization.

**Resistance toward suicide method guideline.** The most consistent guideline journalists in my sample resisted following is the one saying not to mention the method of suicide in the media coverage because they felt this information was necessary or valid. While the rhetoric surrounding suicide is often agreed upon, including the method in coverage often depends on the nature of the suicide. J.B. said, “Generally, I follow the guideline of not reporting on how the person died, but that is the guideline that I have not followed in a couple of stories.” Participants were divided on the decision to include suicide method in their coverage with some agreeing it should never be mentioned because of contagion, and others feeling it is necessary for context and furthering the narrative. J.S. agrees with the suicide rhetoric guideline but disagrees with the method guideline in certain cases. “We sometimes will deviate like when it comes to describing the method used, and that really depends on the story that’s used, and what’s going on.” Detailed reporting, particularly describing the method has been linked to suicide contagion because it can inspire already vulnerable audience members to complete their own suicide using the same method in the story. This is part of the reason public health organizations, such as the World Health Organization worked with suicide prevention experts and journalistic entities to create guidelines for journalists to follow when reporting on sensitive topics like suicides (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). However, journalists often struggle with the recommendation to leave out suicide method because they feel it’s censoring important information that they believe the public should know about.



**Critique creates guideline resistance.** Journalists are less likely to cover suicide in the manner that public health experts want them to cover it. This criticism usually happens when journalists include the suicide method in their coverage to provide context for the community. The participants who are pushing back against reporting guidelines for suicide often had negative interactions with health professionals. These journalists are aware of contagion but are using their own judgement and connection to the topic to follow or resist guidelines. J.B. explained their dilemma trying to balance public health and journalism when reporting on suicide. “I was trying to be extremely ethical and careful, and there’s always something that they seem to not like ... and my argument is, do you understand why journalists shy away from reporting on this topic?” J.B. goes on to explain their interactions with public health professionals, “They critique every word, like you’re going to say something wrong, and that’s going to make people go out and kill themselves.” J.B. was among the participants who felt strongly that suicides should be reported on to release stigma and are concerned about giving up some of their autonomy by letting others dictate how they should do their job. J.S. shared similar views with J.B. about critique they received from health professionals. “As reporters, like it can be very scary covering this, because a lot of times you hear that you’re going to harm someone. Especially when you’re covering kids, that’s even scarier.”

**Personal experience creates empathy.** Within this study, formal suicide coverage training wasn’t being given in participants’ newsrooms; it was usually knowledge gained from personal or in the field experience. The decision to cover suicide is often out of the journalist’s hands or happens because they’re individually interested in pursuing the story. J.S. said, “From this story, it like kind of put youth suicide on the radar for me, even though I was doing like a bigger project at the time.” Participants agreed that journalists are not taught in academia or

prepared by their news organizations prior to covering their first suicide. Instead, learning how to cover suicide comes from personal loss or an interest that grows after covering the topic. K.L. said, “If you’re going to write about it, it needs to be in a way that’s taking into consideration the impacts of it and the scope ... just putting it in the paper can have an effect on a community.”

**Seeking suicide training.** In this study, when suicide coverage training did occur for participants, it often happened later in their careers, or they were seek it out themselves. Also, their newsrooms either avoided covering suicide altogether or it was limited to discussions and field experience. K.L. said, “I was not given any formal training, I just talked about it one-on-one with my editors about how we approach it and what our guidelines are.” Participants most likely to have gone through suicide training were either editors or journalists covering suicide as a beat, particularly youth suicides after a cluster happened in the community. J.P. was among those who pursued suicide guidelines and further training on their own. “I went to a training with the National Press Foundation and NAMI was there and we talked a lot about ethical guidelines when reporting on suicide.”

**Lasting suicide impact on journalists.** Suicide coverage can have a lasting impact on journalists and lead to mental health beat coverage and longer-form community projects. Suicide coverage often sticks with journalists in a way that other types of stories do not. Participants who choose to cover suicide consistently are connected to the topic and recognize responsible reporting can literally saving lives. S.K. reflects on the weight of covering suicide. “I remember thinking this shouldn't affect me the way it does, it doesn't seem to affect other people, and did I do this right ... and not really getting that support.”

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how journalists report on suicides with or without following recommended reporting guidelines, and to explore the influences on the way they cover this sensitive topic.

### **Promoting wellbeing and avoiding harm through positive journalistic practices**

Shoemaker and Reese (2014) argue journalists' content can be influenced by outside social institutions, such as health organizations, and claim the more powerful the outside entity, the more likely a collaborative relationship will develop. One of those powerful outside entities, the World Health Organization, teamed up with several other health and journalism agencies including the Poynter Institute to create recommendations for reporting on suicides to help minimize the risk of contagion. These guidelines recommend journalists focus the narrative on the lives of the victims, avoid speculating on the cause, and provide resources for those impacted by the suicide (Reporting on Suicide, 2015). Another powerful influence within the journalism realm, the *Associated Press* (2018) states reporting guidelines should avoid using sensational language. Also, the Society of Professional Journalists (2018) states caution in reporting suicides is deserved by all people. My study's findings suggest participants agree with and follow these guidelines when reporting on suicide. Participants generally felt in order to minimize harm on the public, detail had to be minimized and context and mental health resources needed to be included in the coverage. These guidelines are important because of the growing body of evidence supporting the negative impact insensitive coverage can have on vulnerable members of the audience. Respondents spoke about noticing suicide clusters leading to more suicides in their communities, especially among youth which is among the vulnerable population susceptible

to suicide contagion. A similar study by Gandy (2014) argues suicide reporting guidelines have been administered universally but with mixed success rates and guideline adoption might be more successful if journalists collaborated more with health professionals. My study supported this idea that more collaboration with health professionals, and more awareness of existing reporting guidelines for suicide beyond the guidelines provided directly from journalistic entities, can provide direction for journalists covering suicide and minimize the risk of contagion on vulnerable populations. However, despite the influence of these social institutions and the journalists within my study generally agreeing with the reporting guidelines, we are still seeing examples of potentially harmful suicide coverage. Based on my research, I believe this is happening because many journalists still see the guidelines and recommendations as suggestions not requirements and make their own judgements when reporting on suicides. Within the journalism guidelines from the Poynter Institute, the *Associated Press* and the Society of Professional Journalists, there is agreement on how to refer to suicide but not on what to omit from suicide coverage. Furthermore, based on the individual journalist's experience with the subject, those deviating often feel they know best, and they're focused on seeking the truth and reporting it above all else. In my study, journalists who had experience with loss either followed the guidelines strictly or deviated from them on a case-by-case basis based on their personal ethics. I do believe greater support from outside institutions would lead to more widespread adherence, and increased focus within newsrooms on training related to suicide coverage would also promote guideline understanding.

### **Changing journalistic norms surrounding suicide to minimize stigma**

Award-winning journalists from the Subramanian (2014) study encouraged sensitive wording and providing positive mental health information in suicide coverage. In that study,

journalists attributed their story's success to the support of their editors, exposure to mental illness, and empathy (Subramanian, 2014). My study's findings suggest participants share a growing awareness of and interest in suicide reporting guidelines, which often stems from their own personal connection to loss. Interviewees also concurred with Gould (2001) that the existence of suicide contagion should no longer be questioned, and research efforts should be refocused on story components that prevent contagion. For example, K.L. said, "I'm very aware of the idea of suicide contagion, and the fact that reporting on suicide in a sensational way or romanticizing or glamorizing it can cause more people to consider suicide." An Etzersdorfer and Sonneck (1998) study examined a popular method for people to kill themselves via subways in the 1970s. This led the Austrian Association of Suicide Prevention to develop and launch media guidelines, which created a change in reporting and saw suicides by subway decrease (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998). In my study, participants shared the desire to report on suicide in not only an accurate manner but also an ethical manner, recognizing the powerful influence the media can have on vulnerable members of the public, especially when it comes to sensitive topics. Participants discussed their connection to the communities they're reporting on, and the personal responsibility they felt to inform the community while covering this topic carefully. For example, D.R. said, "You empathize with the person that's gone through this and has done this ... but at the same time you have to hold a responsibility to help the community that experienced it along with them." Journalistic practices, such as informing without sensationalizing, and including local crisis hotlines can help avoid contagion (Reporting on Suicide, 2015).

To encourage more sensitive reporting within the journalism industry, I believe based on my research, the discussion should start at the academic level with young journalists being taught in school about these reporting guidelines and how to cover suicide safely before they're thrown

into the field and likely covering it for the first time under the umbrella of breaking news or deadline. Also, newsrooms should have specific policies in place for how to cover sensitive topics like suicides with an emphasis on minimizing harm to avoid the possibility of contagion among vulnerable members of the public. There's a big difference between simply being told how to cover suicide and understanding why it's important to cover it a certain way because of the negative impacts it can have on the audience.

### **Suicide rhetoric guideline agreement and method guideline pushback**

The Australian government was concerned about contagion caused by media and decided to fund a project to study suicide framing (Pirkis, Blood, Skehan & Dare, 2010). In the study, Pirkis, Blood, Skehan and Dare (2010) found contagion increased when stories were sensationalized and described the suicide method in detail. The language journalists use when writing about suicide, and the decision to leave out the suicide method, are consistent in both journalistic and health organization guidelines. However, within my study, participants passionately disagreed on one of those major guidelines. I saw participants agree with the suicide rhetoric guideline to help avoid contagion, but a debate occurred among them about the guideline to avoid mentioning the suicide method. For example, J.B. said, "Experts will often tell you just to vaguely say someone took their life. But I thought it was important in that instance to say how they did it ... I have gotten in pretty intense fights with experts." Another participant, J.S., agreed with the suicide rhetoric guideline but disagreed with the method guideline in certain cases. "We sometimes will deviate like when it comes to describing the method used, and that really depends on the story that's used, and what's going on."

Based on my research, I believe journalists get especially caught up on the decision to include or leave out the suicide method for several reasons. First, if it happened in a public place,

the community is likely already aware and asking questions that may make a journalist feel it's necessary to include the method. Secondly, if it involved a young person or inmate, it could encourage journalists to include the method, in an effort to hold school districts and jails accountable. Also, the role of social media in youth suicides can lead to suicide clusters in a community and if it's becoming a pattern, journalists can argue the community needs to know about it. Lastly, if it involved a gun, it raises questions about firearm access, which journalists might feel is vital information to mention to show how often suicides happen this way, and to raise awareness to help prevent suicides by firearm in the future. However, despite the exceptions journalists may exhibit when citing method in their suicide coverage, the way they write about the method is key to avoid contagion because the more detailed the manner, the more likely at-risk members of the public can copy that behavior. Within my study, some participants felt the guidelines surrounding method were too strict and used their own personal experience and ethics to deviate from them in certain cases.

### **Journalists seeking suicide guidance from editors and social media**

With continued advancements in technology, modern day news stories can now be accessed online with websites playing a huge role in providing vulnerable people with information about suicide (Arendt & Scherr, 2016). Arendt and Scherr (2016) argue search engines are more commonly being used to seek suicide-related information, which can be both helpful and harmful depending on the audience. My study suggests journalists are mainly looking to editors, journalistic and health organizations, as well as social media when making decisions about suicide coverage. In my study, the desire for guidance on suicide coverage often stemmed from the lack of training given to journalists in newsrooms on sensitive topics. For example, K.L. said, "I was not given any formal training, I just talked about it one-on-one with

my editors about how we approach it and what our guidelines are.” Participants also discussed how social media platforms and transparency online made stories about suicide in their communities possible by connecting the journalist with relevant sources. Another study by McManus (1997) proposed the need for a structural framework for journalism ethics that includes the growing influence of outside forces, such as social media platforms.

Based on my research, beyond more training, resources for reporting on suicide need to be more accessible for journalists looking for guidance, especially within newsrooms. The reality of deadlines and breaking news can make it difficult to find and follow guidelines. Furthermore, if journalists aren’t given direction on where to look for these guidelines, they’re more likely to lean on journalistic sources they’re familiar with such as the *Associated Press* or Poynter Institute, and often their recommendations on suicide are minimal or ambiguous. Meanwhile, sources like Reporting on Suicide (2015) consult leading experts from the fields of public health, suicide prevention, and journalism to create their detailed guidelines, which is something more journalists need to be aware of. Although well-known journalistic entities contributed to the creation of these newer suicide reporting guidelines from *reportingonsuicide.org*, journalists are not as familiar with these extensive guidelines. Another helpful source for journalists reporting on sensitive subjects is the SPJ Ethics Hotline, which has a phone number and email to reach out to with ethical questions, and the ethics committee will listen and coach journalists using the principles outlined in the Society's Code of Ethics, including to minimize harm. My study suggests more discussions about suicide need to be happening in newsrooms with editors leading the charge. Also, specific guidelines related to suicide need to be readily available in newsrooms whether it’s specific to the news organization or a compiled list of online resources for journalists to refer to.



## **Celebrity suicide coverage is sensationalized and contagious**

An international study found stories about celebrity suicides were about 14 percent more likely to exhibit a copycat effect, known as contagion (Stack, 2003). Stack (2003) also argues contagion is higher from newspaper coverage of suicides than television coverage. A South Korean study had similar findings that high media coverage of celebrity suicides was associated with an increase in public suicide rates (Choi & Oh, 2016). In that study, Choi and Oh (2016) suggest their findings shed light on the importance of media policy to prevent contagion. Even though my study involved local journalists, the findings align with both these studies in that participants felt national suicide coverage, specifically of celebrities, was more likely to disregard guidelines and contribute to contagion. For example, S.K. said, “You read those stories and it’s like no one needed to know this, I think the higher profile the person is, the less humanity we think about.” Another study found a spike in U.S. suicides during the four months following the death of Robin Williams, and that dramatic increase paralleled the same suicide method Williams used (Fink, 2018). The connections people make with celebrities through media can lead to one-sided relationships known as parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and if the audience relates to a celebrity who kills themselves, the risk of contagion increases. According to Bandura (2001), the more steps given to at-risk members of the public, the more likely they will learn the modeling described in suicide coverage and kill themselves, which is an example of mimicking behavior related to the celebrities in these news stories.

My study suggests local journalists feel national journalists’ coverage of suicides is most likely to violate reporting guidelines and contribute to contagion. Generally, local journalists feel like they’re being ethical in their decisions surrounding suicide coverage. For a suicide to make national headlines, it’s often a high-profile incident or person, such as a celebrity, and the

personal details of their life are already public knowledge. When a celebrity dies by suicide, the possibility of contagion intensifies and becomes more widespread with a larger audience consuming the story. Method is often included in a detailed manner in this kind of coverage with more people asking questions and wanting to know exactly what happened to the celebrity (Fink, 2018). The role of social media in celebrity suicide coverage can be both helpful and harmful because of the easy access to stories online, leading to more comments and shares. If that story follows guidelines and includes resources, social media is beneficial. However, if the story details the suicide method and uses sensational language, then the copycat effect only increases for vulnerable audience members.

Based on my study and literature review supporting the existence of contagion, I believe reporting guidelines on suicide should be more strongly and thoroughly enforced in newsrooms, with an emphasis on raising awareness about contagion. If editors at the national level promote these sensitive practices within their news organizations, while journalists at the local level are being taught about and directed to these guidelines, and aspiring journalists are being educated on them in school, then contagion is being minimized at all levels. The more journalists, editors, and news organizations that are aware of contagion and the importance of suicide reporting guidelines to prevent it, the better the journalism field will be at serving the public in an ethical manner.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

As stated by the Society of Professional Journalists (2018), caution in reporting suicides is deserved by all people. This study analyzed the ways journalists report on suicides with or without following recommended reporting guidelines, as well as explored the influences and ethical decisions journalists make when covering suicide. The findings revealed unanimous agreement for the language surrounding suicide and the need to report on it. However, there were both positive and negative perceptions of the suicide reporting guidelines with pushback against minimizing detail and excluding the suicide method. My study adds to a growing body of evidence that journalists are familiar with the concern about contagion and need more resources and guidance on the topic. Because of that, journalists fall back on their own beliefs, which creates a divide in how suicide is covered in the media. Furthermore, the guidelines that do exist are disparate and unenforced, which leads to a group of journalists who are unintentionally promoting contagion. These findings echo Stack (2003) who suggests members of the media can decrease suicide contagion in vulnerable populations by following careful and concise reporting guidelines on suicide. Participants attributed their negative attitudes toward the reporting guidelines to various reasons including the guidelines being too strict, basing decisions on their own personal connections to suicide, desire to hold entities accountable, need to be transparent, the location of the suicide, or a pattern of suicides within their community.

The hierarchical model framework suggests various influences shape media content, which can explain why journalists create content the way they do. Influences such as routine news practices affect the quality of content journalists produce, as well as the reporting guidelines they consider. The media also has relationships with outside institutions that can

influence their content, such as the audience, and health organizations. Shoemaker & Reese (2014) suggest the more powerful an outside entity, the more likely a collaborative relationship will happen. That is consistent with Gandy (2014) who claims guideline uptake could be more influential if journalists collaborated with health professionals. Interviews showed participants hold their media organizations, editors, and fellow journalists' perspectives in high regard and seek their guidance on suicide coverage. These findings suggest suicide reporting guidelines need to be developed as part of a collaborative effort, and newsroom peers are crucial to the implementation of those guidelines throughout the journalism industry.

### **Limitations**

Within my study, there were some limitations that need to be addressed. The sample of participants focused on Colorado newspaper journalists covering suicide due to resource constraints, which limited the population size as well as location of coverage, and may have failed to capture different perspectives on these issues. Also, structured interviews are not flexible in nature, meaning as the researcher, I had to follow an interview schedule and avoid asking impromptu questions. When it comes to purposeful sampling, it's a process that is susceptible to researcher bias because it relies on the judgment of the researcher, as well as their personal interpretation of the data, which is why multiple theoretical frameworks were used to allow me to triangulate my analysis from multiple perspectives.

### **Future Research**

Because of the limited scope of this study, future research into how journalists across different states and media follow or do not follow suicide reporting guidelines is needed. Furthermore, studying any shared acceptance or resistance among journalists toward particular guidelines (as seen among participants in regard to suicide rhetoric agreement and suicide

method guideline pushback) would determine if this study's findings are reflective of the journalism industry as a whole. Meanwhile, future research into youth suicide clusters and the impact of social media in spreading that information within vulnerable populations is required to understand how social media could potentially lead to widespread suicide contagion. Also, given the contagious impact suicide coverage can have on vulnerable members of the public, further research is necessary to understand how journalists consider reporting guidelines to help prevent contagion in this area. As health professionals continue to call for changes in suicide reporting practices, research into the degree in which the guidelines are minimizing suicide contagion also needs to be studied. The desire to report on suicides and minimize harm shown by journalists highlights the importance of improving how suicide is covered and treated in the media, as well as the urgency to destigmatize the topic. Collaborative efforts between journalistic and public health entities appear to produce the best results when it comes to guideline understanding and adoption, which not only better serves the public but could also lead to more acceptance rather than resistance toward the reporting guidelines.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Interview Questions

Prompt: Today we will be talking about covering sensitive topics in reporting, journalism ethics and guidelines. I want you to consider your previous coverage dealing with a local suicide in the state of Colorado.

1. Why did you want to become a journalist?
2. In your opinion, what is the guiding principle for journalists when covering suicide and why?

PROBE: Accuracy, objectivity, timeliness, etc.

3. What guidelines or Code of Ethics do you adhere to when reporting?

PROBE: AP Style, SPJ Code of Ethics, etc.?

4. Do you have guidelines specific to coverage of suicides? If so, what is your understanding of the guidelines for this topic?

5. What training were you given prior to covering sensitive stories like these in the field?

6. Can you talk about when you covered [insert specific event]?

PROBE: How did you get assigned to this story?

PROBE: What ethical questions came to your mind while covering this?

7. In what ways did you consider the effect coverage of this story would have on audiences?

8. How did you apply your journalism sensitivity guidelines and training when covering this story?

9. What did you learn from the experience of covering suicide and would you do anything differently when covering stories like this in the future?

10. Do you feel that journalists covering suicide for the first time are getting the proper resources and mentorship?

11. Do you think it is important to leave out specific details when reporting on suicide?

PROBE: Details about the suicide note, etc.

12. Do journalists do enough to consider the sensitivity of reporting on victims and the families involved in suicide coverage?

13. Do you think coverage of sensitive topics like suicide can have an impact on future incidents?

14. Do you think there is an issue with journalists sensationalizing stories for personal or financial reasons?

15. Are you familiar with the “copycat effect?” If so, in what ways do you think journalists can report on suicide to have minimal negative impacts on the public?

PROBE: What are some key guidelines they should be aware of?

16. Is there anything else you’d like to add that we didn’t cover?

Debriefing: According to Reporting on Suicide (2015), “More than 50 research studies worldwide have found that certain types of news coverage can increase the likelihood of suicide in vulnerable individuals. The magnitude of the increase is related to the amount, duration, and prominence of coverage.”

## APPENDIX 2

### Participants

Journalists interviewed		
Participant	Minutes	Date
J.R.	22	6/10/2019
S.K.	56	6/11/2019
K.L.	18	6/19/2019
J.P.	42	12/10/2019
D.R.	31	12/12/2019
J.S.	25	12/18/2019
J.B.	34	2/13/2020