

Reporting suicide

THE reporting of suicide – which had been covered within the Intrusion into Grief or Shock rules – became a freestanding clause in its own right in 2016.

This was an acknowledgment of the risks of simulative acts, advanced by organisations dedicated to preventing suicide. The clause stresses the need to take care to avoid excessive detail of the method used, which might prompt or encourage copycat cases. At the same time, it strikes a balance by protecting the media’s right to report legal proceedings, such as inquests.

The “excessive detail rule”, which codified a practice already followed by many editors, was first introduced in 2006. This means that it might be relevant to report that an individual died by hanging, but including details of the ligature or point of suspension is likely to be considered excessive. Other examples of potentially excessive detail include:

- The quantity of pills taken in an overdose;
- The steps taken to administer a poison to an individual;
- The position of wounds on a body and how they were incurred.

Exceptions could be made if editors could demonstrate that publication was in the public interest.

WHAT THE CODE SAYS

When reporting suicide, to prevent simulative acts care should be taken to avoid excessive detail of the method used, while taking into account the media’s right to report legal proceedings.

A public interest exemption may be available. [See Page 120.](#)

As the aim is to avoid copycat acts, the rule would – under the spirit of the Code – apply to reporting attempted suicide and to any article appearing to romanticise or glamorise suicide, or which suggests a method is quick, easy or painless or makes suicide appear to be a solution to adversity.

A novel method of suicide that has not been seen before and which might inspire simulative acts requires careful reporting, and there is evidence that the press has willingly cooperated in restricting the level of detail in such cases, while still fulfilling the requirement to report important stories.

The suicide of a celebrity, with whom many people identify, while newsworthy, also requires vigilance on the part of editors.

Press coverage of suicide clusters in a specific geographic

location was highlighted when more than 20 young people took their lives in and around Bridgend. Some parents, politicians and police blamed media coverage for possibly triggering later cases. Faced with such a story, editors must balance the public's right to know with the need not to exacerbate the situation.

When a young person dies by suicide, friends might go online to comment, and journalists should consider carefully whether to publish comments which romanticise suicidal behaviour, or which might suggest that suicide is a way of responding to the difficulties that people might be experiencing. Likewise, social media posts by someone who subsequently took their own life should also be treated with caution for the same reason. And there should be careful consideration when allowing comments on reports of suicides. Headlines and push notifications that reflect these points also require care.

In Bridgend there were also concerns about the cumulative effect of media inquiries on bereaved families. Intrusion into Grief or Shock is now a standalone clause in the Code and must be taken into account when reporting suicide. Taking the two clauses together, editors face a twin test: they must publish with sensitivity and avoid excessive detail.

Some readers may find reports of suicide distressing. On such stories, editors might choose, as a matter of good practice, to include contact details or links to sources of support, such as Samaritans.

IPSO has produced guidance on reporting suicide, which

can be found here: www.ipso.co.uk/media/1725/suicide-journo-v7-online-crazes.pdf

Key points include:

- The Code does not seek to prevent reporting of suicide - there is a public interest in raising awareness of this significant public health issue;
- Care should be taken to limit the risk of vulnerable people being influenced by coverage of suicide and choosing to end their own lives;
- Journalists should be prepared to justify the inclusion of any detail of the method of suicide in any report;
- Particular care should be taken when reporting on unusual methods of suicide;
- The fact of someone's death is not private. Deaths affect communities as well as individuals and are a legitimate subject for reporting;
- Journalists should show sensitivity towards people in a state of grief or shock. Reporting should be handled sensitively, and appropriate consideration should be given to the wishes and needs of the bereaved - see also Clause 4 Intrusion into Grief or Shock.

IPSO also noted that there is a growing body of evidence showing the benefits of sensitive coverage of suicide, including interviews with people who have overcome a crisis. It can actually assist vulnerable people by encouraging them to seek help and reducing the stigma around the subject.

The Code and IPSO do not seek to limit the language that journalists can use to describe suicide but all those involved

in reporting these tragic cases should be aware that language continues to evolve and must decide how it can best be used in any particular incident. For example, the Suicide Act 1961 decriminalised the act of suicide. Many organisations working in the area of suicide prevention are concerned about the use of the phrase “commit suicide” and argue that it stigmatises suicide and causes feelings of shame that prevent people from reaching out for help. They prefer to refer to a person’s decision to take their own life, or to say they died by suicide.

Samaritans has also produced guidance for reporting suicide, which is not binding but can be helpful for journalists. It is found here: www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/.

The regulator has accepted complaints from third parties, as well as from close families or friends.

Reporting inquests

In a free society it is of fundamental importance for the press to be able to report on inquests into the deaths of fellow citizens. IPSO’s own guidance on reporting deaths and inquests says there is a public interest in the reporting of inquests, which are public events. It can be found here: www.ipsa.co.uk/media/1490/deaths-journo_v3.pdf

While requiring editors to take care to avoid excessive detail, the clause protects the media’s right to report inquests and other hearings by adding “...while taking into account the media’s right to report legal proceedings”.

This applies particularly to inquests, where details are given in evidence and often need to be reported to provide a clear and accurate account of issues that are very much in the public interest. This means editors must strike a fine balance in their coverage. In addition to guarding against excessive detail that might result in a simulative act, editors must also exercise judgment to avoid including gratuitous detail that might intrude on grief.

A reporter’s natural instinct is to give a full account of proceedings but Clause 5 requires great care in selecting what to include in a story and in deciding what level of detail is excessive.

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An online report of an inquest included too much detail about a woman's overdose. The suicide had involved an unusual method but the report described the substance, the amount taken, what this was mixed with, the approximate cost of the substance, the amount that constituted a "lethal dose" and where it had been purchased.

The complainant, who was the woman's sister-in-law, said the level of detail made it easy for individuals to understand how they could take their own lives using the method described. She was particularly concerned as such information was difficult to find online because of the little-known method used.

IPSO said the article had been so detailed that it would help an individual to copy the method. This was concerning when the article related to a relatively unusual method of suicide, as there was a risk of increasing the awareness of this among the population.

[Dayman v Northampton Chronicle & Echo:
www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=04394-18](http://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=04394-18)

In contrast, another newspaper's report of the same inquest, which did not include the same level of detail, was judged to have complied with the Code.

The article named the substance the woman had used and also included the concentration of it in her blood. However, it did not include any details that might support an individual in carrying out a simulative act, such as the amount of the substance required, and how it could be obtained or administered.

[Dayman v Gloucestershire Echo:
www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=04393-18](http://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=04393-18)

In some cases, editors might successfully argue that publication of greater detail was in the public interest or was otherwise justified for a specific reason.

A family complained that "graphic and excessive detail" in a report of an inquest into the death of a scientist who had taken his life was an intrusion into the family's grief and could encourage simulative acts of suicide.

IPSO said that inquests are public hearings and newspapers play an important role in informing readers about evidence heard during proceedings, which is expressly recognised within the Code. However, IPSO made clear that the publication of gratuitous detail could constitute an intrusion into grief and therefore breach Clause 4.

In this case the details heard at the inquest had been presented in a factual and non-sensational way. In addition, there was a justification for the inclusion of the details in the article, which explained why some evidence appeared to raise a question about whether a third party had been involved in the man's death. There was no breach of Clauses 4 or 5.

[Smyth v Oxford Mail:
www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=14070-16](http://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=14070-16)

Sometimes the story requires more detail to fulfil the requirement of effectively reporting inquest proceedings. A newspaper was accused of including excessive detail when it reported the position of a shotgun in a man's death.

IPSO did not uphold the complaint. It said the detail was expressly cited by the coroner as key to her conclusion that it had been an intentional act, despite the family's disagreement.

The inclusion of this information served an important purpose in explaining why the coroner had come to this decision. Indeed, the coroner had stated that because of the placement of the gun, she “[could] not see an alternative explanation”. It was not, therefore, excessive.

[Hartley v Lancaster Guardian:](#)

www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=01983-14

The location where a suicide took place could be considered to be a detail of the method used. A mother complained that there was excessive detail in an inquest report that gave the height and name of the local viaduct that her daughter fell from and also reported that she had accessed the viaduct through local woods.

IPSO said the location of a suicide might constitute a detail of the method used. In this case, the report of the incident did not include a level of detail that was excessive. The additional details, including how the complainant's daughter reached the viaduct, also did not constitute excessive detail.

[Young v Teesside Live:](#)

www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=04850-19

Even consent from a relative would not necessarily absolve editors from responsibility under the “excessive detail” rule. The PCC accepted a third-party complaint that a magazine article contained too much detail, even though it was by the

sister of a man who had taken his own life. The case was resolved without going to adjudication.

[Brown v She magazine:](#)

www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html?article=NTE10Q