

# The Impact of Media Reporting on Suicide

## Launch New Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide

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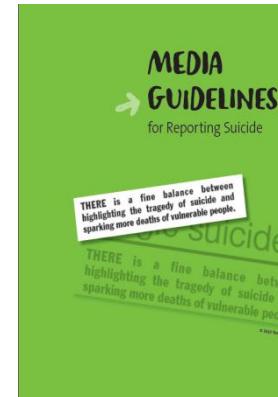


# **Increased understanding of the importance of media guidelines for reporting of suicide among journalists**

*“I would be careful not to go into graphic description about the mode of the suicide because I think that’s voyeuristic and ultimately unhelpful”*

Anne Dempsey,

Freelance journalist, Ireland



*“Reporting on suicide is one of the most difficult issues facing journalists. These guidelines are here to help, by providing reporters with the information they need to cover cases of suicide or self-harm responsibly. They don’t aim to censor the media or limit its freedoms. Instead, they seek to help journalists deal with many dilemmas on reporting suicide and assist the public in understanding the complexity of the problem”*

Carl O’Brien, Social Affairs

Correspondent, The Irish Times

# Historical evidence of contagion of suicide

**1774:** "The Sorrows of Jung Werther" – JW Von Goethe

- Following publication of the novel, indications for imitative suicides among young men in Germany, and in Denmark and Italy – "The Werther Effect"



**1962:** Marilyn Monroe

- 12% increase in suicide in the month following her death by suicide.

**1988:** TV film of railway suicide of a 19-year old male student

- A tv film showing the railway suicide of a young men was followed by a 175% increase in railway suicides in young men over 70 days after broadcasting.

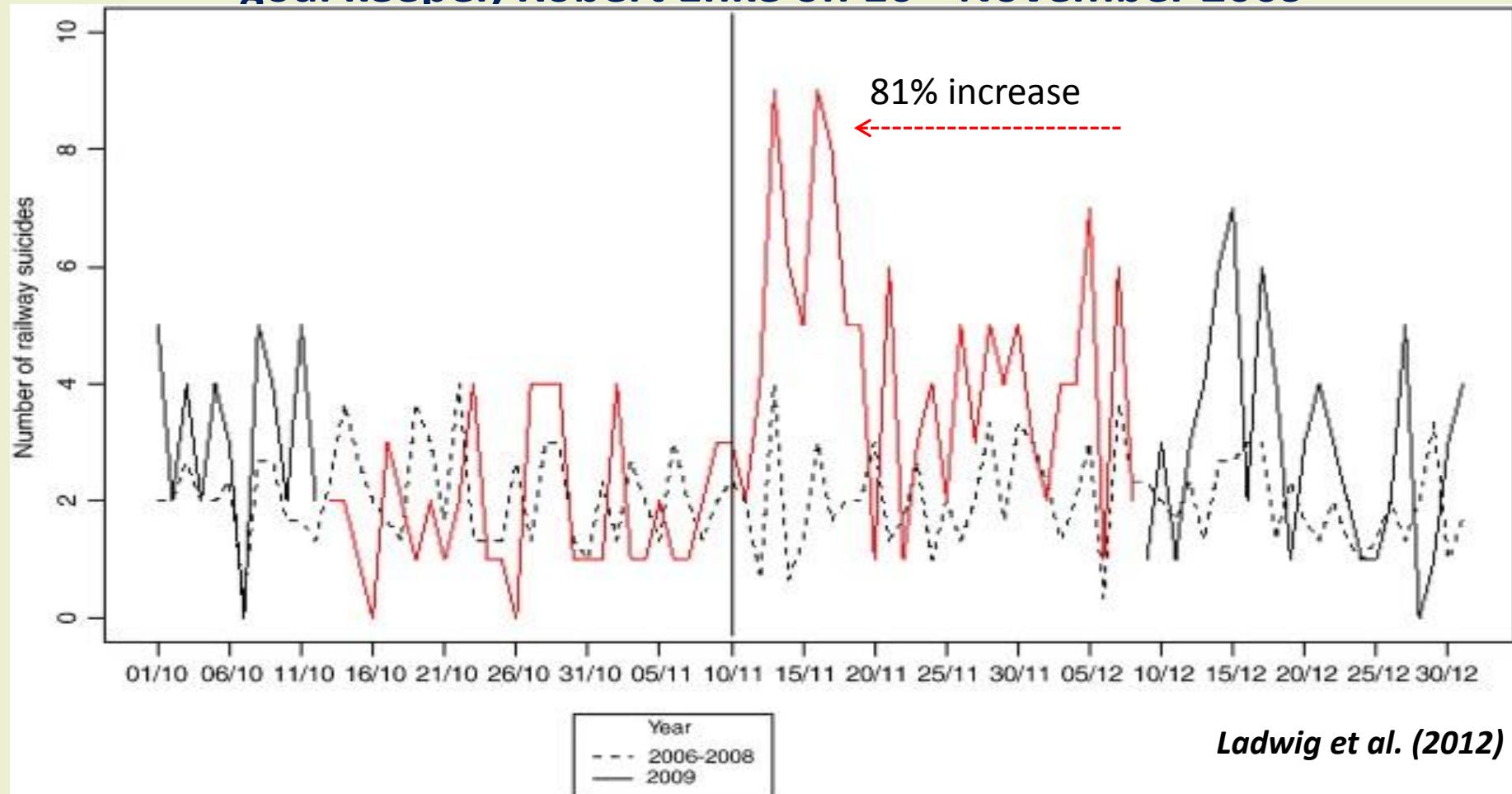
Phillips, 1974; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988; Halgin et al, 2006

# **Outcomes of international research in terms of impact of media coverage on suicide**

- Research consistently shows evidence for the impact of sensationalised media coverage on suicide (41 studies)
- The impact is greater on people with similar gender-age characteristics as the deceased, and when celebrities are involved
- Several studies show that copycat effects of media reporting are primarily found for vulnerable people, such as people with depression and those who have engaged in self-harm
- Protective effects of media coverage through newspaper blackouts, reducing the quantity of reporting, improving the quality of reporting and addressing positive mental health topics (6 studies)

*Varnik et al, 2012; Niederkrotenthaler et al, 2012; Stack, 2005*

# Significant increase of railway suicides after the suicide of German goal keeper, Robert Enke on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2009



In addition to the short term increase in railway suicides, Hegerl et al (2013) identified a long-term effect: 19% increase in railway suicides in the two years after the suicide by Robert Enke



National Suicide  
Research Foundation

## German goalkeeper kills self by stepping in front of train, police say

November 13, 2009 1:53 pm EST

**Germany stunned as national goalkeeper Robert Enke commits suicide**

By SPORTSMAIL REPORTER

Last updated at 12:15 PM on 11th November 2009



# **Positive impact of national implementation of media guidelines on suicides**

- Implementation of media guidelines for reporting of suicide in Austria; systematic approach and reinforcement implementation of both national and regional media
- Significant pre-post implementation difference; in the year following the introduction of media guidelines a significant decrease in suicides was observed (- 81)
- Significant association between changes in suicide rates and changes in the quantity and quality of media reporting
- Alternative hypotheses were verified, but not confirmed

# **Quality of media reporting of suicide in Ireland in recent years**

- Screening and analysis of the quantity and quality of media reporting of 4 cases of suicide:  
Darren Sutherland (14-09-2009), Gary Speed (27-11-2011),  
Erin and Shannon Gallagher (27-10-2012 and 12-12-2012).
- Media articles recorded by Headline
- Total number of articles screened: 231
- Screening of quality based on criteria in accordance with the media guidelines

# Quality criteria

Sensationalised language? (e.g. suicide “epidemic”, “craze”)

Report located on the front page of the publication?

Was the word “committed” used?

Were photographs of the scene published?

Was the location of the suicide pictured?

Method of suicide detailed? (e.g. hanging, overdose)

Did the article refer to wider issues? (e.g. mental health, interventions)

Did the article include supportive information? (e.g. Helplines, Support websites)

Were the family of the deceased interviewed?

Was there reference to the incident that may have caused the suicide? (e.g. breakdown of marriage, debt)

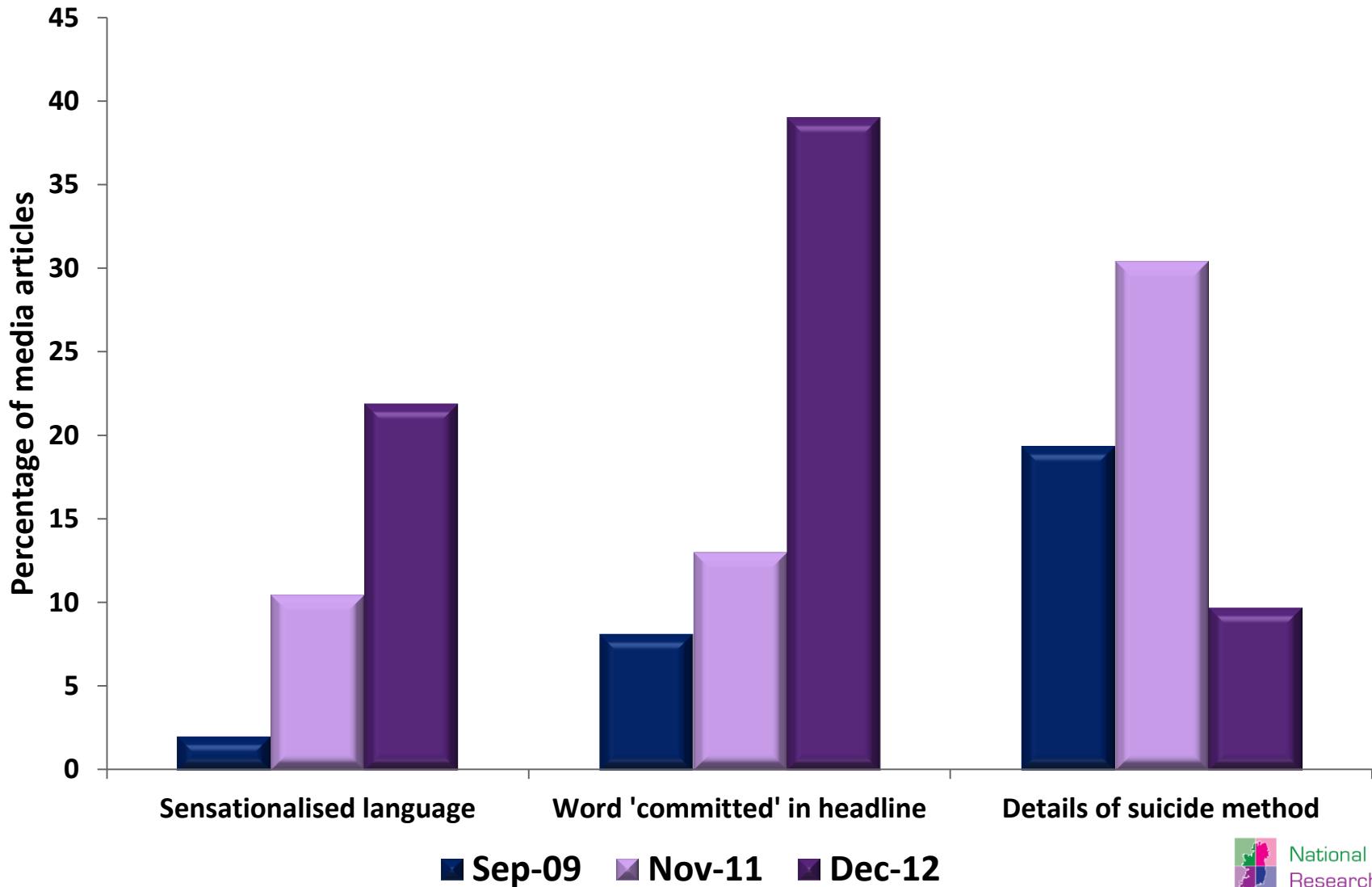
Was community grief emphasised? (e.g. gathering of community to mourn)

What was the time lapse of the report? (e.g. time period between date of death & date report was published)

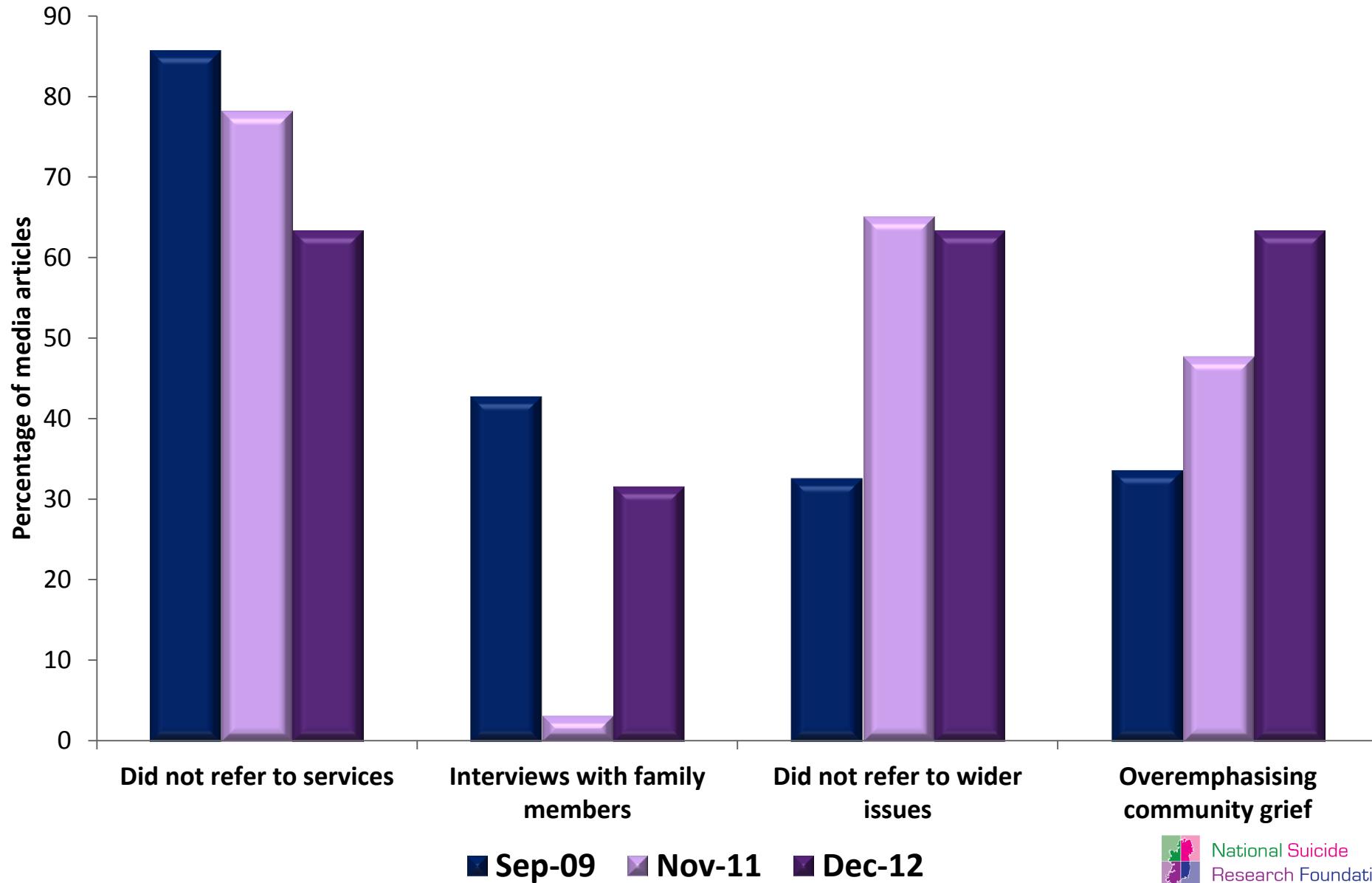
Were statistics on suicide reported in the article?



# Outcomes of quality rating of media articles



# Outcomes of quality rating of media articles



# Examples of inappropriate media reporting

Cyber-bullies  
claimed lives  
of five teens

**DAD OF SUICIDE SISTERS: I WASN'T A GOOD FATHER**

Irish Teen, Commits Suicide After  
Battle With 'Vicious' Cyberbullying



# Recommendations

- Guidelines for the media achieve more compliance if these are developed by an interdisciplinary team, including mental health professionals and media specialists
- Implementation of media guidelines should be conducted using a pro-active approach and working with journalists and editors in training workshops
- Guidelines for reporting of suicidal behaviour should be included in press ethics codes for journalists

# Recommendations

- Media monitoring agencies, such as **Headline** should monitor the implementation of media guidelines for reporting of suicide and reinforce the implementation on an on-going basis
- Positive reinforcement of appropriate reporting of suicide in the media
- Further research into the role of social media in suicide and suicide prevention is needed in order to obtain greater insight into potential dangers and benefits

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