

The Leveson inquiry should encourage more sensitive media coverage of suicides to help prevent copycat deaths.

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Much of the evidence given at the Leveson Inquiry so far has focused on invasion of privacy and harassment by the press and press intrusion into grief and shock. These issues are currently laid out in the Editors' Code of Practice, regulated by the Press Complaints Commission. [Nicola Peckett](#), Head of Communications at Samaritans, looks at how suicides are reported by the media, which hasn't yet come under the spotlight at the Leveson Inquiry, and explains why it should.



Extensive research shows that inappropriate media coverage of suicide can trigger so-called 'copycat' deaths. The first documented copycat suicides occurred back in the 1700s when Goethe published *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and many young men across Europe took their own lives in the same manner as the character Werther in the novel. The 'copycat' effect or suicide contagion is often referred to as the Werther Effect.

While it is never likely to be easy to prove that a particular media report contributed to a particular copycat death, we do know that the cumulative effect of lots of coverage by many outlets can contribute to people dying. That's why Samaritans made a submission to the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press, drawing attention to the need for sensitive and restrained reporting of suicide.

Samaritans started looking at the issue of how the media reports suicide in 1994, when we published our first set of guidelines advising journalists on how to cover this difficult subject matter sensitively and appropriately. Following the tragic events in the Welsh county of Bridgend in 2007/08 when more than 20 young people died by suicide in a period of 18 months, we re-doubled our efforts to work with the media to ensure that the sort of widespread and sensationalist coverage seen then never occurred again.

In our submission, we highlight our success in working with the media on this issue over the past few years as well as our success in working with the Press Complaints Commission. In particular, we highlight our work in limiting the coverage of a series of three suicide pacts involving gassing which have occurred over the past year, and the cooperation of the press in working with us to ensure this method of suicide doesn't spread.

In Japan, where media coverage of a pact in 2008 by the same method was extensive, there were more than 200 deaths in the ensuing four months. In the UK we've had no more than a dozen deaths by this method in the past year and we believe this may have been because of the media's willingness to work with us on covering these deaths responsibly. If deaths by this method in the UK don't increase substantially in the coming months and years, we should all be proud of the effect we can have when we work together on limiting coverage.

Since we made our submission to the Leveson Inquiry, Gary Speed has tragically died. While coverage has been extensive, it has also been sensitive. We don't yet know if more suicides will ensue or if the reverse will happen – that more men will feel it's okay to talk about how they're feeling and to seek help. Some commentators have speculated that coverage of Speed's suicide has been more sensitive precisely because the Leveson Inquiry is ongoing, suggesting a 'Leveson Effect' on media behaviour.

At Samaritans, we believe a 'Leveson Effect' would be very welcome. However, we'd like to see it continue long after the Leveson Inquiry has reached its conclusions. That's why we've made our submission. The progress made to date needs to continue, and achieving sensitive and sensible suicide reporting needs to be a key priority for any future regulator. When lives are at stake, we cannot afford to relax press standards in this area.

Please read our [before posting](#).

About the author

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Nicola Peckett is Samaritans' Head of Communications. She has worked in the not-for-profit sector for nearly 20 years, focusing on health issues. Nicola's previous jobs include communications roles at the cot death charity and at ActionAid, as well as two years in Nigeria as a VSO volunteer on an HIV/AIDS project.

