

Vanja Gomboc,^{*} Polonca Borko,^{**}
Nuša Zadravec Šedivy,^{***} Vita Poštuvan^{****}

Narratives at the Crossroads: Media Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia in the Context of Socio- political Changes in 1959-1999^{*****}

IZVLEČEK

PRIPOVEDI NA RAZPOTJU:
MEDIJSKO POROČANJE O SAMOMORU V SLOVENIJI V KONTEKSTU
DRUŽBENO-POLITIČNIH SPREMENB MED LETOMA 1959 IN 1999

Raziskava preučuje prikazovanje samomora v slovenskih časopisih med letoma 1959 in 1999. To je obdobje, ki ga zaznamujejo globoke družbenopolitične spremembe. Z analizo 1.785 člankov, pridobljenih iz arhivov dveh glavnih časopisov, Dela in Večera, identificira dinamičen odnos med načinom medijskega poročanja o samomoru in razvijajočim se družbenim kontekstom. Ugotovitve nakazujejo na prehod od pretežno provokativnega k bolj preventivnemu poročanju o samomorih skozi desetletja. Kljub splošnemu trendu k bolj preventivnemu poročanju pa je razmerje med provokativnimi in preventivnimi vidiki v posameznih člankih dosledno nakazovalo na prevladovanje provokativnega poročanja, in to v vseh preučevanih obdobjih. V zgodnjih letih, ki so bila predmet preučevanja v okviru te študije, je bilo poročanje o samomoru pogosto senzacionalistično, kar bi lahko pripisali

^{*} Assistant, Slovene Centre for Suicide Research, Andrej Marušič Institute, University of Primorska, Muzejski trg 2, SI-6000 Koper, vanja.gomboc@iam.upr.si; ORCID: 0000-0001-7525-4847

^{**} Assistant, Slovene Centre for Suicide Research, Andrej Marušič Institute, University of Primorska, Muzejski trg 2, SI-6000 Koper, polonca.borko@iam.upr.si

^{***} PhD, Assistant Professor, Slovene Centre for Suicide Research, Andrej Marušič Institute, University of Primorska, Muzejski trg 2, SI-6000 Koper, nusa.sedivy@iam.upr.si; ORCID: 0000-0002-3005-6983

^{****} PhD, Associate Professor, Slovene Centre for Suicide Research, Andrej Marušič Institute, University of Primorska, Muzejski trg 2, SI-6000 Koper, vita.postuvan@upr.si; ORCID: 0000-0002-8258-5852

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različnim dejavnikom, med drugim tudi manj ozaveščenim medijskim praksam. V devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja pa je opaziti presenetljiv porast preventivnega in provokativnega poročanja, kar sovpada z osamosvojitvijo Slovenije in liberalizacijo medijev. Nihanje trenda poročanja je v nasprotju z izsledki globalnih študij, a poudarja povezanost med mediji, družbenopolitičnimi spremembami in javnim dojemanjem samomora. Raziskava poudarja pomen medijev ter izziv uravnavanja javnega interesa in družbene odgovornosti pri poročanju o samomoru.

Ključne besede: samomor, poročanje, mediji, provokativni vidiki, preventivni vidiki

ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of suicide in Slovenian newspapers from 1959 to 1999, a period characterised by profound socio-political changes. By analysing 1,785 articles from the archives of two major newspapers, Delo and Večer, we identified a dynamic relationship between the style of media reporting on suicide and the evolving societal context. Our findings suggest a transition from predominantly provocative to increasingly preventive reporting on suicide over the decades. Interestingly, despite an overall trend towards preventive approaches, the ratio of provocative to preventive aspects per article consistently favoured provocative reporting in each period studied. In the early years studied, reporting on suicide tended to be sensationalised, which could be due to a variety of factors, including less informed media practices. In the 1990s, however, a surprising increase in both preventive and provocative reporting was observed, coinciding with Slovenia's independence and the liberalisation of the media. This mixed trend contrasts with worldwide studies, but underlines the link between media, socio-political changes and public perception of suicide. The study highlights the significance of the media, and the challenge of balancing public interest and social responsibility when reporting on suicide.

Keywords: suicide, reporting, media, provocative aspects, preventive aspects

Introduction

Suicide is a major public health problem with profound consequences for individuals, families, and communities.¹ Suicide not only leads to loss of life, but also has a significant impact on the bereaved (e.g., family, and friends) who often experience profound grief and feelings of guilt. The economic impact is also notable, affecting the wider socio-economic structure of communities. According to the World Health

¹ World Health Organization, *Suicide in The World: Global Health Estimates* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2019).

Organization, more than 700,000 people die by suicide every year, making it the fourth leading cause of death among those aged 15-29 globally.² Recent studies suggest that up to 135 individuals can be affected by each suicide.³ Suicide is the result of a complex interplay of individual, social, psychological, cultural, and biological factors. This complexity highlights the critical need for comprehensive and multifaceted preventive strategies. Effective mitigation of suicide risks often requires comprehensive community and policy-level interventions that address these diverse contributing elements.⁴

Slovenia Between 1959 and 1999

Historically, Slovenia has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe and the world, a trend that has been influenced by a variety of cultural, economic and historical factors⁵. The systematic collection of data on deaths by suicide in Slovenia began in the 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, the suicide rate consistently exceeded 30 per 100,000 individuals per year, reaching a peak in 1984 (35.8 per 100,000 individuals) and 1989 with one of the highest rates in Slovenian history (35.2 per 100,000 individuals).⁶ In the last two decades, however, we observed a gradual but steady decline in these rates, with recent averages at around 20 per 100,000 individuals per year.⁷ This fluctuation in suicide rates can be attributed to several factors, including increased alcohol consumption and its availability,⁸ societal stress related to the transition from socialism to market economy,⁹ public discourse on the issue, improved availability of mental health services in recent years, comprehensive public health strategies, and targeted national suicide prevention measures.¹⁰

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Slovenia, within Yugoslavia, became rapidly industrialised and urbanised.¹¹ By adopting a unique socialist model with a model of market liberalisation and opening up to foreign investment, Yugoslavia diverged from Eastern Europe

2 World Health Organization, *Suicide* [WHO, 2023], <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide>.

3 Julie Cerel, Margaret M. Brown, Myfanwy Maple, Michael Singleton, Judy van de Venne, Melinda Moore and Chris Flaherty, "How Many People Are Exposed to Suicide? Not six," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 49, No. 2 (2019): 529–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12450>.

4 World Health Organization, *Suicide in The World: Global Health Estimates*.

5 Andrej Marušič, "History and geography of suicide: Could genetic risk factors account for the variation in suicide rates?," *American Journal of Medical Genetics Part C: Seminars in Medical Genetics* 133, No. 1 (2005): 43–47, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajmg.c.30045>.

6 Marušič, "History and geography of suicide." Onja Tekavčič Grad, "Zgodovina suicidologije na Slovenskem," in Saška Roškar and Alja Videtič Paska (eds.), *Samomor v Sloveniji in svetu: Opredelitev, raziskovanje, preprečevanje in obravnavanje* (Ljubljana: Nacionalni inštitut za javno zdravje, 2021). Mira Virant-Jaklič, "Samomor v Sloveniji med letoma 1970 in 1991," *Obzornik zdravstvene nege* 29, No. 1/2 (1995): 15–18.

7 Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, "Deaths by Underlying Cause of Death (ICD-10, Chapters I-XIX), Sex and Age Groups, Slovenia, Annually," Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, n.d., <https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/en/Data/-/05L3004S.px>.

8 William Alex Pridemore and Aleksandra J. Snowden, "National Alcohol Policy in Slovenia: An Interrupted Time-Series Analysis," *American Journal of Public Health* 99, No. 5 (2009): 915–20, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.146183>.

9 Mojmir Mrak, Matija Rojec and Carlos Silva-Jáuregui, *Slovenia: From Yugoslavia to the European Union* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2004).

10 Slavko Ziherl and Peter Pregelj, "Samomorilnost v Sloveniji," *Zdravniški vestnik* 79, No. 7/8 (2010): 559–62.

11 Božo Repe, "Modernizacije pri Slovencih," *Acta Histriae* 25, No. 3 (2017): 581–596.

and oriented itself towards Western markets.¹² The shift from rural to urban areas also significantly changed social structures, impacting community ties and individual identity,¹³ which are critical factors for the psychological well-being of individuals. Despite successfully navigating Cold War politics, Yugoslavia showed signs of economic stagnation and recession in the late 1970s, reflecting the general global economic downturn. This phenomenon became even more pronounced during the 1980s, a decade characterised by significant socio-economic and political turbulence for Slovenia and the broader Yugoslav federation. Following Tito's death in 1980, the federation began to disintegrate, facing severe economic problems characterised by high inflation and unemployment. This led to widespread social unrest and halted social services and infrastructure investment. Many struggling companies laid off their employees, and household incomes and savings rapidly declined.¹⁴ Simultaneously, Slovenia experienced a cultural renaissance with growing calls for democratisation and independence.¹⁵ In 1991, Slovenia transitioned from a Yugoslav socialist republic to an independent democratic republic, marked by a declaration of independence and a brief 10-day war. This shift enabled the creation of a new national identity, independent political institutions and integration into international economic systems. Slovenia joined the UN in 1992 and became an associate member of the EU in 1996, leading to full membership in 2004. This period also saw significant political, social and economic reforms, stabilising the economy.¹⁶

The political and economic changes were accompanied by significant shifts in media freedom and journalistic practices, leading to changes in the media landscape, more freedom of expression and a diversification of viewpoints in public discourse. Journalistic practices also began to move more towards independent and investigative journalism.¹⁷

Media Reporting on Suicide

Media reporting on suicide has been studied extensively due to its potential impact on public behaviour and policy.¹⁸ Research has shown a correlation between media portrayal of suicide and subsequent suicide rates, suggesting that irresponsible reporting can lead to imitation among vulnerable individuals.¹⁹

12 S. L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After The Cold War* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1995). John Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

13 Repe, "Modernizacije pri Slovencih."

14 Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*.

15 Repe, "Modernizacije pri Slovencih." Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*.

16 Repe, "Modernizacije pri Slovencih."

17 Sandra Bašić-Hrvatinić and Lenart J. Kučič, "Slovenia," in *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*, ed. Branka Petković (Ljubljana: Peace institute, 2004).

18 Jane Pirkis and Richard W. Blood, "Suicide and The Media," in Stephen H. Koslow, Pedro Ruiz, and Charles B. Nemeroff (eds.), *A Concise Guide to Understanding Suicide: Epidemiology, Pathophysiology and Prevention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

19 David P. Phillips, "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," *American Sociological Review* 39, No. 3 (1974): 340–54.

The influence of the news and informational media is considerable, as they shape society's perceptions and can change individuals' attitudes and behaviour.²⁰ This influence is particularly significant in the context of suicide, a topic surrounded by myths, that can impact vulnerable populations.²¹ Given the high level of public interest in suicide, such stories often attract media attention and lead to extensive coverage, which can increase the risk of imitation.²² Additionally, the manner in which suicide is reported can shape public opinion on research priorities and social policy.²³ This is evident as media coverage often directs public attention and legislative focus toward high-priority public health issues,²⁴ underscoring the essential role that media plays in shaping discourse and policy related to suicide prevention.

Historically, Phillips²⁵ was the first to systematically examine the link between media reporting on suicide and actual suicide rates in the public. In 1974, he demonstrated that suicides in the United States increased following media reports on suicide. He termed this phenomenon the Werther effect, named after the protagonist in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel "The Sorrows of Young Werther," who dies by suicide. The Werther effect remains one of the most well-researched phenomena in media influence on suicide. Similarly, as Phillips noted in 1974, the publication of Goethe's novel in 1774 was associated with a notable increase in copycat suicides among young men, mirroring Werther's fate.²⁶ This effect demonstrates that detailed and sensationalized depictions of suicide in the media can lead to an increase in suicide rates, especially among individuals who find aspects of their own lives reflected in the articles. Identification with the individual or circumstances, reported in news articles, can amplify the impact of the media portrayal²⁷ and underline the need for responsible reporting on suicide. Following the publication of Phillips' article in 1974,²⁸ research on media reporting of suicide began, initially focusing on Western countries, particularly the United States, until around 1990.²⁹ Later, studies expanded to Asia, Europe, and, in some cases, Australia.³⁰ The first prospective study in this area was conducted in Vienna. After the Vienna subway opened in 1978, it became a 'popular' location for suicides in the 1980s. Most of the suicide cases that occurred there were

20 Pirkis and Blood, "Suicide and The Media."

21 Mark Sinyor, Ayal Schaffer, Yasunori Nishikawa, Donald A. Redelmeier, Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, Jitender Sareen, Anthony J. Levitt, Alex Kiss and Jane Pirkis, "The Association Between Suicide Deaths and Putatively Harmful and Protective Factors in Media Reports," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 190, No. 30 (2018): 900–07, <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.170698>.

22 Pirkis and Blood, "Suicide and The Media."

23 Merike Sisask and Airi Värnik, "Media Roles in Suicide Prevention: A Systematic Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 9, No. 1 (2012): 123–38, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph9010123>.

24 Melanie A. Wakefield, Barbara Loken and Robert C. Hornik, "Use of Mass Media Campaigns To Change Health Behaviour," *The Lancet* 376, No. 9748 (2010): 1261–71, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(10\)60809-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(10)60809-4).

25 Phillips, "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide."

26 Ibidem.

27 Steven Stack, "Media Coverage As a Risk Factor In Suicide," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 57, No. 4 (2003): 238–40, <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.57.4.238>.

28 Phillips, "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide."

29 Steven Stack, "The Effect of the Media on Suicide: Evidence From Japan, 1955-1985," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 26, No. 2 (1996): 132–42. Sisask, and Värnik, "Media Roles in Suicide Prevention."

30 Sisask, and Värnik, "Media Roles in Suicide Prevention."

reported dramatically and extensively in the media. Initially, there were only a few suicides and suicide attempts, but both increased significantly after 1983. A media campaign in mid-1987, which focused on informing journalists about the possible negative effects of their reporting, was associated with a significant decrease in suicide rates and attempts, which continued until 1992.³¹ Other studies from America, Asia, and Europe have generally confirmed the association between media reporting on suicide and actual suicide rates among the general public. These studies suggest that the more prominently a suicide is reported (e.g. on the front page or in several articles in different newspapers), the higher the number of suicides. The risk of copycat behavior is also higher if readers can easily identify with the person reported in the article.³²

Conversely, studies have found the opposite effect. The ‘Papageno Effect’, named after a character in Mozart’s opera “The Magic Flute”, represents the potentially positive effects of a responsible portrayal of suicide in the media. Papageno, who is thinking about suicide after the loss of his loved one, finds a way to live through the hope and effective coping strategies, supported by his friends.³³ Media highlighting stories of overcoming suicidal crises through supportive interventions can foster resilience and provide hope to those affected or in distress, thus potentially reducing suicide rates.³⁴

Aim of the Study

These phenomena underscore the dual impact that the media can have on public health and emphasize the need for careful, considerate reporting that prioritizes preventative measures over sensationalism. Empirical research suggests that the manner in which suicide is depicted in the media can significantly influence imitative behaviour. Sensational and inappropriate reporting can exacerbate this risk, while responsible portrayal that emphasizes prevention and support resources can help reduce it. However, there are no studies in Slovenia that examine how suicide was reported in the media in the years before 2000. This study is thus the first to analyse the changes in media reporting on suicide in Slovenia from 1959 to 1999, a period marked by political and social changes that need to be taken into account when discussing (media reporting on) suicide. To this end, both provocative and preventative aspects in the articles were analyzed and the results were placed in the broader context of life in Slovenia and attitudes towards suicide during these periods.

31 Elmar Etzersdorfer and Gernot Sonneck, “Preventing Suicide by Influencing Mass-Media Reporting: The Viennese Experience 1980–1996,” *Archives of Suicide Research* 4, No. 1 (1998): 67–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811119808258290>.

32 Phillips, “The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide.”

33 Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, Martin Voracek, Arno Herberth, Benedikt Till, Markus Strauss, Elmar Etzersdorfer, Brigitte Eisenwort and Gernot Sonneck, “Role of Media Reports in Completed and Prevented Suicide: Werther v. Papageno Effects,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 197, No. 3 (2010): 234–43, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.109.074633>.

34 Niederkrotenthaler, Voracek, Herberth, Till, Strauss, Etzersdorfer, Eisenwort and Sonneck, “Role of Media Reports in Completed and Prevented Suicide.” Benedikt Till, Ulrich S. Tran, Martin Voracek and Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, “Beneficial Effects of Non-Sensationalizing Media Portrayals of Suicide: The Role of Papageno Effects,” *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 77, No. 6 (2016): e738–e46.

Method

Sample and Procedure

In this study, the methodology emphasizes a comprehensive approach to identifying and analyzing media representations of suicide, ensuring a systematic collection and a focus on articles that directly relate to the intended research objectives. Since the procedure of this study is described in detail in another article of this study,³⁵ we only summarize it here.

Upon conducting an initial search through electronic archives of two prominent Slovenian newspapers, *Delo* and *Večer*, a total of 13,042 articles were retrieved using the keyword 'suicide.' This search covered the period from October to November 2022 for both publications and was repeated for *Večer* between March and May 2023. 497 articles were immediately excluded for reasons such as irrelevance of the keyword, inaccessibility or duplicates, leaving 12,545 articles that were subjected to a detailed content review. The approach to collecting relevant articles was similar to methods reported in other studies.³⁶

A rigorous screening was then conducted, focusing on the content relevance and context of suicide in each article. A total of 10,715 articles were excluded during this phase for depicting suicide in contexts such as terrorism, political protests, metaphorical use and art, or were part of entertainment content such as humour or crossword puzzles. Articles that only marginally dealt with suicidality or described unrelated phenomena such as accidents, murder or euthanasia were also excluded.

After this meticulous process, 1,785 articles (1959-1969: 412 articles, 1970-1979: 508 articles; 1980-1989: 341 articles; 1990-1999: 524 articles) remained that were considered relevant for an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis. These included 848 articles from the dLib database of the newspaper *Delo*³⁷ and 937 from the e-archive of the newspaper *Večer*,³⁸ ensuring a comprehensive analysis of suicide reporting practices in the selected periods.

The final sample of 1,785 newspaper articles published in two well-known Slovenian newspapers between 1959 and 1999 predominantly documented either a suicide or a suicide attempt involving one or more individuals (1,097 men and 329 women with an average age of 35.47 years).

35 Nuša Zdravec Šedivy, Polonca Borko, Vanja Gomboc and Vita Poštuvan, "Media Portrayals of Suicide's Risk and Protective Factors in Slovenia (1959–1999)." Published Here.

36 Vanja Gomboc, Diego De Leo and Vita Poštuvan, "Responsible Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia: Are We There Yet?." In press. Saška Roškar, Alenka Tančič Grum, Vita Poštuvan, Anja Podlesek and Diego De Leo, "The Adaptation and Implementation of Guidelines for Responsible Media Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia," *Zdravstveno varstvo* 56, No. 1 (2017): 31–38, <https://doi.org/10.1515/sjph-2017-0005>.

37 Digitalna knjižnica Slovenije – dLib.si, <https://www.dlib.si>.

38 The archive of the newspaper *Večer* is accessible at *Prijava za oddaljeni dostop do informacijskih virov*, <https://ris2016-vecer-com.eviri.ook.sik.si/arhivi/arhiv.aspx>.

Instruments and statistical analysis

To evaluate the reporting style in terms of preventive and provocative aspects, we performed a systematic content analysis of the individual articles using an evaluation form developed specifically for this study. This analysis aimed to determine the type of suicidal behaviour reported as well as the gender and age of the individuals involved. We assessed the inclusion of four provocative aspects (outlined in Table 2) and nine preventive aspects (detailed in Table 3) in line with the methodology of other studies in this area.³⁹ These provocative and preventive aspects are discussed in the guidelines for responsible reporting on suicide⁴⁰, which advocate a more conscientious approach to media reporting on suicide and thus contribute to the prevention of suicidal behaviour.

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0, calculating descriptive statistics and examining variations in frequencies using the chi-square test.

Results

The results of this study provide a comprehensive overview of the portrayal of suicide in two prominent Slovenian newspapers from 1959 to 1999. The content analysis, conducted on a final sample of 1,785 newspaper articles, revealed nuanced patterns in reporting styles across four decades, with a focus on assessing the balance between provocative and preventative aspects of reporting.

Table 1 shows the frequencies of provocative and preventive aspects for four time periods as well as the sum of the aspects identified in each period. Analyses indicate that there are statistically significant differences in the number of preventive and provocative aspects in the four time periods measured ($\chi^2(3) = 62.04, p < .001$). When looking at the provocative or preventive aspects separately, there are also differences between these four time periods (provocative aspects: $\chi^2(3) = 155.91, p < .001$; preventive aspects: $\chi^2(3) = 177.76, p < .001$).

39 Gomboc, De Leo and Poštuvan, "Responsible Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia." Roškar, Tančič Grum, Poštuvan, Podlesek and De Leo, "The Adaptation and Implementation of Guidelines for Responsible Media Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia."

40 Saška Roškar, Alenka Tančič Grum and Vita Poštuvan, *Spregovorimo o samomoru in medijih: preprečevanje samomora – strokovne smernice za odgovorno novinarsko poročanje* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za varovanje zdravja, 2010).

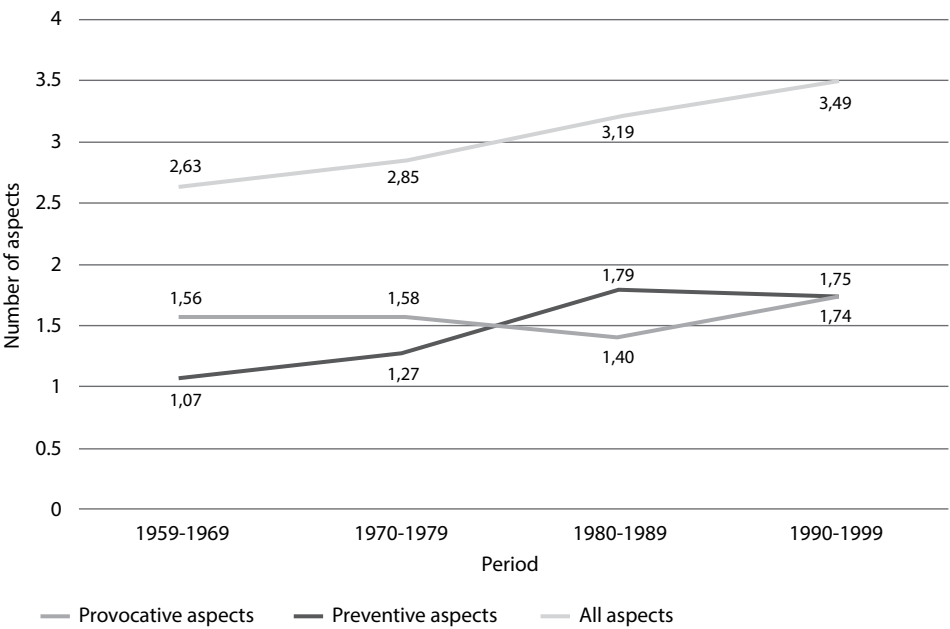
Table 1: Inclusion of provocative and preventive aspects of media reporting on suicide according to four periods.

	Provocative aspects		Preventive aspects		All aspects
	<i>f</i>	% per all aspects	<i>f</i>	% per all aspects	<i>f</i>
1959-1969	644	59.46	439	40.54	1083
1970-1979	801	55.36	646	44.64	1447
1980-1989	476	43.87	609	56.13	1085
1990-1999	918	50.11	914	49.89	1832

Source: The table is the property of the authors and is based on research data collected in this study.

Figure 1 displays the average number of provocative and preventive aspects included in each article on suicide for each period. When examined by individual period, no statistically significant differences were observed between the average number of included provocative and preventive aspects per article ($\chi^2(3) = 0.93, p = .819$). Similarly, no statistically significant differences were detected when only provocative or preventive aspects were examined in four different periods (provocative aspects: $\chi^2(3) = 0.43, p = .934$; preventive aspects: $\chi^2(3) = 0.67, p = .881$).

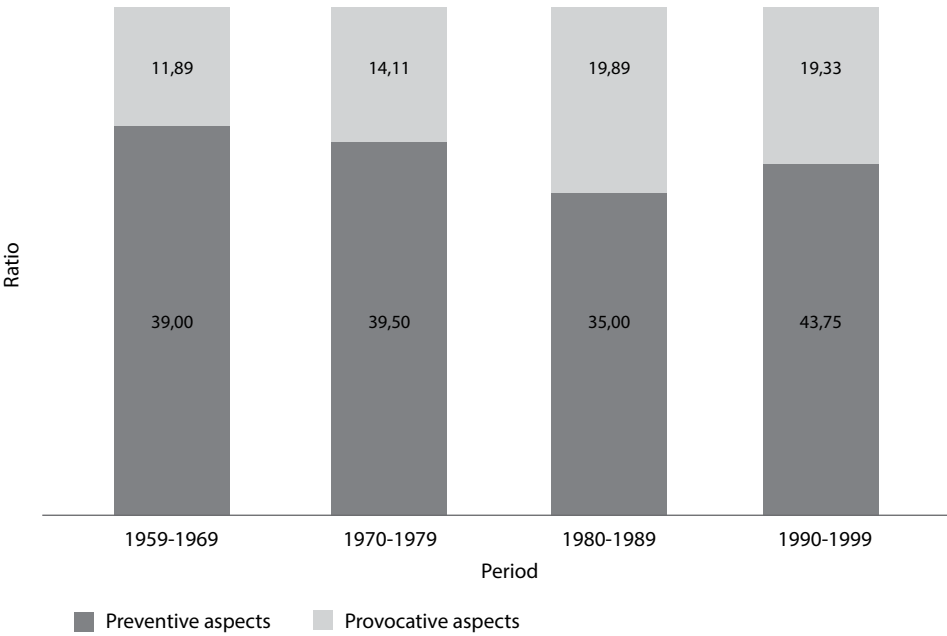
Figure 1: Number of aspects per article for each period.



Source: The table is the property of the authors and is based on research data collected in this study.

Figure 2 illustrates the ratio of actual provocative aspects to the maximum possible provocative aspects per article as well as the actual proportion of preventive aspects per article to the maximum possible number of preventive aspects in a single article. No article included all provocative and preventive aspects. On average, across all four periods, the articles contained 39.31% of all potential provocative aspects and 16.31% of preventive aspects. When examined by individual periods, as shown in Figure 2, the number of preventive aspects in an article has increased over the years. A different trend can be observed for provocative aspects. The lowest number of provocative aspects was recorded between 1980 and 1989, with the highest occurring in the last period, 1990–1999.

Figure 2: The ratio of included provocative and preventive aspects in media reporting on suicide across four periods.



Source: The table is the property of the authors and is based on research data collected in this study.

Table 2 and Table 3 provide detailed insights into the provocative and preventive aspects of media reporting on suicide. Each table lists specific aspects and the corresponding percentage of articles that included these aspects during the examined periods, highlighting how frequently certain elements appear in coverage over time.

Table 2: Individual provocative aspects of reporting on suicide across four periods.

	1959-1969		1970-1979		1980-1989		1990-1999		All		X ²	df
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
The title of the article is sensationalist, using the word suicide.	293	71.12	318	62.6	216	63.34	367	70.04	1194	66.89	39.90**	3
Inappropriate choice of pictorial material (e.g. depiction of method, location of suicide).	16	3.88	31	6.1	11	3.23	77	14.69	135	7.56	80.32**	3
Includes a detailed description of the method of completed or attempted suicide.	220	53.4	278	54.72	138	40.47	301	57.44	937	52.49	67.61**	3
Includes a detailed description and information about the location of the attempted or completed suicide.	164	39.81	174	34.25	111	32.55	173	33.02	622	34.85	17.37**	3

Note. ***p* < .001.

Source: The table is the property of the authors and is based on research data collected in this study.

Several important findings emerged from the analysis of media reporting on suicide in four time periods (Table 2). The prevalence of sensationalist headlines using the word “suicide” varied across the periods, with a peak of 71.12% in the period 1959-1969 and a marked decline to 62.60% in the period 1970-1979, before rising again in the following decades. The use of inappropriate imagery, such as depicting the method or location of suicide, also increased significantly, from 3.88% in the period 1959-1969 to 14.69% in the period 1990-1999, indicating a shift towards more provocative content in later years. There were also fluctuations in the detailed descriptions of the method and location of suicide, with the 1980-1989 period showing the least provocative reporting on suicide in the media, while it increased significantly in the following period.

Table 3: Individual preventive aspects of reporting on suicide across four periods.

	1959-1969		1970-1979		1980-1989		1990-1999		All		X ²	df
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Informing and raising public awareness about the phenomenon and causes of suicide.	64	15.53	119	23.43	147	43.11	261	49.81	591	33.11	139.88**	3
Avoiding sensationalist language that presents suicide as acceptable or presents it as a solution to problems.	138	33.5	190	37.4	207	60.7	304	58.02	839	47	68.79**	3
Avoiding emphasis and unnecessary repetition of stories.	175	42.48	274	53.94	199	58.36	267	50.95	915	51.26	31.85**	3
Reporting on celebrity suicides in a thoughtful and careful manner.	18	4.37	27	5.31	29	8.5	19	3.63	93	5.21	3,99	3
Show care, empathy and respect for those bereaved by suicide.	24	5.83	17	3.35	3	0.88	12	2.29	56	3.14	16.71**	3
Information on where to seek help for mental health problems.	8	1.94	9	1.77	10	2.93	19	3.63	46	2.58	6,7	3
General advice is given on how to help.	8	1.94	8	1.57	5	1.47	19	3.63	40	2.24	11.4*	3

	1959-1969		1970-1979		1980-1989		1990-1999		All		X ²	df
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
Stories of people who have overcome difficulties.	6	1.46	2	0.39	5	1.47	8	1.53	21	1.18	3,57	3
Consideration of the fact that journalists and other members of the media may be involved in stories about suicide.	4	0.97	0	0	4	1.17	5	0.95	13	0.73	0,15	3

Note. ** $p < .001$. * $p < .05$

Source: The table is the property of the authors and is based on research data collected in this study.

Conversely, the data revealed a progressive increase in the inclusion of preventive aspects in reporting (Table 3). The percentage of articles informing and raising public awareness about the phenomenon and causes of suicide increased significantly: from 15.53% in the period 1959-1969 to 49.81% in the period 1990-1999. Efforts to avoid sensationalist language that presents suicide as an acceptable solution have also improved. This was particularly noticeable from the 1980s onwards when the percentages rose from 33.50% to 58.02% by the end of the study period. However, despite these positive trends, four out of nine preventive aspects showed no significant changes over time.

Discussion

Historic and socio-political changes in Slovenia illustrate the complex interplay of societal transformations, providing a unique context to explore, how suicide reporting and perceptions varied across different political and cultural climates.

The fluctuations in the balance between provocative (e.g., suicide is presented in the article as a solution: 'Death as the only way'; simplistic presentation of suicide: 'He gave up on life because he could not find personal warmth in it.') and preventative aspects (e.g., suicide is discussed as a problem that can be solved: 'Recognize the signs', 'Be ready to listen', 'Help find help'; provision of sources of help: 'Before you think of suicide, call us. We have a phone number...') of media reporting on suicide observed in this study are consistent with national and global trends observed in other studies

with more recent data.⁴¹ Studies repeatedly confirm that there is a large discrepancy between the number of provocative and preventive aspects in media articles on suicide, although the number of preventive aspects included in each article has increased over the last decade. This was also observed in the only two comprehensive studies on media reporting on suicide in Slovenia.⁴² Both studies concluded that a positive change (more preventive information in articles) was observed after the guidelines for responsible media reporting on suicide were introduced in Slovenia in 2010.

In the current study, we observed an increase in preventive reporting and a significant decrease in provocative content during the 1980s. Conversely, the following decade (1990-1999) saw a notable rise in provocative reporting. This finding is unexpected and deviates from results reported in other studies. The trend, observed in our study, is particularly noteworthy given that epidemiological data indicate a peak in suicide rates in the mid-1980s, a period marked by economic challenges and substantial societal changes.⁴³

Further analysis of the data shows that the cumulative presence of preventive aspects in articles from 1980 to 1989 exceeds that of provocative aspects when both are considered together. However, this observation must be interpreted with caution. Given that our framework includes nine preventive and only four provocative aspects, the apparent predominance of preventive content may not fully reflect the overall balance of reporting. A more detailed analysis at the level of individual articles shows that the number of provocative aspects per article actually surpasses that of preventive aspects, suggesting a potentially more complex interaction between media portrayal and societal impact than initially assumed.

The higher suicide rates during this period may be due to several factors, including recession, inflation, unemployment and broader societal changes, as noted in the existing literature.⁴⁴ The peak in suicide rates in Slovenia is consistent with observations from Vienna for a similar period (between 1984 and 1987), where the portrayal of provocative aspects in the media was among the factors associated with fluctuations in suicide rates.⁴⁵

While in the 1990s the proportion of preventive aspects in media reporting on suicide remained similar to the previous period, there was a notable increase in provocative aspects per article, with both aspects occurring more frequently in this period compared to previous decades. This period coincided with significant socio-political upheavals as Slovenia transitioned from a socialist republic within the Yugoslav

41 Gomboc, De Leo and Poštuvan, "Responsible Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia." Niederkrotenthaler, Voracek, Herberth, Till, Strauss, Etzersdorfer, Eisenwort and Sonneck "Role of Media Reports in Completed and Prevented Suicide." Roškar, Tančič Grum, Poštuvan, Podlesek and De Leo, "The Adaptation and Implementation of Guidelines for Responsible Media Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia."

42 Gomboc, De Leo and Poštuvan, "Responsible Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia." Roškar, Tančič Grum, Poštuvan, Podlesek and De Leo, "The Adaptation and Implementation of Guidelines for Responsible Media Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia."

43 Repe, "Modernizacije pri Slovencih." Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*.

44 Ibid.

45 G. Sonneck, E. Etzersdorfer and S. Nagel-Kuess, "Imitative Suicide on The Viennese Subway," *Social Science & Medicine* 38, No. 3 (1994): 453–57, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(94\)90447-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(94)90447-2).

Federation to an independent democratic state, culminating in a short but impactful 10-day war. Gaining independence led to profound changes in national identity, the establishment of autonomous political institutions and integration into the global economic systems that ushered in the transition to a market economy.⁴⁶ These changes had a significant impact on Slovenian society and its institutions, including the media.

The increasing presence of both provocative and preventive aspects in media reporting on suicide in the 1990s may be partly due to these changes. The newfound independence may have influenced journalistic practices in various ways, possibly reflected in the different ways in which suicide was portrayed. Moreover, the changes occurring within Slovenian society itself during this period were probably reflected in the media's approach, suggesting that internal societal dynamics and external representation in the media were closely linked. This period of intense national redefinition and media development underlines the complex relationship between societal changes and media practices.

During the decade from 1959 to 1969, media reporting on suicide in Slovenia exhibited a notably high proportion of provocative content and the lowest proportion of preventive aspects. This period was marked by considerable social and economic upheavals after the Second World War when the country experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization.⁴⁷ The portrayal of suicide in the media during these years likely reflected the public's challenges in adapting to these changes. The high incidence of provocative reporting during this period may also reflect a lack of systematic data on suicide. Formal and systematic data collection on deaths by suicide in Slovenia began in the middle of this period.⁴⁸ Prior to this, there was no comprehensive tracking of suicide rates, which likely contributed to less informed media practices. Without data, media professionals and policymakers may have been less aware of the consequences of provocative reporting on suicide. This lack of information may have exacerbated the problem, as the media may not have fully understood the impact of their reporting style on the public's behaviour and attitudes toward suicide.

Furthermore, the low availability of prevention information in the media indicates a limited awareness of suicide prevention strategies and their importance. This omission points to a critical gap in media reporting on suicide and underscores the need for more balanced and responsible reporting that not only informs the public about the realities of suicide, but also provides resources and guidance on prevention. The combination of intense societal changes and lack of guidance for the media during this period thus set the stage for a media landscape that could inadvertently exacerbate societal pressures rather than alleviate them.

When considering studies from other European countries and around the world, it appears that positive changes in Slovenian reporting on suicide occurred later than in countries such as Austria, the UK, and the USA.⁴⁹ Although changes in these studies

46 Repe, "Modernizacije pri Slovencih."

47 Lampe, "Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country, Second Edition."

48 Tekavčič Grad, "Zgodovina suicidologije na Slovenskem."

49 Sisask and Värnik, "Media Roles in Suicide Prevention." Etzersdorfer, and Gernot Sonneck, "Preventing Suicide by Influencing Mass-Media Reporting: The Viennese Experience 1980–1996." Gomboc, De Leo and

could be due to many factors, informing journalists and working with them to report on suicide more responsibly was an important factor.⁵⁰ In Slovenia, similar efforts were made, but they happened a few decades later,⁵¹ which could explain why the changes were observed later.

When analyzing each preventive and provocative aspect individually across the four periods, we observe patterns consistent with the broader trends previously discussed. Notably, sensationalist headlines and detailed descriptions of the location of suicides were most prevalent in the early period from 1959 to 1969. In contrast, the detailed description of the method and the inadequate imagery are most problematic in the period 1990-1999. All four aspects are among the most common in the two periods mentioned. In general, the title is the most common provocative aspect in the four decades, appearing in two-thirds of all articles, followed by a detailed description of the method. In contrast, inappropriate imagery was less frequently observed, which presents an interesting deviation from findings in another Slovenian study conducted by Roškar et al.⁵² This discrepancy could be attributed to the different periods covered by the two studies, which likely influenced the availability and use of visual material in media reporting.

In examining the specific preventive aspects of suicide reporting over the decades, clear patterns emerge, particularly in the recent periods (1980-1989 and 1990-1999). In these years, three important preventive aspects were increasingly included in media articles: Raising awareness of suicide, avoiding sensationalist language, and minimizing unnecessary repetition of the story. The other six preventative aspects were rarely included and generally appeared in no more than 5% of the articles for each period. This selective inclusion of preventative strategies suggests a gradual evolution of media practices, possibly influenced by the growing recognition of the impact of responsible reporting. Prior to the introduction of formal guidelines, there may have been less emphasis on a comprehensive preventative approach, as the direct public health benefits of such reporting were not as well documented or understood. This shift is consistent with the findings of other studies, such as those by Roškar et al.,⁵³ which show similar trends, particularly in the period prior to the introduction of responsible reporting guidelines. The gradual adoption of these practices likely reflects an increasing awareness within the media community of the potential for responsible reporting to positively influence public understanding and attitudes toward suicide and thus contribute to prevention.

Poštuvan, "Responsible Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia." Roškar, Tančič Grum, Poštuvan, Podlessek and De Leo, "The Adaptation and Implementation of Guidelines for Responsible Media Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia."

50 Sisask and Várník, "Media Roles in Suicide Prevention."

51 Gomboc, De Leo and Poštuvan, "Responsible Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia." Roškar, Tančič Grum, Poštuvan, Podlessek and De Leo, "The Adaptation and Implementation of Guidelines for Responsible Media Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia."

52 Ibid.

53 Roškar, Tančič Grum, Poštuvan, Podlessek and De Leo, "The Adaptation and Implementation of Guidelines for Responsible Media Reporting on Suicide in Slovenia."

These results show that the interplay between historical and socio-political changes and the nature of media reporting can be collectively linked to the observed suicide rates in the periods studied. The nuanced dynamics of media influence on public health, as evidenced by shifts in suicide reporting, should be further explored to understand their implications on suicide prevention strategies. The findings from this study underline the need for continued advocacy and training for journalists on the implications of suicide reporting. While there has been progress, the enduring presence of provocative elements in media portrayals of suicide suggests areas for improvement. Future strategies should focus on enhancing the understanding among journalists of the 'Papageno Effect'—where media portrayal of coping mechanisms and support can have a protective effect against suicide.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms the profound influence of the media on public understanding and behaviour regarding suicide. It highlights the significant responsibility that the media has in shaping social attitudes towards this sensitive issue.

However, when considering the findings of this study, several limitations should be taken into account. First, the scope is limited, as the findings are derived from only two major newspapers. It would be interesting to examine how more local newspapers have reported on the topic. The study provides an insight into the basic characteristics of the reporting, focusing primarily on the newspapers used. However, the potential to generalize these findings to the characteristics of reporting across Slovenia is limited by the narrow scope of the study, and caution is advised in interpreting these findings. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of suicide reporting during the study period, it would be beneficial to include a wider range of relevant and popular newspapers. The publishers involved in this study issued a variety of magazines and newspapers that ranged from less to more sensational in their coverage. By including not just a single newspaper, but other publications from the same publisher, one would gain a deeper insight into the characteristics of reporting on suicide, which would allow for a better understanding of certain changes during this period, such as the perceived decline in sensationalism. It is possible that the reporting itself did not change significantly, but rather that more problematic stories were selectively published in the tabloids of the same publisher. Previous research on media reporting and sensationalism attributes the rise of tabloids to lower publication costs and greater accessibility, which necessitated competitive strategies to attract readers. Sensationalism and the novelty of news content were crucial in this competition.⁵⁴ At the same time as the circulation of tabloids in Slovenia increased, so did the

⁵⁴ Mariska Kleemans and Paul Hendriks Vettehen, "Sensationalism in Television News: A Review," in *Meaningful Media: Communication Research on The Social Construction of Reality*, ed. Ruben Peter Konig, Paul Nelissen and Frank Huysmans (Ubbbergen: Tandem Felix, 2009).

sensational reporting observed in this study. Although we cannot confirm the relationship between tabloid circulation and sensational reporting on suicide in this study, we can hypothesize that the increase in sensational reporting in articles on suicide is partly due to the desire to remain competitive with the more tabloid-oriented newspapers, and not only due to the societal changes mentioned above (e.g., national independence). Consequently, extending the data set of this study to include tabloids could allow for a more comprehensive analysis. The initial search was based solely on the keyword 'suicide,' which might exclude relevant articles using different terminology or indirect references to suicidality. Additionally, the exclusion of a large number of articles for various reasons (e.g., metaphorical use, and irrelevant contexts) could omit content that still offers insights into societal attitudes and media practices surrounding suicide. However, despite these limitations, a systematic approach—including the simultaneous random analysis of articles by different researchers—was adopted to minimize the impact of these shortcomings.

The persistence of provocative aspects, particularly in the 1990s, underlines the challenges faced by the media in balancing compelling reporting with social responsibility. The fluctuating presence of provocative and preventive aspects through the decades points to ongoing debates and learning within the journalistic community about the public health implications of their work.

As Slovenia continues to develop its public health strategies, the role of the media remains central. Ensuring that reporting evolves and prioritizes preventative, informative and supportive content will be crucial in ongoing efforts to mitigate the impact of suicide on society.

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**Vanja Gomboc, Polonca Borko,
Nuša Zadravec Šedivy, Vita Poštuvan**

PRIPOVEDI NA RAZPOTJU: MEDIJSKO POROČANJE O SAMOMORU V SLOVENIJI V KONTEKSTU DRUŽBENO- POLITIČNIH SPREMEMB MED LETOMA 1959 IN 1999

POVZETEK

Študija ponuja celovito analizo prikaza samomora v slovenskih časopisih v štirih desetletjih, upoštevajoč pomembne družbenopolitične spremembe v Sloveniji. Analiza 1.785 člankov, objavljenih v dveh večjih časopisih, Delu in Večeru, razkriva kompleksen vzorec prikaza samomora, ki ga zaznamuje prehod od pretežno provokativnega do vse bolj preventivnega poročanja. Ta razvoj poročanja odraža širše zgodovinske in družbenopolitične spremembe v Sloveniji, zlasti prehod iz socialistične republike v okviru jugoslovanske federacije v neodvisno demokratično republiko.

V šestdesetih in sedemdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja je bil samomor v časopisnih člankih večinoma senzacionaliziran. K temu je najverjetneje prispevalo več dejavnikov, med drugim pomanjkljivost strategij preprečevanja samomora in pomanjkanje sistematičnih podatkov o količniku samomora, ki so vodili k podcenjevanju tega problema. Medijsko poročanje o samomoru je bilo v tem obdobju zaznamovano z dramatičnim

podajanjem problema in odsotnostjo preventivne vsebine. Ta ugotovitev kaže na slabo informirane medijske prakse, ki bi lahko potencialno vodile k poslabšanju stisk ljudi in povečanju tveganja za posnemanje samomora.

Nasprotno pa je devetdeseta leta zaznamoval pomemben preobrat pri načinu poročanja o samomoru, ki je sovpadal z osamosvojitvijo Slovenije in posledično liberalizacijo medijev. Že proti koncu osemdesetih in v devetdesetih so članki vedno pogostejše vključevali preventivne informacije, med drugim poudarjanje pomena storitev s področja duševnega zdravja, programov za preprečevanje samomora in javnozdravstvenih kampanj. Kljub napredku pa je bilo opaziti tudi znatno povečanje provokativnih vsebin v primerjavi s prejšnjim desetletjem. Ti izsledki so v nasprotju s svetovnimi trendi, ki na splošno kažejo premik k odgovornejšemu poročanju. Sklepamo lahko, da se je z večjo medijsko svobodo povečala tudi kompleksnost uravnotežanja uredniške občutljivosti za takšne vsebine in javnozdravstvene odgovornosti.

Študija poudarja vpliv načina medijskega poročanja o samomoru na javno percepcijo in vedenje. Opozarja na pomen in vlogo medijev ter pasti neustreznega načina poročanja: z ustrezno obliko lahko predstavniki medijev spodbujajo ozaveščenost in preventivna prizadevanja, medtem ko lahko s senzacionalističnim in stigmatizirajočim modusom poročanja povečujejo tveganje za posnemanje vedenja. Da je o teh spoznanjih razpravljala tudi novinarska skupnost, kažejo nihanja med provokativnim in preventivnim poročanjem skozi desetletja.

Če povzamemo, ugotovitve te študije poudarjajo potrebo po nenehnem usposabljanju novinarjev in implementaciji medijskih smernic za odgovorno poročanje o samomoru z namenom izboljšanja kakovosti posredovanja informacij. Medijski pristop k poročanju o samomoru mora prioritizirati javno zdravje in etična načela, da bi učinkovito prispeval k preprečevanju samomora in ohranjanju novinarske neodvisnosti. To ravnovesje je ključno, saj Slovenija še naprej izpopolnjuje javnozdravstvene strategije in medijske prakse, upoštevajoč spreminjajoče se družbene razmere.