

# Compliance with the WHO guidelines on suicide reporting. An analysis of the Spanish digital press (2010-2017)

*Cumplimiento de las recomendaciones de la OMS en noticias sobre suicidios. Análisis de la prensa digital española (2010-2017)*



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## How to cite this article:

Olivar de Julián, F. J.; Díaz-Campo, J. and Segado-Boj, F. (2021). Compliance with the WHO guidelines on suicide reporting. An analysis of the Spanish digital press (2010-2017). *Doxa Comunicación*, 32, pp. 57-74.

<https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n32a3>

Received: 10/02/2021 - Accepted:19/03/2021

**Abstract:**

This research analyses compliance with World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on the reporting of suicides as published in the Spanish digital press over the period between 2010 and 2017. The *Mynewsonline* newspaper library has been used for this. A content analysis has been carried out on a sample created from all the news reports on suicides (n = 183) published in the six main Spanish digital media outlets (*elpais.com, elmundo.es, abc.es, lavanguardia.com, elconfidencial.com* and *20minutos.es*). Among other issues, the use of photographs and the young and / or popular character of the victims have also been studied. The results indicate that few news items about suicides are published and that only 32.84% of those published refer to events that occurred in Spain. A lack of compliance with the ethical recommendations of the WHO is also evident.

**Keywords:**

WHO; suicide; digital press; news; Mynewsonline.

Recibido: 10/02/2021 - Aceptado:19/03/2021

**Resumen:**

Esta investigación analiza el cumplimiento de las recomendaciones de la Organización Mundial de la Salud (OMS) en las noticias sobre suicidios publicadas en la prensa digital española en el periodo comprendido entre 2010 y 2017. Para ello se ha utilizado la hemeroteca *Mynewsonline*. Se ha llevado a cabo un análisis de contenido sobre un universo creado a partir de todas las noticias sobre suicidios (n=183) publicadas en los seis principales medios de comunicación digitales españoles (*elpais.com, elmundo.es, abc.es, lavanguardia.com, elconfidencial.com* y *20minutos.es*). Entre otras cuestiones, se ha estudiado también el acompañamiento gráfico y el carácter joven y/o popular de las víctimas. Los resultados indican que se publican pocas noticias sobre suicidios y que solo el 32,84% de las publicadas se refieren a sucesos ocurridos en España. También se ha evidenciado una falta del seguimiento de las recomendaciones éticas de la OMS.

**Palabras Clave:**

OMS; suicidio; prensa digital; noticias; *Mynewsonline*.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Suicide and its repercussions in the media

Almost 800,000 people die around the world every year by suicide, which means that a death by this cause takes place every 40 seconds. It is further estimated that for each death there are 20 suicide attempts, which equates to someone trying to commit suicide every two seconds. Moreover, it is the second commonest cause of death among those between 15 and 29 years of age (WHO, 2018). Suicide was the most frequent external cause of death in Spain in 2018, with 3,539 fatalities (2,619 men and 920 women) (INE (National Statistics Institute), 2018). In light of these figures self-inflicted death can be considered to be a serious public health problem, both in Spain and in the rest of the world (WHO, 2018; Spanish Government, 2020).

The figures have intensified the ongoing debate concerning numbers of deaths by suicide, which represents the commonest cause of non-natural death in Spain (INE, 2018) as well as the reporting of suicide by the media, where there still exist doubts about the propriety of publishing news of this kind. The fear that a copycat effect may be triggered (the Werther effect) as opposed to the fact that the responsible publication of this type of news may have a preventative effect (the Papageno effect) remains today the object of scientific study. The first effect takes its name from the novel "*The Sorrows of Young Werther*" by Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe (1774) as, just after its publication, there were a series of imitation suicides related to the book's titular character. This effect was studied by the sociologist David Phillips (1974) who demonstrated the relationship that existed between news of suicides published in the *New York Times* and the number

of deaths by that cause in the United States. Later research has demonstrated that certain reporting on suicides does not follow the WHO guidelines and that this unprofessional behaviour in coverage of this type of news may contribute to suicide contagion (Carmichael & Whitley, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2013).

In contraposition to this effect is the Papageno effect (named for the bird-man character in the opera *“The Magic Flute”* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who is persuaded not to commit suicide), which considers that a report on suicides from a preventative focus, in line with the principles set by WHO for the reporting of this kind of news, may prevent attempts and suicides (Durán & Fernández-Beltrán, 2020).

The WHO (2000) proposes a series of norms and guidelines for professional journalists in order to “inform appropriately, exactly and potentially usefully about suicide by progressive and intelligent means which may prevent tragic loss of life”:

- How to report suicide in general?
- The statistics should be interpreted carefully and correctly.
- Authentic and reliable sources should be used.
- Spontaneous commentary should be handled with care.
- Generalizations based on small numbers require particular attention.
- Reporting of suicidal behaviour should be resisted

How to report on a specific suicide?

- Sensationalist coverage of suicides must be avoided. Great effort should be made to avoid exaggeration. Photographs of the victim, of the method employed and of the scene of the suicide should be avoided. Front page headlines are never the ideal place for reporting a suicide.
- Detailed description of the method utilized should be avoided
- The suicide should not be reported as something inexplicable or simplistic.
- The suicide should not be described as a manner of facing problems.
- Reporting should consider the impact on the family.
- Victims of suicide are not to be glorified as martyrs or objects of adulation.
- Description of the physical consequences of the suicide attempts may act as an element of deterrence.

Provision of information on help available:

- List of available mental health services and telephone helplines.
- Publicize warning signs of suicidal behaviour.
- Offer a message of solidarity with the survivors (2000: 9).

The WHO also proposes(2000) some specific actions and omissions regarding suicide:

To do:

- Work closely with the health authorities on the presentation of the facts.
- Refer to suicide as something done, but not as an achievement.
- Only present relative data on the inside pages.
- Highlight the alternatives to suicide.
- Provide information about helplines and community resources.
- Publish risk indicators and warning signs.

Not to do:

- Do not publish suicide photographs or notes.
- Do not report specific details of the method used.
- Do not give simplistic reasons.
- Do not glorify or *sensationalize* suicide.
- Do not use religious or cultural stereotypes.
- Do not apportion blame (2000: 11).

### *1.2. Previous studies on suicide*

The handling of suicide by the media has been the object of several research projects. In some cases analysis has focused on media coverage of this type of events when the victim was famous(Fink, Santaella-Tenorio & Keyes, 2018; Choi & Oh, 2016;Kim *et al.*, 2013; Müller, 2011)or when, regardless of their fame, the style of reporting used in the news item transmitted to the audience an unreal sensation of control by the victim, a situation that contributes to the greater stigmatization of all that surrounds suicide (Boudry, 2008). Other studies have demonstrated that the reporting of suicides by famous victims has a higher probability of generating an imitation effect in society than the same news items with anonymous victims(Stack, 2005).

There have been other studies with a greater focus on professional ethics which have sought to analyse how reports on suicides are written. This research has concluded that the media do not always comply with the guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Díaz-Campo *et al.*, 2021; Duncan & Luce, 2020; Camacho Markina & Santos Díez, 2020; Durán & Fernández-Beltrán, 2020;Acosta *et al.*, 2019;Garrido-Fabián *et al.*, 2018;Herrera Ramírez *et al.*, 2015) and that, although the meaning of these directives is understood, their interpretation is not always so simple (Machlin, Skehan & Sweet, 2012).As regards the conception of journalistic valueand the development of the ethical focus in news aboutsuicides, it can be said that there has been movement away from a popular genre of sensationalist stories to that of it being a private matter which requires prominence, impact, or rarity in order to be published (Parks, 2019).

There are other qualitative studies which indicate that journalistic treatment of suicide is different to that of other non-natural deaths, and that, though the line followed by the media is generally orientated towards not publishing this type of news, journalists end up accepting its reporting having gone through a personal process of rationalisation (Beam, John & Yaqub, 2017). As regards other types of non-natural death, such as homicides, research indicates a greater presence in the media for these than for suicides, a circumstance which contributes to minimizing the resources available for the prevention of suicide (Niederkröthenthaler & Stack, 2017).

In this regard, several recent scientific articles have advocated the media breaking its silence and reporting this type of event with greater professionalism and a preventative focus (Till, Tran & Niederkröthenthaler, 2020; Yaqub, Beam & John, 2020) along with reporting of violence in general (Díaz-Campo, Chaparro-Domínguez & Rodríguez-Martínez, 2018) and fires (Pérez Pereiro, Chaparro Domínguez & Díaz del Campo, J. (2018).

Furthermore, there are studies which encourage governments and health organizations to involve themselves in the distribution of specialized guidebooks for journalists dedicated to reporting events (Gandy & Terrion, 2015).

Other studies analyse the impact of the use of social networks on attitudes to suicide (Choi & Noh, 2020) and the use of specific preventative campaigns to reduce the mortality due to this cause (Sindoni, 2020; Pirkis *et al.*, 2019). The latest studies even consider the incidence of COVID 19 in relation to suicide (Wake, Paton & Pryor, 2020)

Regarding multivariable studies of suicide reporting, there is one study which identifies methods, sources and the degree of adherence to the WHO's guidelines (Victor *et al.*, 2019), but we have not found studies which analyse compliance with the WHO guidelines together with accompanying image(s) and young and/or famous victims.

Therefore, the novelty of this study resides principally in this multivariable analysis regarding compliance with the WHO guidelines in relation to the reporting of news on suicides in the Spanish media.

### 1.3. Objectives

General objective:

1.3.1. Identify compliance or non-compliance with the WHO's guidelines for media professionals in the reporting of news concerning suicides published in the Spanish digital press

Specific objectives:

1.3.2. Measure the presence of news items on suicides in the Spanish digital press during the period 2010-2017

1.3.3. Identify the relationship between the different types of non-compliance and the accompanying image

1.3.4. Identify the relationship between the different types of non-compliance and the type of victim (young, not young, famous, or unknown)

## 2. Methodology

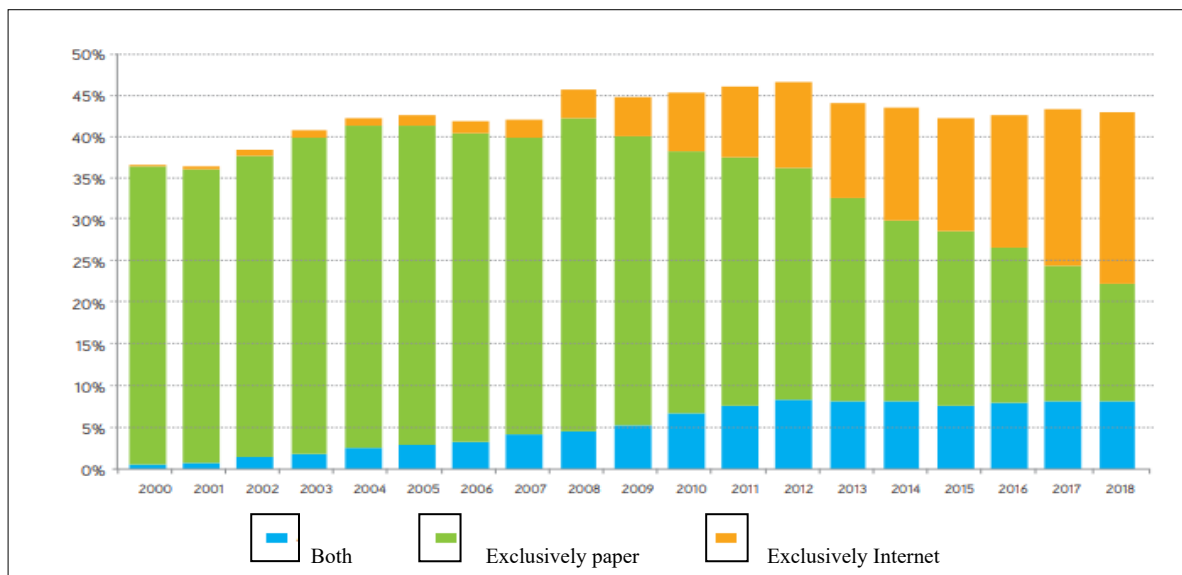
This study has carried out a quantitative content analysis of the reporting of suicide news by the Spanish digital media.

### 2.1. Determination of the sample

The unit of analysis selected for this study is journalistic pieces related to suicide, published by the chosen digital dailies over the period 2010-2017.

Digital media alone have been the object of this study due to the increasing tendency of readers to inform themselves more via the internet and less by the printed press (Boasberg *et al*, 2019) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Changes in the audience of dailies by type of reader (paper/internet), 2000-2018



Source: Media Research Association (AIMC), General framework of the media in Spain, (Boasberg *et al*, 2019)

In order to obtain a representative sample of the online dailies both immigrant daily newspapers and native digital newspapers have been taken into consideration. The digital immigrant dailies are those which have managed an “adaptation from traditional newspapers to new digital media and their interface” (Peña-Fernández, Lazkano-Arrillaga, & García-González, 2016: 27). Furthermore, native digital dailies are considered to be those which were born as online dailies, including those which have undergone a rapid digital transformation, such as *20minutos.es*, which went from being a traditional newspaper to a digital one in only five years (2000-2005), holding a *Creative Commons* licence (which allows

the literal copying of its texts citing the source) and offering complete openness of its content to readers' comments (López Redondo, 2012).

For the selection of the media, criteria of predominance and diffusion were utilized following audience figures (number of hits/month and number of single users). From this base, the digital immigrant dailies *elpais.com*, *elmundo.es*, *abc.es* and *lavanguardia.com* and the native digital dailies *elconfidencial.com* and *20minutos.es* were chosen

Audience data has been taken from the General Media Survey (Boasberg, 2019) and from the internet audience measurement company *CWHOCORE*(2017), these organizations being habitual references for studies of this type both in the national (Galletero Campos & Saiz Echezarreta, 2018; Rodríguez, 2018), and international fields (Potvin Kent & Pauzé, 2018) and the healthfulness of all food and beverage ads was assessed using the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO). For the selection of news items, criteria of inclusion/exclusion were established based on recommendations taken from previous scientific studies, such as that of Zimmermann *et al* (2019).

Reports of suicides in Spain and in any other part of the world in the period 2010-2017 were selected, including attempts as well as accomplished facts, as published in the selected media. Reports of current events have been accepted, leaving outside the study recompilations or summaries of news, themed reports, opinion pieces, revindications or statistical balances.

### 2.1.1. Analysis code & variables

Firstly, a test phase and a pre-test were carried out with the objective of evaluating the suitability and efficacy of the variables. Once the optimal variables for the study had been determined, the following table of categories was created (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Table of variables with details by category blocks

Category blocks	Variable	Detail	Category	Measurement	Reference
Aspects of location	Date of news item		Qualitative	dd/mm/yy	
	URL	Obtained through <i>Mynewsonline</i>	Qualitative	Textual	
Sources	Media	<i>elpais.com</i> , <i>elmundo.es</i> , <i>lavanguardia.com</i> , <i>abc.es</i> , <i>elconfidencial.com</i> , <i>20minutos.es</i>	Qualitative	Categorical	Muñiz-Zúñiga & Fonseca-Valido, 2017; Díaz & Mellado, 2017.
Responsibility	WHO guidelines	Revelation of the method, motive or farewell note. Sensationalism. Photograph directly linked to the event.	Qualitative	Categorical	WHO, 2000.

Emotional elements	Number of victims		Quantitative	Ratio	Müller, 2011; Lozano, Estephany & Ozonas, 2017; Rubio Conesa, 2016.
	Famous victim	Public figure with presence and influence on social life. The victim's full name usually being given along with a profession which confirms them as a public figure (presenter, politician, sportsperson...).	Qualitative	Categorical	
Proximity	Foreign		Qualitative	Categorical	
	No detail		Qualitative	Categorical	Trilling, Tolochko & Burscher, 2017
	National		Qualitative	Categorical	
Newsworthy and viral values	Youths	10-29 years of age	Qualitative	Categorical	

Source: created by the authors

For an objective determination of the parameters which identify the variable “young victim”, as in other studies (Olivar-Julián, & Díaz-Campo, 2020), the age group of 10 to 29 years of age (inclusive) has been used, which falls within the consultation range at the INE. This decision is in line with the parameters set by other entities such as the United Nations Organization (UN) (10-24 years of age), the WHO (10-30), the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) (15-29) and the Spanish Youth Institute (INJUVE) (15-29) (RTVE, 2019).

### 2.1.2. Sample

The sample has been taken from the digital newspaper library *Mynewsonline*, which holds online press publications since 2010. This resource has been utilized in other similar communication-related research (Repiso & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2018; Garcia-Gil & Cortiñas-Rovira, 2018).

An advanced search of suicide reports was performed in this digital newspaper library, following the criteria of inclusion/exclusion mentioned above, for the period 2010-2017. The search produced a total of 183 news items published in the selected media.



### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Compliance with WHO guidelines

Some instances of noncompliance with the recommendations that the WHO offers to media professionals who report on suicides were detected. The principal breaches of these indications related to the revelation of the method used in the suicide (162), of the motive which led to said action (133), of the existence of a farewell note -on occasions with specific details of the event- (30) and the accompaniment of a photograph intimately related with the event (15) (see Table2).

**Table 2. Table of noncompliance in the reporting of suicides**

Revelation of the method used in the suicide		162
Revelation of the motive of the suicide		133
Information on the victim's personal note		30
Photograph related to the suicide		35

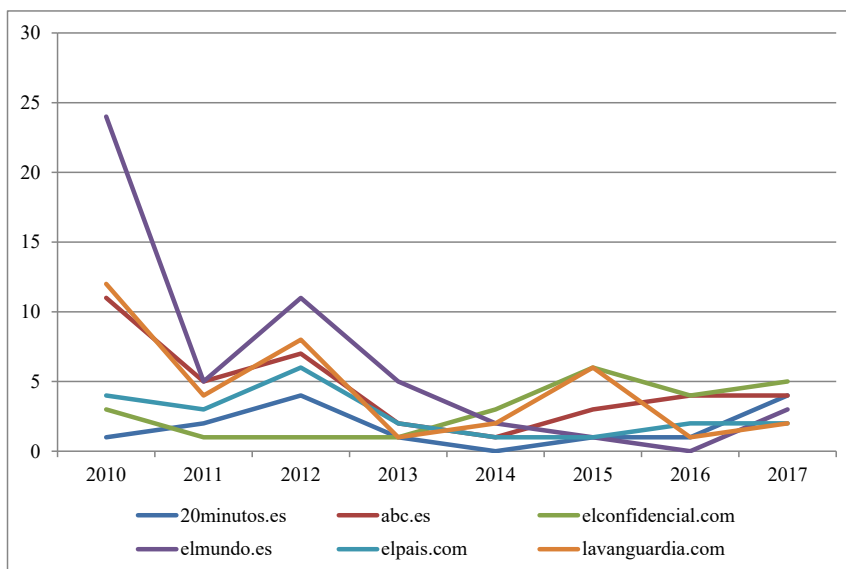
Source: created by the authors

#### 3.2. Presence of news on suicides in the Spanish press

A total of 183 news items concerning suicides were found in the six media selected for this study. The daily which published the highest number of reports on suicides was *elmundo.es* (51), followed by *abc.es* (37), *lavanguardia.com* (36), *elconfidencial.com* (24), *elpaís.com* (21) and *20minutos.es* (14).

Figure 2. presents the changes over time in the number of news items on suicides published in each of the media.

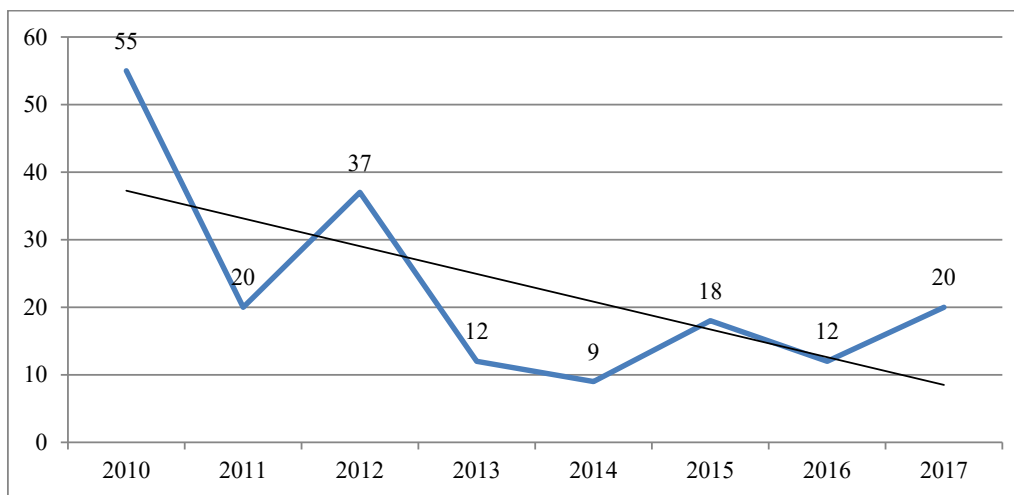
Figure 2. Changes in the number of news items on suicides by media 2010-2017



Source: created by the authors

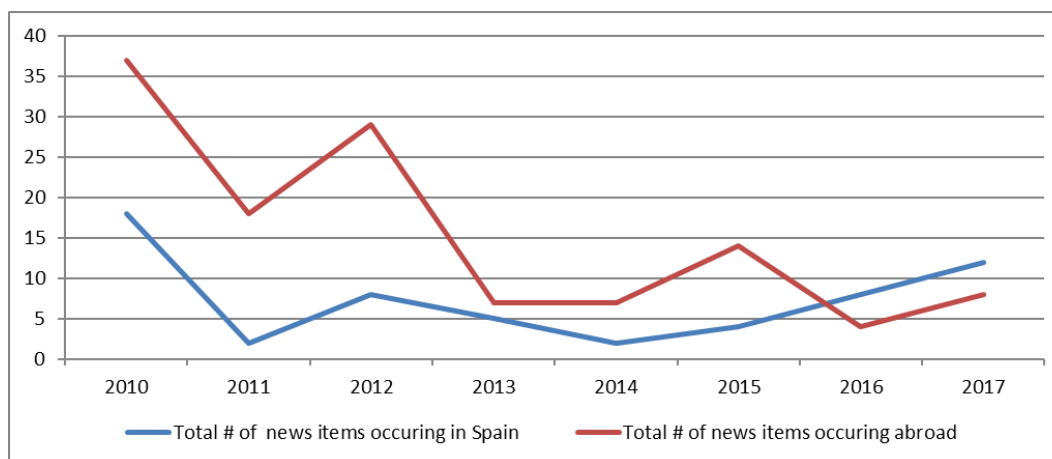
The total number of news items on suicides during the period 2010-2017 was also calculated. Figure 3 shows the decreasing tendency to publish news items on this cause of death.

Figure 3. Changes in the total number of news items on suicides 2010-2017



Source: created by the authors

As regards the number of reports on suicides which occurred in Spain (59), it can be seen that the figure is markedly inferior to that of suicides abroad (124), although a change in the tendency over the period 2010-2017 is appreciable (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Changes in the total number of news items on suicides occurring in Spain and abroad 2010-2017**

Source: created by the authors

### 3.3. Noncompliance related to an accompanying photograph

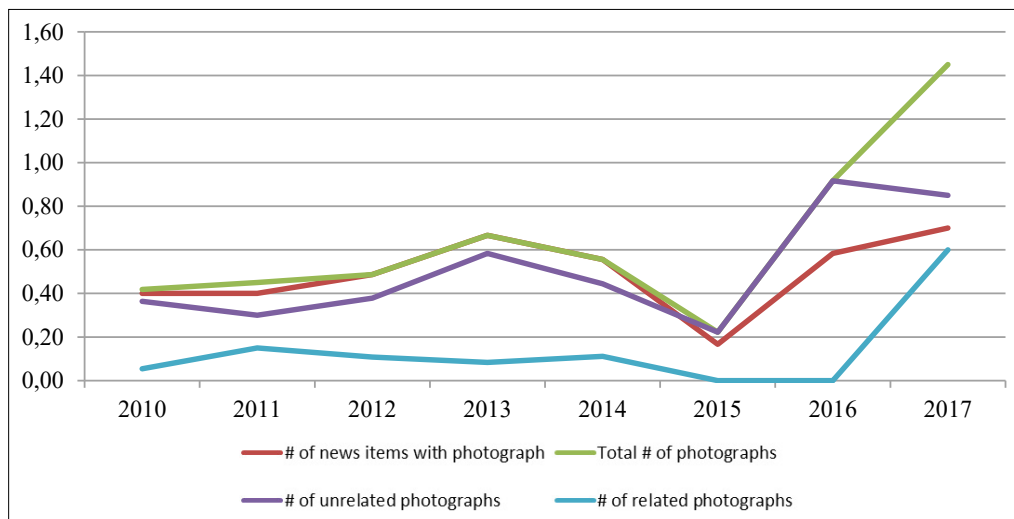
From the total of 183 news items studied, 85 were accompanied by photographs (46.44%), and only 15 were related to the news (8.20%). The data compiled in the previous section indicates that this noncompliance is the least frequent when compared to the other types under consideration, but that if this same analysis takes into account all the photographs published (some news items publish more than one image) the total would come to 107, of which 24 (22.43%) are related to the fact being reported (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Table of noncompliance related to an accompanying photograph**

Total # of photographs	85
# of news items with photograph(s)	107
# of unrelated photographs	83
# of related photographs	24

Source: created by the authors

If we weigh this data against the number of news items published annually, the data differs little from the previous analysis, but a consistency can be observed in the number of photographs published up to 2015, as well as a clear decrease in the number of unrelated photographs in 2017 against the total, this being the year which gives the highest values of all the series (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Weighted changes in the number of news items with photographs & the number of photographs**

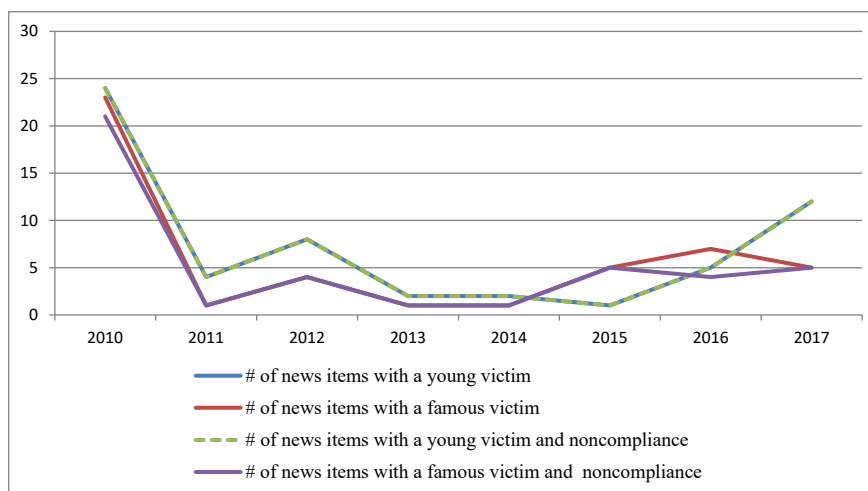
(related and unrelated to the event) 2010-2017

Source: created by the authors

### 3.4. Noncompliance by victim type (young, not young, famous or not famous)

There were 58 (31.69%) news items about suicides of the young in the period 2010-2017, while for reports on famous victims the number was 47 (25.68%). An evaluation of the number of reports including both variables (young and famous victim) shows 8 reports in both categories simultaneously (4.37%). The low percentage of coincidence between the two variables allows us to evaluate them separately and highlight the greater number of suicide reports with young victims as opposed to famous victims and underline the fact that in all the reports with young victims the WHO's guidelines were not complied with, this not being the case in reports on famous victims (at least between the years 2010 -2016). We can observe this effect in Figure 6.

**Figure 6. Weighted changes in the number of news items with young victims& famous victims (including noncompliance with WHO guidelines) 2010-2017**



Source: created by the authors

#### 4. Discussion

The publication of news on suicides is very infrequent, *elmundo.es*, *abc.es* and *lavanguardia.com* being the media that publish most news items of this type. Furthermore, there is a decreasing tendency to publish reports on this cause of death and only 32.24% of these reports concern suicides that have taken place in Spain.

However, it can be seen that the journalists who report on this type of news do not adhere to the recommendations of the WHO, especially as pertains to the revelation of the method used in the suicide and the motive behind the act.

It can also be observed that the photographs which accompany suicide reports have some relationship with the event described in 22.43% of cases, and that in 2017 there were proportionally over twice as many photographs as had been published in the previous seven years, and these images had an increasingly close relationship with the event.

One striking fact is that all the reports with young victims (100%) failed to comply with the WHO guidelines for the reporting of suicides. This is not the case when the victim was famous where, despite a high degree of noncompliance, as was found in other similar studies (Fink, Santaella-Tenorio & Keyes, 2018; Müller, 2011), on occasions greater formality was displayed in the coverage when compared to the cases with young victims. This fact contrasts with the studies that indicate that suicide reports with famous victims have a greater imitation effect on society than in cases with anonymous victims (Stack, 2005).

Regardless of any particular characteristics of the victim, many studies have proven that, in general, the media do not habitually follow the WHO's guidelines when reporting these events (Duncan & Luce, 2020; Camacho Markina & Santos Díez, 2020; Durán & Fernández-Beltrán, 2020; Acosta *et al.*, 2019; Garrido-Fabián *et al.*, 2018; Herrera Ramírez *et al.*, 2015) and many other scientific conclusions call for this problem to be aired with a professional and preventative focus (Till, Tran & Niederkrotenthaler, 2020; Yaqub, Beam & John, 2020), both in the press and on social networks (Choi & Noh, 2020). In any case, it appears evident that it is not always a simple task to interpret the guidelines (Machlin, Skehan & Sweet, 2012) and that it would be useful and recommendable that both governments and health authorities were aware of the need to create and distribute appropriate specialized guidelines among professional journalists to be consulted in order to report such a special type of news item with the greatest propriety (Gandy & Terrion, 2015).

Using the approach described above, by virtue of which there is little news coverage of suicides, and whereby, in general, they are reported in a way intended to attract readers' attention, further research might ask about the possible effect that responsible reporting could have, were this public health problem to be reported from a more professional point of view. Furthermore, in view of the results obtained, greater research could be performed into the fact that noncompliance of the WHO's guidelines when reporting on the suicide of young victims may imply that such reporting creates a greater imitation effect in society than news of victims from other age groups.

All things considered, in light of the results, it can be concluded that in recent years the Spanish digital media have not employed specialized journalist treatment of news items on suicide and have not in general made a serious attempt to follow the guidelines of the WHO when reporting this type of news.

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