



# **Report Assessing Headline's Performance of its Media Monitoring, Media Response, and Media Education Functions**

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Connecting for Life



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## Terms of Reference

Headline monitors mental health and suicide reporting in Irish media with a view to: identifying the extent to which coverage meets best practice reporting guidelines; contacting media organisations in the event of guideline breaches and; informing educational outreach activities with practicing journalists and those studying journalism at post-secondary and third level.

In March 2017, a team led by Dr Roddy Flynn of the Institute for Future Journalism and Media (FuJo) at the DCU School of Communications made a successful bid to the HSE's National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) to survey and analyse the operations of Headline.

The research team committed to assess:

- The efficacy of the existing guidelines and Headline's efforts to ensure they are adhered to by media organisations;
- The manner in which the media monitoring element of Headline's work is conducted and the nature of the output from that work;
- Whether Headline's existing focus on text-based media (print and online) could be expanded to include broadcast and social media; and
- The success of Headline's training/education work.

It should be emphasized that, reflecting the core function of NOSP, the original terms of reference were focused on suicide reporting and associated guidelines. However, given the actual nature of Headline's work and the relationship between mental health and suicide, the research has, to an extent, considered the broader mental health aspect of Headline's mission.

This work was conducted using a mix of methods including:

- Assessment of the workings and layout of the Headline website;
- Assessment of the content analysis protocols used in media monitoring; and
- Interviews with stakeholders in the Mental Health and Suicide sector, working journalists, journalist educators, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and print and broadcast regulatory bodies in Ireland.

## Summary of Findings and Recommendations

1. The Media Monitoring operation is conducted on a scale, which is disproportionate to the value of the information produced. Nor does it use the all of the protocols and procedures usually associated with formal content analysis. We recommend that the monitoring be cut back to a point which focuses on guideline breaches and limits more in-depth analysis to periodic samples.
2. In a related point, the field of data analytics has developed substantially since Headline's establishment in 2006. We believe there are a number of external firms in this field which could conduct the vital work of identifying guideline breaches and promptly bringing them to Headline's attention, thus relieving Headline of the need to do so in-house. We recommend that Headline actively explore developing relationships with such firms. Given the lead-in time for developing appropriate machine learning systems and the approaching end of Headline's contract with their current media monitor we suggest that, if possible, such contacts should commence no later than the third quarter of 2017.
3. Although there are some caveats as to cost/efficacy of existing "off-the-shelf" radio and television monitoring systems, it is a relatively straightforward task to monitor "public" social media content in real time. Again, there are a number of firms that do so and contacts should be initiated to explore the scope and scale of the monitoring possible. (As an aside, expanding the scope of Headline's work to cover non-journalistic social media output will demand some re-consideration of how Headline relates to non-professional media producers.)
4. Headline's efforts over the past decade to disseminate/inculcate guidelines on suicide reporting appear to have borne fruit. Among practicing journalists, there is a widespread, unprompted familiarity with, and acceptance of, the value of such guidelines (at least in the abstract). There is some resistance to the idea that the guidelines should be regarded as "rules" and journalists emphasize that no set of guidelines can possibly address the conditions of all possible real world stories.
5. Given this resistance, the research proposes that Headline use the time previously devoted to media monitoring to develop their outreach activities with media professionals, including representative media organisations beyond print and broadcast media. There is scope to build on the success of existing initiatives such as the Media Awards in this regard.

## Summary of Findings and Recommendations

6. Headline's educational outreach activities are generally well-received by both media educators and students. The presentations are generally considered up-to-date, empirically-informed and intellectually stimulating. Furthermore, Headline appears to have conducted these activities in literally every post-secondary education training institution in the Republic of Ireland.
7. The research would recommend, however, that the current informal "guest lecture" approach be enhanced by seeking to more definitively "embed" the lectures within module design across the 10-15 institutions involved in journalist education. This is already de facto the case in some institutions but should be the norm. (Obviously this will require some "buy-in" from educational institutions.)

## Headline in Context

Before considering Headline's activities, it may be helpful to briefly outline our understanding of the context the organisation operates within.

In 2006, SHINE (then Schizophrenia Ireland) were operating MediaWatch, a programme looking at how schizophrenia and psychosis was reported in the media. This prompted a collaboration with the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) to develop guidelines on how to avoid the use of stigmatizing language when writing on or discussing mental health.

In 2006, the HSE National Office for the Prevention of Suicide (NOSP) launched the "Reach Out" suicide prevention strategy. The strategy included actions around media suicide reporting. Given SHINE's existing experience in this regard they successfully pitched for funding from NOSP to monitor media reporting on suicide and mental illness. Thus Headline was created and initially housed by SHINE. Using Samaritans guidelines, schizophrenia guidelines and eating disorder guidelines, Headline began to monitor print-based media output.

The annual budget for Headline, provided by NOSP via SHINE, is approximately €155,000 which covers the equivalent of 3.2 FTE posts and non-pay operational costs. A significant amount of these operational costs - €32,000 – is devoted to media monitoring. At the outset, it should be noted that the small staff numbers inevitably leaves Headline very vulnerable to staff absences.

Headline is tasked with three main functions: (i) media monitoring; (ii) actioning/responding to media coverage of mental health or suicide which infringes the guidelines; and (ii) educating student journalists in a college context and working with journalists through in-office training seminars.

This report adopts a three-part structure which looks at each of these functions in turn. It is largely based on interviews with: stakeholders from institutions working within the field of mental health and suicide (and in particular the media representation of those areas); editors and journalists from print, broadcast and online media and; a smaller cohort of media educators. However, it is also informed by the researchers' direct experience of conducting what are – by academic standards at least – large scale content analyses using academic protocols.

At the outset it is worth acknowledging that, coincidentally or not, over the period of Headline's existence there appears to have been a significant decline in both the absolute and relative incidence of problematic mental health-related content within Irish media.

## Headline in Context

This is reflected in the fact that there has never been a complaint to the Broadcasting Complaints Commission regarding suicide coverage and although the Press Council has received several suicide-related complaints, these have not been on the basis of guideline breaches (and tend instead to refer to invasion of privacy).

This is not to suggest that there is no room for further development but rather that matters have improved during Headline's lifetime. It is impossible to definitively ascribe these changes to Headline's influence but journalist interviews (see below) suggest that it has played some role in this regard.

## Media Monitoring

The researchers were asked to review practices around Media Monitoring and to make recommendations on how this might be improved or enhanced.

At present Headline mainly rely on an external media monitoring service to capture mental health and suicide related content. Headline is contractually committed to using their services until April 2018. This service currently costs in the region of €25,000 per annum which is charged at a flat rate (e.g. regardless of the volume of content collected). It provides comprehensive coverage of national, regional and local print media in Ireland and includes non-newspaper print outlets such as magazines and periodicals. There are over 500 print titles listed as subject to monitoring along with a wide variety (330 approx.) of online content producers. This is mainly concentrated on professional content producers: though not entirely absent, personal blogs constitute a relatively small proportion of the total (52 in total). (As an aside, we note that there is no obvious pattern to the blogs which are included in this monitoring which range from those operated by journalists to some representing fringe political opinion. Many do not appear to be “live” and in some cases have not been updated for nearly a decade.)

The external media monitoring agreement deal does not include monitoring of broadcast content, although this service is potentially available. Nor does it cover social media such as Twitter or Facebook although, again, social media are partially amenable to monitoring. In this regard, it is worth noting that the 2015 – 2017 Reuters Digital News reports suggest that print media, though still a significant source of news for Irish audiences, are less influential (in terms of the number of people accessing them) than television, online media and radio. (As a further caveat, however, we should acknowledge that print media themselves constitute a significant proportion of online content, including social media content.) In other words, at present Headline’s monitoring activities are concentrated on a medium which is less influential than any other and whose influence, moreover, appears set to decline further.

In addition to using professional media monitoring, Headline engage in what might be termed “passive monitoring” of content across all media via relationships (maintained through a weekly email list) with approximately 1,500 private individuals and interested organisations across the country. These individuals bring incidences of possible guideline breaches to the attention of Headline who respond to them as appropriate. We do not propose to explore this system in detail except to note that, by definition, its efficacy and reliability is inherently impossible to assess in the context of this research. However, only the most sustained and egregious breaches of the guidelines are likely to be captured under this system: it is not a replacement for a more formal monitoring system.



# Media Monitoring

Even without broadcast and social media, the corpus (body) of content collated each year on Headline's behalf is immense. To identify relevant coverage, 25 search terms relating to mental health and suicide are used. Furthermore, there has been a manifest increase in the overall level of coverage given to suicide and mental health since 2007. The 2008 Headline annual report recorded 19,000 relevant articles. The 2015 report points to 33,000 and we understand that the 2016 figure has leapt to 55,000.

We have looked at the current system under three main headings:

- How effective is the current Headline monitoring system?
- What are the implications of expanding monitoring to include additional media?
- Could the monitoring be done differently?

## *Effectiveness of the current system of monitoring*

There are a number of levels to this including the current level of media monitoring provided to Headline and what use is made of the corpus of coverage collected by Headline.

As noted above relevant coverage is identified according to predefined search terms. They send on that coverage as pdf files which reproduce the coverage as it appears in print or online. In other words, they are not simply sending the written text to Headline but a facsimile of the article (including any related images). This allows Headline to assess the article at both a textual and visual level. This also has a cost implication end: to copy individual articles, media monitoring services must pay Newspaper Licencing Ireland a fee (typically 10-12 cents) for each article copied. This cost is usually passed onto the client.

Several of the interviewees pointed to a significant diminution in the quality of the external media monitoring service in the past year. The specific changes in the level of service offered relate in part to the archive. Whereas previously Headline had access to a full (i.e. 2007 to the present) archive of relevant content, it has now been reduced to archival access to material no older than 28 days. (In point of fact Headline have sought to retain their archive but only by actively intervening to store the story files on their memory devices. However it is not clear how comprehensive this store actually is and it may represent only a very small fraction of the 200,000-plus article collected since 2007.) According to Headline some coverage is simply not being captured and the externally performed media alert function has ceased.

## Media Monitoring

Headline's relationship with external media monitoring agencies is in any case in flux. In 2015, a mooted new charging scheme led Headline to consider alternate options, although it remains to be seen whether alternatives to the existing service can maintain the same scope of coverage.

Regardless, once Headline have received material from their media monitoring service, it is subjected to a "content analysis". We use this term with caution, however, because strictly speaking, content analysis implies a set of procedures and protocols which are not obviously followed by Headline. This is not to suggest that the results of that analyses are flawed – we have no reason to believe this is the case – but that their consistency is overly-dependent on the analysis being conducted or overseen by a single individual.

In the abstract, content analysis is a quantitative method for capturing the presence or absence of key search terms within a corpus of media content. Bernard Berelson (1952)<sup>1</sup> describes it as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication." Content analysis has no built-in "theory of significance". Thus it is up to the person conducting the analysis (the "coder") to interpret the quantitative results in a manner which results in a more qualitative finding. However that interpretative process needs to be subjected to clear written statements of how the coder has defined their categories and is interpreting their results. In practice this would imply drawing up a coding sheet (where one notes the presence or absence of whatever content is sought) but also an explanatory sheet wherein the meaning of the various coding categories are defined to the greatest degree of specificity possible.

At present within Headline, both the coding sheet and the explanatory sheet are more implicit than explicit. Staff are familiarised with the various guidelines relating to mental health and suicide coverage (but in particular those of the Samaritans and the NUJ) then asked to assess whether individual articles breach those articles or not. Articles are coded by outlet, categorised by mental health category and, most importantly whether the articles are "positive, neutral or negative".

Over the period of Headline's existence there has been a clear improvement in the quality of reporting as measured by the relative incidence of negative coding. In 2008 3% of articles coded by Headline were categorised as negative. This fell to 2% by 2011 and the 2015 report notes that just 0.3% of all articles were regarded as negative.

<sup>1</sup>Bernard Berelson (1952) *Content Analysis in Communication Research*, (Glencoe Ill: Free Press).

Nonetheless there are a number of issues here.

1. Best practice for content analysis demands the presence of a coding sheet and explanatory guide. Well designed content analysis seeks to avoid two categories of “semantic slip” whereby either two different coders code the same piece of content in a different fashion or, the same coder codes the same piece differently over the course of time. In other words, the function of the explanatory guide is to offer a universal, timeless (i.e. objective) definition of coding categories to reduce the possibility that subjective factors come into play when categorising content. A coding sheet and explanatory guide should be tested via Inter-Coder Reliability tests until an acceptable level of agreement is achieved. Such an approach has the further advantage that the coding process exists on paper i.e. is not reliant on the presence/absence of a single individual, and can thus be adopted by new coders.
2. It is not entirely clear to the reader of the Headline annual reports what the categories ‘positive’, “neutral” and “negative” specifically mean. At a glance, assessing whether a piece conforms with the guidelines implies a binary coding system – it either does (neutral coding) or does not (negative coding). The use of a third category implies that the coder has adjudged the journalist to have actively embraced the guidelines. However, it is not entirely clear what specific criteria would need to be met before a coder would employ the positive category.
3. By breaking down the incidence of positive, neutral and negative reporting by type of print medium and by title, the Headline annual report clearly points to sectors of the market and individual titles which need to be addressed. This is very helpful. However, it is notable that, although the corpus of articles is drawn in part from a large number of online sources, the annual Report does not yet offer similarly detailed figures on how individual websites perform.
4. The scale of the corpus currently faced each year by Headline is enormous especially given Headline’s current reliance on a manual coding process. Assuming a 48 week year, there are 240 working days available for coding. Even when there were as few as 19,000 articles per annum, this still meant coding an average of 80 articles a day. If the 2016 figure of 55,000 is correct, Headline’s coders now face an average of 230 articles a day. No academic project would contemplate that scale and, by implication, pace of coding. By definition coders can do no more than scan over the vast majority of the articles they examine.

# Media Monitoring

At worst this increases the possibility that problematic content might be missed. At best, it means that despite having an enviably large dataset at its disposal, Headline is not in a position to subject that corpus to detailed content or discourse analysis.

In making these comments it is important to acknowledge that we are not criticising Headline for failing to adopt the protocols mentioned. Headline is not a primarily research-oriented organisation nor was it ever designed to be one. It would be highly surprising if it spontaneously began to act as one and adopted associated procedures. Nonetheless, we would query the efficacy of the current approach and wish to propose an alternative structure (see below).

## ***What are the implications of expanding monitoring to include additional media?***

As noted above Headline's media monitoring is limited to print media and some online media (including online versions of print media). Given the increasing influence of broadcast media and social media is there a case for expanding the monitoring to include these media?

The reason for not doing so to date is primarily related to cost. Although news clippings services initially (going back to the 1980s and before) coded content on behalf of clients manually (i.e. print content was coded by an individual reading content and noting references to clients), the digital turn in the 1990s made monitoring of digital text based services far easier (and cheaper). However, although social media are text-based, for reasons discussed below they are not necessarily available for the kind of monitoring we currently subject print to. The nature of broadcast media bring up their own issues:

1. *Radio.* The nature of radio as an oral/aural medium renders it difficult to subject to automated (i.e. machine-based) monitoring. Although News Access and Kantar have offered radio monitoring services, it is a very expensive service to subscribe to because it is very labour intensive: each show monitored must be listened to in real time by a real human being. Given that the BAI now licences approximately 50 radio stations across the commercial, community and temporary licence sectors, the cost of comprehensively monitoring all radio output in Ireland would be prohibitive. (In any case, it appears that no Irish media monitoring service is currently offering such a comprehensive radio-related service. Instead the focus is on a handful of popular programmes such as RTE's Morning Ireland or Today FM's The Last Word. Given that several interviewees noted incidences of guideline breaches on local radio in the past 12 months, signing up to services which do not capture such content seems like a poor use of resources.

The light on the horizon in this regard is the development of voice recognition software. It is impossible to be definitive about this but advances in this regard will be evident to anyone who uses the voice dictation function on their smartphone. There remain difficulties with regard to sentence construction (full stops and commas can be hard to hear) but also coping with heavily accented English. (This is not limited to non-native speakers.) Nonetheless the data analytics companies spoken to for this research seem relatively confident that we are within half a decade of technology which can reliably translate the spoken word into text (and thus into a searchable corpus). Thus, although radio is currently beyond the reach of Headline, this situation may alter relatively quickly.

2. *Television.* The partially audio nature of television raises similar issues (but also potentially similar solutions) to radio. However, there may also be a shorter term technical fix which will render television broadcast content more amenable to monitoring. The School of Communications at DCU is directly involved in developing technology which strips out close-captioning from television broadcast content. (Close-captions are embedded in some television content to assist deaf viewers in comprehending television content.) In effect then, television content is rendered into a text-searchable form which could be monitored in the same way as print currently is.

Inevitably there are caveats here. First off, not all television content is so captioned. Although the current BAI Access Code requires that between 87% and 92% of all RTE 1 television content be captioned or subtitled by 2018, the obligation imposed on purely commercial channels are less onerous – Eir Sport (formerly Setanta) for example is only required to caption 12% - 14% of their content. Furthermore, given the reliance of Irish channels on imported content, the production of which is beyond the BAI's regulatory reach, it may well be that achieving a 100% figure is impossible.

The final caveat lies in the current state of the available technology. Although the DCU-developed system ("DiNA") has reached beta-testing level, it is still only able to narrow the search for defined terms to individual programmes. In other words, although one could quickly establish whether, for example, an individual news bulletin made reference to suicide, one would still have to manually watch the full programme before determining exactly who said what and when. DCU will be seeking funding from Enterprise Ireland to develop the system in collaboration with a commercial partner by late summer 2017, however, so it may be that the service is available in the next 1-2 years.



## Media Monitoring

3. *Social Media*. This is relatively straightforward. Public social media such as Twitter are akin to broadcast media. Thus their content is in the public domain and can be monitored (although the scale of traffic on Twitter, is such as to demand very careful construction of search terms). Several data analytic firms based in Ireland (Meltwater, Olytico etc.) have been offering this service for some years. There is one potential issue with Twitter feed monitoring which we must highlight given the nature of Headline's function: It can be very difficult to definitively establish the geographical origin of Twitter users. Although users can choose to switch on geo-location they must actively opt-in to do so. It appears that the majority of users do not do so and perhaps fewer than 10% of users can be confidently associated with a particular location. Given that Headline are likely to be primarily concerned with content coming from Irish users, this may limit the scope for of the monitoring possible. Against that, it is likely that, given the nature of Twitter, many of the comments on mental health and suicide will be prompted by posting content from Irish legacy media. Thus at least some monitoring of specifically Irish tweets will be possible simply by following replies to initial tweets of Irish legacy media content.

By contrast most Facebook pages are private (i.e. associated with private individuals). As such they are not available for monitoring by outside firms. There are two exceptions to this: in the case of Public Facebook pages, e.g. those associated with corporate entities who use them for promotional purposes, the feeds are public and thus searchable. The other exception is Datasift, a company with whom Facebook have an exclusive deal allowing the former to data mine even private Facebook pages for references to their clients. Such data mining faces limits, however: the data is anonymised so that, although clients may be able to glean what a *category of users* are saying about their company or product, they cannot access what specific *individuals* are saying. It is also important to stress that the service is very expensive: an annual subscription would be equivalent to the total sum spent on running Headline for a year.

In sum then, adding an element of social media monitoring is immediately possible and, as discussed below, done in conjunction with a number of other changes, would not necessarily require an increase in expenditure. However, given the comments above as to the current scale of Headline's media monitoring activities, it is questionable as to how feasible a further increase in content monitoring would be. This raises the question of whether the current approach should be reconsidered.

# Media Monitoring

## *Could the monitoring be done differently?*

As the research progressed we increasingly found ourselves addressing the question of what is the rationale for the monitoring operation as currently conducted? In response we are tentatively suggesting that current approaches may be the result of path dependency, i.e. an approach devised (and appropriate) for the context of 2006 is still being applied in 2017. The question is whether it still needs to be?

Again, Headline's media monitoring is essentially an enormous content analysis project. Most media content analysis works on the basis of samples of content which represent a larger universe of material. It is thus accepted that the descriptions arrived at of content will be subject to statistical error of 1% - 5% depending on the size of the sample relative to the universe. However, that Headline cannot afford such a margin of error is down to the nature of the particular task they are confronted with.

When Headline was established in 2006, part of the purpose of media monitoring was to simply to establish a baseline understanding of the nature of Irish media coverage of mental health and suicide. However, specifically with regard to suicide, the media monitoring clearly also has a much more urgent function: quickly identifying content which, because it discusses methods or represents suicide as a meaningful act, may encourage copy-catting and thus needs to be immediately addressed and corrected. Thus, to the extent that it is feasible, Headline need to be in a position to capture 100% of problematic content.

However, it is already apparent that as currently resourced Headline are struggling to cope with this aspect of the workload. This in turn has had a knock-on effect on the organisation's capacity to fulfil its media response and education functions.

The obvious suggestion is to advocate for an increase in Headline's staffing. However, if Headline was to subsequently expand its current monitoring practice to additional media (as mooted above), that additional staff member would doubtless quickly find themselves facing the same impossible workload.

As noted above, less than a third of one percent of the coverage coded by Headline in 2015 is considered problematic. At one level this is highly encouraging and it appears to confirm the view expressed by virtually every stakeholder interviewed, that media commentary on mental health and suicide has markedly improved since 2006. However, the labour involved in establishing this figure seems out of all proportion to its utility.

## Media Monitoring

After more than a decade of research it can be fairly said that Headline have established a clear picture as to the nature of mental health and suicide reporting among legacy and online media. There is no longer a compelling reason to continue subjecting to content analysis the full universe of mental health and suicide-related coverage.

This is not to suggest either a) that everything is fine in Irish media coverage or b) that some analysis of the broad range of mental health and suicide reporting should not continue. However this research would propose that in future Headline should outsource not just the overall media coverage gathering function (as is currently the case) but also the “triaging” function, whereby media content requiring an immediate response (i.e. an outlet –specific response) or potential stories emerging via public social media channels (requiring a media alert) are isolated and quickly brought to Headline’s attention for appropriate action. It appears that this function can be performed by an external media monitoring/data analytics firm.

Although not part of the original scope of the research, we discussed this approach with firms currently active in the Irish marketplace. These firms have mainly grown out of the online media monitoring sector , addressing the gaps left by older legacy-media focused media monitoring operations. However, as legacy media have increasingly migrated online adopting “digital first” strategies (whereby content is made available first through online portals before reaching print, radio or television) such firms now assert that their online monitoring covers the vast majority of print, broadcast and online content.

However because these firms are not merely searching for key terms but are engaged in data analytics they assert that they are in a position to offer more than the relatively passive search term-driven identification of relevant media content. They may in addition be able to actively identify problematic content and immediately highlight it for Headline’s attention by building a relational database (i.e. finding words and phrases which when used in conjunction or in proximity with one another are associated with problematic content). By creating semantic filters it should be possible to screen out the volume of irrelevant content returned by a general mental health/suicide search of media coverage in Ireland. The development of the database and the filters would take place over a period in consultation with Headline to narrow down the key indicators of problematic material with a view to creating a bespoke machine learning system to teach the software what to look out for.



## Media Monitoring

Thus there would be an initial period of extensive and active feedback between the external data analytics firm and Headline but in the longer term this should result in a far smaller number of articles requiring an “emergency” response. In effect then, on a day to day basis, Headline would be able to reduce the time spent on media monitoring by anything up to 90%, thus freeing up time for more time-sensitive functions such as media responses (see below).

There are a number of other advantages to the data analytics approach: because firms like Olytico and Meltwater do not necessarily provide pdfs of coverage (preferring instead to provide direct web links), they are not subject to Newspaper Licencing requirements and associated costs. Thus the current annual bill for media monitoring of €25,000 should drop to something closer to €4,000-€8,500 depending on the specific terms and reach of the deal done.

Furthermore, since the data analytic approach would continue to collect all coverage relating to mental health and suicide, Headline (or potentially the newly established research team within NOSP) could continue to trace broad developments in media reporting on mental health and suicide. However, this would be done on the basis of much smaller samples of coverage at annual or six-monthly intervals. (One further refinement might be survey particular categories of mental health coverage (suicide, body image, psychosis etc.) in a rolling sequence thus building up a longitudinal picture of coverage of these conditions. This would have the added benefit of offering an evidence base on which to assess the success or failure of condition-specific programmes aimed at shaping media coverage.)

At present the mainly quantitative approach adopted by Headline is missing an opportunity to produce results which could inform how Headline approaches media outlets. For example, the research suggests that murder-suicides and celebrity suicides throw up particular issues for Irish media outlets and that it might be useful to focus particularly on those areas in conversation with those outlets. However, to do that we would need to be able to point to research demonstrating that these are the real issues and, as currently, reported, the media monitoring operation does not and cannot do this.

## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

This section is mainly focused on the results of journalist interviews but is augmented with a final section reflecting the consensus views emerging from interviews with stakeholders in the Mental Health sector. We have adopted a broad approach to understanding the efficacy of what we have characterised as Headline’s “emergency response” function, seeking to situate it both within Headline’s wider set of relationships with media professionals but also within the general approach media professionals report as characteristic of their approach to suicide reporting.

We interviewed a total of 38 journalists working at a national and local level in all media: print, broadcast, digital natives and online versions of legacy media. Where appropriate/relevant we have identified responses which appear specific to particular categories of media. However, for the most part we have aggregated the responses. Where useful we have included direct quotes from the interviewees. However, in the interest of ascertaining frank perspectives from our interviewees we committed not to attribute specific comments to named individuals. Thus the quotes are anonymised.

***Do Irish journalists see suicide stories as different? In other words, have they internalised the notion that they demand a particular approach and perhaps more caution than other stories?***

The summary response to this question is in the affirmative: the default mode for most of the journalists interviewed is to avoid reporting suicides where possible. Where they are reported there is an awareness of the need to avoid romanticisation and details of method. However there are several sets of contexts (see below) where the default response of Irish news media *is* to report on the suicide.

Obviously this question of whether journalists see suicide stories as “special” is key given that a core element Headline’s mission is to sensitise Irish media professionals to the implication of positive and negative reporting on suicide. Without exception the interviewees describe suicide-related stories as demanding far greater caution than other stories and thus stories on suicide are far more likely to be referred up the line (i.e. to editors). Furthermore, as the figures from the Headline annual reports from 2008 on the absolute and relative incidence of negative stories illustrate, and as several of the journalists interviewed volunteered without prompting, an overt cognisance of the implications of different approaches to the reporting of suicide has developed over the past decade (“We are aware of the guidelines and would be more cautious than in times previous.”)

## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

*"Now in fairness to Headline they did play a role in the early days. I think when a newspaper would print a story and they'd go a bit too far, you'd always get correspondence from Headline in the days afterwards pointing out where you went wrong: making you more aware of your responsibilities. That played a big part."*

Specifically, there is an unprompted awareness amongst virtually all interviewees of the need:

- To avoid romanticising suicide;
- To avoid detailing methods (again because of an overt awareness of the risk of copycatting); and
- To include references to helplines.

A number of the journalists interviewed suggested that, to an extent, the default mode is simply not to report a death by suicide at all. In effect then it is treated as akin to any other death by natural causes and thus a personal matter (“Suicide isn’t necessarily a story”, “If it’s a suicide and there’s no other issue involved we won’t cover it.”) Remarkably, at least one national media outlet appears – on the back of external (guideline) advice – to actively avoid reporting on suicide-related stories even where, on the face of it, the details of the story tick several news value boxes. (“We might cover a story but drop it if there is a whiff of suicide”.) Thus the fact that the manner of death is suicide is not intrinsically considered worthy of note by journalists in the first place. In the event that the individual has some celebrity, the death may be reported but again the default is to use code language such as “died suddenly”, “personal tragedy” etc.

Nonetheless interviewees also argue that in certain contexts that the public interest may be served by reporting on suicides. Examples repeatedly cited include:

- High profile suicides which are, at least notionally, connected with broader societal crises (collapse of the economy) or suicide clusters;
- Where the death or suicide attempt provokes a significant (i.e. very public) response from the emergency services; and
- Murder-suicides which are clearly regarded as inherently newsworthy. (Some interviewees also appeared to legitimate offering more detail on method in such cases.)

## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

There is a concern amongst the journalist interviewees with regard to tabloid practices in particular relating to the reporting of suicide. These are supported by Headline’s own figures which suggest that the incidence of problematic coverage is objectively higher amongst tabloid newspapers. However, in interview, the responses from tabloid journalists do not suggest the latter consciously adopt a more sensational attitude when dealing with suicide.

Similarly, despite the caricature of online reporting as the “Wild West” of journalism, this is not reflected in the interviews. Digital natives outlets argue that their more direct connection with their “users” (audiences) can result in an immediate “push-back” from audiences if they perceive that the online outlet has used inappropriate language or more broadly dealt with the subject in an inappropriate manner. There is also an awareness among online outlets that their relatively neophyte status means they perhaps lack the legitimacy associated with legacy media. Hence there is a strong incentive to present themselves as reliable and trustworthy (both in terms of veracity but also in how they approach stories). Digital natives are also more likely to pick up external (to Ireland) stories than other media which may bring external news agendas into play. However, in both cases, interviewees stress that they edit such stories in line with local suicide reporting guidelines and/or subject them to particularly close fact-checking scrutiny.

In a similar vein, local media report that precisely because they are local, there is a possibility that the family and friends of the person who has died are directly or indirectly known to the local journalist (“not too many layers between us and the reader”) and thus there is an added incentive for sensitive reporting.

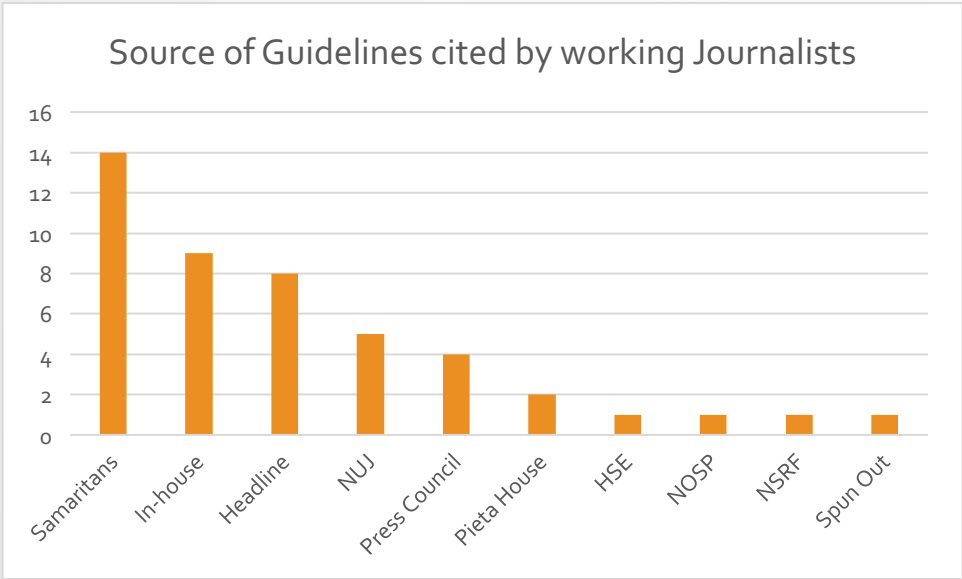
***Do the media outlets interviewed refer to specified codes/guidelines when reporting on a suicide-related story? If so, what are these codes?***

The answer to the first question here is generally in the affirmative. However, the level of specificity in interviewee responses varies. In some institutions (generally associated with “elite” media) there are extensive media outlet-specific in-house guidelines. Others refer to guidelines from Headline, the Samaritans, the NUJ ethics code etc. A minority, while asserting that they refer to guidelines are somewhat vague as to exactly where they have been sourced from. The sense in these latter cases is that the guidelines have been internalised and the journalists in questions do not need to repeatedly consult a written list. (“I do not specifically consult guidelines but am guided by experience”)

# Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

It is important to acknowledge that the in-house codes are usually developed by reference to external guidelines so it likely that the impact of the Samaritans/Headline codes is slightly understated by the guide above. (It should also be acknowledged that the journalists interviewed were aware in advance that Headline would be a subject of the research so this may have positively influenced the number of references to its codes.) It may also be significant that when one goes to the Headline website and seeks advice on reporting particular types of stories (e.g. murder suicide) the fact that one is likely to be redirected to a page trade-marked ‘Samaritans’ may mean that even those who go to the Headline website leave under the impression they’ve consulted the Samaritans.

Interestingly, a small minority of respondents point to the fact that audience members may “spontaneously” (prompted by Headline?) tweet guidelines to the media outlet in the wake of coverage which does not reflect best practice.





## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

### ***Awareness of Headline***

Most of the interviewees have at least heard of Headline and, at a minimum, associate it with suicide reporting practices. However, just over a quarter had either no awareness at all or had only a very distant understanding of its functions. For the majority who were “actively” aware of Headline, the main avenue for this was through receipt of their generic press releases (i.e. non-targeted media alerts). A small minority had also encountered Headline through receipt of training (either whilst a student or through sessions organised in-house) while a slighter greater number (but still no more than 20%) have received direct contact from Headline regarding specific stories.

### ***Assessment of Headline’s work***

The overall assessment of Headline by practicing journalists is, though positive, not unambivalent. For about a quarter of interviewees, Headline’s work is unambiguously positive, but for a very small minority (literally one or two interviewees) there is close to outright hostility to the organisation (though, crucially, not to the idea that reporting on suicide should be treated with caution).

*“I would be somebody very cognisant of the risks and concerns attached to all of this. I work for a serious newspaper and Headline have an amazing ability to irk people in our trade. For a communications organisation they have an ability to behave with size 12s because of the manner in which they approach the media. It’s not that we disagree with them on the basic points, we’re fully in agreement with them, but they cannot seem to hide a teacher-like role when in communication with media.”*

*“Guidelines come from people not in the daily business of news reporting.”*

We include these quotes not because they are widely representative of the views of the journalists interviewed (they are not) but because of the strength of their negativity. Furthermore these same interviewees suggested that such attitudes towards Headline would be common across other media outlets. Crucially, the research as a whole does not support this. The predominant attitude lies somewhere in the middle.

The typical narrative found amongst interviewees (across the gamut from tabloid to broadsheet newspaper) recounts an initial encounter with Headline via what are repeatedly characterised as “annoying” letter or email contacts drawing the attention of the media outlet either to specific infractions of the code or in some cases sending out material in anticipation of a suicide-related story breaking.

## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

The initial internal media outlet response is effectively “who are these people to tell us how to run our business?” However, in most of these narratives, the interviewees acknowledge that the Headline intervention performed a “consciousness raising” function which led to definitive changes in subsequent approaches to suicide reporting. Indeed, in some cases this has led to a much more active media outlet/Headline engagement including workshops. Once that process has been gone through, contacts tend to decline: having internalised the guidelines, the media outlets then tend to “run our own show” thereafter.

*“I think there was a bit of mirth at the beginning [of Headline’s operations] and this isn’t just where I work...you’d get a letter from Headline and the joke was we must be doing something right here. That was the case for a year or two, but it started to sink in...We’ve kind of come on leaps and bounds in this country in the media in the last four or five years, and there’s no laughing about Headline anymore to be quite honest.”*

Furthermore, in a counterweight to the finger-wagging, “teacherly” characterisation above, several interviewees also highlight the importance of positive reinforcement, either through a note from Headline praising examples of positive coverage or through the annual media awards. This is particularly significant in the case of media outlets who have previously been singled out for censure and have actively adopted new approaches to suicide reporting as a consequence. In other words, overt recognition and positive reinforcement of behavioural change on the part of media practitioners is very important.

A final consideration in this regard relates to those journalists who express resistance or other negative attitudes towards Headline. The fact that despite the expression of such attitudes, actual journalistic practice does appear to have changed since 2006 raises a question of whether there may in fact be some value to such antagonism. It is possible that a “softly, softly” approach may not prompt the kind of conscious-altering behaviour several of the interviewees advert to. Thus, although we propose developing inter Headline-Media Practitioner relationships below, we are not necessarily advocating for a “lighter touch” approach.

## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

### *How helpful do journalists find the guidelines?*

The answers here do not exclusively refer to Headline guidelines but also those of the NUJ and the Samaritans. There is a strong consensus welcoming the existence of any guidelines suggesting that they are regarded as useful signposts in what journalists recognise to be sensitive territory. (Indeed the tone is often deferential: “we are not the experts in this area. You have to go with the expert advice, bow to expert knowledge.” “Guidelines are there for a reason.”) There is also a very broad acknowledgment that the guidelines do not get in the way of telling a story: “you take the guidelines into account and then we take our own editorial stance on each story on its merits.”

Nonetheless there are some exceptions to this positivity: one repeated objection was the sense that the guidelines were sometimes used as a blunt instrument and that, by definition, they cannot take account of the specifics of every story. Murder-suicides for example prompted media outlets to look for murder-suicide specific guidelines, because they constitute events where two story types with contrasting rules converge.

*“... as soon as that murder suicide occurred or other murder-suicide occurred, we got this research sent to us from the NSRF, before any article had been written, effectively saying what could and couldn't be said. The data they sent to us was actually to do with suicide clusters, but I suppose they're suggesting that there could be copycat incidents, even though it was clearly a murder-suicide – the statistics that they sent us didn't even reference murder-suicide at all, so I would argue that it was not particularly relevant.... So I would think that if organisations are sending guidelines they have to cognitive that there are different types of suicide and this catch-all didn't serve any good purpose”*

In this regard it is striking that none of the correspondents who raised the question of murder-suicides mentioned the specific advice on the Headline page (from the Samaritans) on reporting murder-suicides. (It's unclear as to whether they are genuinely unaware of this advice – and it is buried in the website which still has missing links (see below) - or whether the advice offered is inadequate.)

On the whole, there is little sense that journalists adopt a knee-jerk defensive attitude with regard to admonitions to adhere to suicide reporting guidelines. Rather, in the context of working on often complex stories, the journalists interviewed suggest that they sometimes require story-specific advice and that this may not always be forthcoming from Headline.



## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

One media outlets noted with regard to a particular murder-suicide story that “In this case Headline were not helpful but via media alerts kept reiterating the guidelines like a mantra rather than considering the specifics of the case”. This sort of attitude is particularly common among those media where the news cycle is faster (i.e. especially radio). A small handful expressed desire for something like a helpline number for immediate guidance (“Headline would be more effective if they had the resources to flag stories as they are happening as this is the contemporary news environment, that of real time coverage”).

However, when asked if they’d ever actively sought guidance from another body on how to handle the reporting of a murder-suicide, the vast majority were quick to say ‘no’:

*“We have never felt the need to consult externally – we are an all-news organisation, that’s all we do. We have a whole wealth of experience in-house on which to draw...if we don’t get the answer in that group, it’s time to go home.”*

(In addition some radio interviewees felt that the guidelines were primarily oriented towards print although the precise difficulty this constituted was not described.)

### ***Do time/deadline pressures sometimes lead to inadvertent breaches of the guidelines?***

The consensus view here is that they do not. Again there is a general sense of erring on the side of caution. Regardless of deadline pressures, if the media outlet is not confident of how to handle a suicide-related story, they will not rush to press/air. (“Suicide raises a red flag so time is not ever an issue.”) However, this is – unsurprisingly – far less strongly asserted amongst online media, regardless of whether they are net native or online versions of legacy media. One online editor noted:

*“Almost all of the media organisations in Ireland now have live websites that publish news pretty much as it happens...there’s a time pressure that does not exist to the same extent with the newspaper.”*

The one – repeated - exception to this relates to celebrity suicides (implicitly from outside Ireland) where the fact that audiences have access to borderless media makes it harder to ignore a news agenda which is being generated overseas but accessed by an Irish audience. (Notably the journalistic comments here relate less to suicide guidelines and more to gradations of privacy – there’s a sense that a celebrity death wouldn’t receive the same circumspection as the death by suicide of a more anonymous individual.)

## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

### ***Do the particular news values of your media outlet shape how suicide is reported?***

The question here was intended to assess whether journalists were conscious that their outlet’s news values might, for example, encourage a more sensationalist approach, given that the Headline annual reports make it clear that tabloid papers tend to be more consistent offenders with regard to guideline breaches. However, although outlets that might be characterised as “elite” media were happy to confirm that status and suggest that they wouldn’t “stoop” to the levels of tabloids, there was little hint from within the more popular media outlets that pressures to sensationalise were a key influence shaping their reporting on suicide. Again, tabloid journalists do not recognise themselves in the descriptions of them offered by their counterparts in other sectors of the media.

### ***Are the codes ambiguous?***

This question was in part prompted by the research team’s initial trawl through the Headline website which offers a variety of advice, “dos and don’ts”, and guidelines both from the Samaritans but also from wider sources outside Ireland. Our concern was that this might lead to confusion on the part of journalists, especially if there was any internal contradiction across these codes. However, as noted immediately below, no such ambiguity appeared to manifest for perhaps two reasons:

1. Our own examination and comparison of the various guidelines on the Headline site points to a high degree of consistency across those guidelines and virtually no internal contradiction. When we expanded our survey to consider guidelines offered by other institutions, (e.g. the NUJ, the Press Council and the NSRF) we reached similar conclusions. Thus the scope for ambiguity/contradiction within the text of the guidelines seems very limited.
2. A second factor is that, as noted above, journalists rarely actively seek to consult with external guidelines when working a specific suicide-related story. Thus they are already working to overtly stated in-house guidelines or personally internalised reporting principles. In this context the quality or otherwise of the Headline website guidelines is simply not relevant to the day-to-day practice of journalistic writing on suicide.

Given this, there is a general sense that the codes as they stand are comprehensible and workable. That said, a minority of interviewees requested an expansion of the guidelines to account for a wider variety of situations. (“Of course they ambiguous because every incident is unique.”) One or two actually sought more prescriptive guidelines:

*“Don’t say ‘Be aware of the impact of media portrayals of suicide’, say ‘Copycatting is a thing’”. [I.e., overtly state what the issue is.]*

## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

However, there is again a sense that although the codes are fine in the abstract, they can be hard to apply to a particular story: “where every story is unique to a certain extent, it’s very difficult to give specific guidelines that can be applied to every story”. This is reflected in a speech addressed to the 2015 Samaritans AGM by then Press Ombudsman, John Horgan:

*“Because every suicide is different, it is impossible – even if it were advisable – to devise a sort of policy strait-jacket to be donned by reporters every time they are called out to a suicide tragedy. The basic tools for reporting suicide are the same basic tools as for everything else: accuracy, timeliness, and respect for human dignity. In cases of personal grief or shock, however, there are two other gold standards: sympathy and discretion.”*

These kind of complaints point to something of a disconnect between journalists and Headline. If journalists feel that the guidelines can’t be applied to particular stories, one might expect them to seek clarification from Headline. That it appears that it simply doesn’t occur to them to do so may in part reflect the independent culture of journalism but may also point to the need to enhance Headline’s connections with the profession.

There is also a sense that, for perhaps a small majority (i.e. just over half) the guidelines are just that: guidelines. They clearly aren’t regarded as having the status of a Press Code and where ambiguity in interpreting the guidelines is created by the circumstances of a particular story, the media may revert to more generic news-value informed guidelines instead .

### ***Summary of journalist perspectives on Headline and Headline’s response function***

The interview findings do not suggest that journalists remain to be convinced of the need to adopt caution in the manner in which they address suicide-related stories or that they have any substantive issues with the guidelines as currently expressed. However, given the repeated observations regarding the difficulty of operationalising those guidelines in the very particular circumstances of a specific story, it does appear that there is a need for some mechanism whereby journalists can, at the very least, “run a story by” the external expertise which Headline embodies. Of course, in theory, this mechanism already exists, and occasionally, media practitioners will contact either the Samaritans, Headline or the NSRF to seek such advice. However, that they do not routinely contemplate this suggests a need to explore means to thicken the web of connections between Headline and the media.

## Actioning/Responding to Guideline Breaches or “Problematic” Coverage

### *Stakeholder perspectives on media actioning*

There is an aggregate view across the stakeholders spoken to that, at times, Headline has not been in a position to respond problematic content in a timely manner. In all cases, it is acknowledged that this relates to the resourcing of Headline: there simply aren't enough hours in the day for staff employed to do the media monitoring and the other duties. There's also a sense of precarity: not in the sense that someone might lose their job but that the nature of that job might change at short notice. For example the fact that the current Media Assistant is employed through SHINE appears to have led to a situation whereby the Assistant (or her equivalent) may be re-purposed for periods so that instead of working three days a week for Headline there will be periods where they are fully engaged with, for example, some aspect of the See Change programme. Furthermore, it appears that there is a relatively rapid turnover of staff who are brought in as news researchers. These individuals are not necessarily lost to the larger organisation as they seem likely to move into SHINE or a related project. However, given that a month may be spent training them in media monitoring it would seem logical to try and maintain them in that role for as long as possible to properly exploit the benefit of that training period.

The proposal to significantly reduce the amount of time invested in monitoring should improve this significantly. However, given the “emergency” nature of the response function, there is clearly a need to develop a formal protocol to ensure that in the event that either a) Headline staff are ill or on leave or b) or that a story breaks outside normal work hours that there is some means of responding quickly.

For example, it appears that when the Media Project Coordinator was on maternity leave in 2016 the gap was filled in a relatively ad hoc fashion by two people in addition to their existing functions. This appears to have coincided with a period in which Headline's outreach functions were significantly diminished.

The author of this report is not a management consultant and does not profess to be expert on deployment of Human Resources. Nonetheless the research tentatively suggests that, given the HSE Main Press Office's existing capacity to provide 24 hour media response cover, extending the responsibility of officers on call to respond to alerts about problematic coverage provided by a data analytics/media company with guidelines-informed responses may be worth considering.

## Education and Training

Of the 38 journalists interviewed, only five had had direct contact with Headline in the context of a training session/seminar/symposium. One of those five had encountered Headline as a student. Two more – both from larger media groups - were “reasonably certain” that Headline had been in their offices within the last five years but the individual journalists interviewed weren’t themselves present at those workshops. As a consequence this research cannot offer an extensive assessment of those workshops. Those who had received such training were generally positive (indeed sometimes very much so: “Good workshops, very practical, knowledgeable about the media environment, reporters enjoyed and found useful”) but again there was some doubt expressed as to whether the case studies used in the workshops could offer specific guidance in the context of subsequent stories.

For the most part then this section concentrates on the experience of those who have encountered Headline’s delivery of talks/lectures in a formal educational context.

Before doing so, it’s worth acknowledging that the journalists we spoke to were more likely to be senior figures (Heads of News, News Editors) and established (i.e. possibly fulltime, with a permanent contract) journalists. Their status is not typical of most who have entered the profession in the last decade. Freelance, short-term contracts are now the norm. Thus the likelihood that individual journalists might encounter Headline training whilst on the job has significantly declined because such journalists literally aren’t in the building. (This is doubly true of online outlets.)

Notwithstanding the confidence with which the media outlets interviewed describe themselves as sensitive to the guidelines, the logic of this suggests placing particular emphasis on reaching neophyte journalists at the training stage. Thus, if Headline does draw back from its active monitoring/coding of content, the research recommends placing a new emphasis on educational outreach.

Headline have an established relationship with a range of post-secondary/third level institutions teaching journalism around Ireland and the sessions are generally well-regarded. With regard to in-class presentations, there is strong agreement that they are in the abstract a good idea but there are significant variances in how the actual content is received by educators. It should be acknowledged that students themselves report very positively on the sessions. Although, one or two may adopt the “who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do?” response (and may advert to the fact that Headline does not have statutory powers), the general sense is that the Headline sessions alert them to considerations that would not otherwise have been raised.



## Education and Training

*"With Headline their research is up-to-date, the statistics, their case studies are up to date...I think they do an important job and anyone I've dealt with in Headline has been committed, engaged and professional in their dealing with us."*

(Against this we've spoken to a minority of educators who make more or less the opposite observation: "The slideshows are dated, they've got tear-sheets from red-tops thirty years ago". Without knowing exactly which presentation was last seen by this particular individual, it's hard to know what to make of this minority view. Furthermore, since the Media Project Coordinator points out that Headline presentations have never included material of such antiquity, it may be that a degree of hyperbole characterises such statements.)

Headline typically come into educational establishments as guest speakers. As a consequence, the sessions need to be organised from scratch every year. This may raise an issue of continuity. In some institutions it is clearly taken for granted that Headline will form an element of course content each year but this research proposes that a more formal structure be considered so that the Headline sessions are embedded into module design rather than, as they currently are, treated as add-ons. (Although some institutions have de facto already treated Headline as embedded, the same is not true across the board.)

In this regard the universal applicability of the Headline educational presentation needs to be explored. At present Headline delivers what appears to be a well-honed and generally effective presentation. However, it is not clear that that presentation takes account of the varied academic contexts into which the material will be delivered. Although the educators spoken to had a reasonably clear sense of what Headline would deliver none could recall being asked how the Headline lecture would relate to prior or subsequent course material. Depending on whether, for example, the guest lecture is slotted into a module on news values or one on news ethics, it may be that a slightly different approach is appropriate. To a certain extent it appears that at present there is a one size fits all approach. Furthermore, presumably reflecting the media monitoring emphasis on text-based media, there was a sense that the lectures/training were primarily oriented towards print-based guidelines. In other words, the particularities of radio and television media were not reflected in the examples given.

### ***Summary conclusions on education***

The education function of Headline is a clear “win” for the organisation. Given this the recommendation is that it should be expanded and more concretely embedded in formal third level education. This would imply a survey of current educational provision of, not just journalism education but of media production education in general. Thus Headline’s educational activities should include addresses to film students, those on radio and television production courses, and to students engaged in learning how to develop content for multi-media/online media.

## Conclusions

If the proposal to fully outsource the media monitoring/guideline breach identification function is adopted, Headline staff should find that their capacity to engage in media response and education activities is significantly enhanced: the logic of the proposal to cut on the media monitoring function is to free up time. Some of this would go on timely responses to problematic coverage, some on more extensive contact with student journalists AND other media producers through educational institutions. More broadly, however, it would free up space to engage with a wider set of media institutions and to deepen existing relationships.

The following list is not exhaustive but new relationships might include the following institutions:

- Screen Producers Ireland
- Screen Training Ireland
- Filmbase
- Independent Broadcasters of Ireland
- The Public Relations Institute of Ireland
- Newsbrands
- Regional Newspapers of Ireland
- The Press Council
- The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland

Some of these relationships already exist but on the basis of limited and sporadic contacts.

What is needed is a more or less permanent conversation between Headline and these bodies. This approach should also be expanded to cover relations with news media so that when there is problematic coverage there is a) less of a finger-wagging approach and b) more of a sense that an ongoing dialogue is simply being picked up and continued.

The research is not suggesting that the existing relationships aren't achieving Headline's core goals – i.e. encouraging media organisations to reflect more on how they represent suicide. However we are suggesting that at present relationships are for the most part necessarily reactive. We are instead proposing a much proactive "getting out there" relationship with the wider range of bodies listed above. In this regard it's important to reinforce just how receptive media outlets are to active engagement. The annual awards are taken very seriously by Irish media outlets and genuinely appear to encourage behaviour change.



## Conclusions

Finally, the research has also thrown up one other issue on which we offer brief conclusions below:

### ***Should Headline's responsibility for both mental health coverage and suicide coverage be disaggregated?***

At a minimum this research would suggest that, given the urgency associated with breaches of the guidelines in suicide reporting, clear priority should be given to Headline's activities in monitoring and actioning suicide coverage over those related to more general mental health coverage. In our view, although the tracking of more general mental health coverage remains important, it would be more appropriate to subject it to a longitudinal analysis (i.e. based on comparing changes/consistencies in coverage over time) which should be carried out at longer intervals (e.g. annually).

With regard to the specific question of disaggregation, the consensus among stakeholders is that it should not occur on the grounds that the two areas are intimately connected: incidence of suicide is obviously much greater amongst those with mental health conditions. Despite this, the research is not convinced that, given the emergency nature of responding to problematic suicide reporting (as opposed to the still serious but less urgent issue raised by stigmatising representation of, for example, people with schizophrenia), repurposing Headline as a suicide reporting only-focused organisation should not be explored.

As a corollary of this, there may be a logic to placing Headline in a direct reporting relationship with NOSP rather than SHINE. This might even extend to the sharing of office space which would also facilitate speedier communications between NOSP and Headline. Finally it would also put Headline in direct contact with the new NOSP research team.

In a related point there is clearly some logic (perhaps already established) in using the new NOSP in-house research team as a clearing house for content analysis on coverage of specific aspects of mental health as proposed earlier. If considered appropriate this could be conducted in conjunction with academic partners but the research feels that there is also scope for exploring the role of whichever media monitoring agency Headline retains after the current contract elapses in 2018. Machine coding of content could significantly enhance the size of the sample used in such research.

## List of Interviewed Stakeholders

<b>Jane Arigo</b>	Media Project Coordinator, Headline
<b>Claire Sheeran</b>	Media Assistant, Headline
<b>Sarah Woods</b>	Communications Manager, National Office for Suicide Prevention
<b>John Saunders</b>	Director, SHINE
<b>Rachel Wright</b>	Policy and Communications Manager, Samaritans Ireland
<b>Paul Bailey</b>	Head of Press and Media Relations, HSE
<b>Martin Rogan</b>	Chief Executive Officer, Mental Health Ireland
<b>Jill O’Herlihy</b>	Head of Communications and Fundraising, Mental Health Ireland
<b>Kahlil Coyle</b>	Currently Client Director at HSE but previously at SHINE, See Change and National Mental Health Campaign Manager at HSE
<b>Prof. Ellan Arensman</b>	Scientific Director, National Suicide Research Foundation
<b>Barry Finnegan</b>	Headline Steering Group Member and Journalism Lecturer Griffith College Dublin
<b>Seamus Dooley</b>	National Union of Journalists
<b>Peter Feeney</b>	Press Ombudsman
<b>Declan McLoughlin</b>	Policy Officer, Broadcasting Authority of Ireland



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