

Suicide and the Media Project (SAMP), Taiwan

Progress Report, December 2006

This report outlines findings from the Suicide and the Media Symposium held in Taipei on 17 November 2006, organised by the National Cheng-Chi University and The MediaWise Trust, and a subsequent lecture tour by MediaWise Director Mike Jempson. It also proposes follow-up activities as part of the MediaWise Suicide and the Media Project (SAMP).

Suicide in Taiwan

In recent years suicides in Taiwan have almost doubled, from 2,360 in 2000 to 4,100 in 2005, according to figures published by the recently-created National Suicide Prevention Center, which now operates through four regional units. Taiwan Lifeline International, a voluntary organisation that has been providing telephone counselling for 35 years and operates through 23 regional centres, also reports similar levels of increase in calls from distressed individuals.

Suicide now ranks ninth in the causes of death in Taiwan, with as many as 12 people a day taking their own lives. The impact of unemployment appears to be a significant factor, and suicide among older people is on the increase. The statistics are indicative of a significant social issue for Taiwan which has an ageing population and is losing manufacturing jobs to mainland China. As such suicide is a valid topic for media coverage. However much coverage is more sensationalist than informative, and it is clear that health professionals may need assistance in more effective media relations.

The media in Taiwan

Hundreds of journalism graduates emerge from Taiwan's many universities each year hoping to find employment in the island's flourishing and highly competitive media industry. There are said to be 360 newspapers, 5,700 magazines (including several dealing with journalism), more than 80 radio stations, some 70 TV channels (including five 24-news channels with another planned for 2007) to which 90% of the population subscribe, and about 20 local internet news services available to Taiwan's population of 23 million. Most are based in the Taipei, home to only 13% of the island's population of 23 million.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Taiwan 43 in its 2006 Worldwide Press Freedom Index, and the US-based Freedom House ranked it 35 in its 2006 Global Survey of Media Independence.

Over the last decade newspaper readership among the population has dropped from 80% to an estimated 50%, and competitive pressures led to the sudden closure of the *Ming Shen Daily* in November with a loss of 200 jobs. The sensationalist tabloid *Apple Daily* sells about 500,000 copies, outstripped only by *LibertyTimes*, which plans to launch its own 24 hours TV news channel in 2007. It is following in the footsteps of the loss-making *China Times* which now owns Chinese TV Network, one of Taiwan's most profitable broadcasting stations.

Ownership of news outlets affords influence in a highly politicised environment, yet soaps and game shows dominate the TV schedules. Two senior TV executives admitted that their news agenda is driven primarily by ratings. In competing for audiences news broadcasts rely heavily upon sensational footage. Ironically

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commentators suggested that in such a crowded news market-place achieving 1% of the potential viewing audience is considered an achievement.

Broadcasting is regulated by the National Communications Commission, but the National Press Council of the ROC is regarded as virtually defunct, and the Government Information office wields considerable power. A number of pressure groups have campaigned around media ethics issues, including the Foundation for the Prevention of Public Damage by the Media, the Taiwan Media Watch Foundation, and the Association of Taiwan Journalists. Some have highlighted irresponsible coverage of suicide. After demonstrations and official protests, *Apple Daily* was forced to apologise for publishing a front page photograph of the wife of the Mayor of Taichung covered in blood and clearly in agony as she was rushed into hospital after a car accident (19 Nov 2006). TV news the previous evening had repeatedly run footage of the scene.

According to several senior journalism trainers at different universities many of their students who take up internships before completing their degree course return to the academy shocked by the high pressure conditions under which they are expected to operate. It is a far cry from the theoretical model they have learned about, and some opt to follow their tutors and undertake second degrees rather than re-enter the trade.

Since university teachers are expected to have doctorates, relatively few bring substantial practical experience of the trade to their courses. Inevitably there appears to be a mismatch between how people are trained and what is expected of them in the workplace.

The predicament of those who are successful in gaining media jobs was summed up by one TV journalist who said simply "We are owned by the company." Although there are professional associations to which some may belong, few operate as industrial trade unions dealing with wages and conditions. Several journalists and journalists-turned-academics suggested that some are 'tainted' by their ideological stance, most operate merely as networking clubs which can be suborned by commercial, political or other interest groups.

The most frequent question asked by student journalists was what could be done to protect their professional integrity in the workplace. There is clearly room for strengthening the organisation of media workers to allow them greater independence of thought and action.

The Symposium and lecture tour

The Taipei Symposium, attended by media and health professionals, was shown local and international examples of 'insensitive' reporting of suicide, and heard evidence about academic research over many years into 'suicide contagion' following detailed and/or sensational media reports of suicide. Examples quoted included the 40% increase in suicides during the year following the untimely death of Japanese pop singer Yukiko Okada in 1986; the sudden and sustained 'popularity' in Hong Kong of an, until then, unusual suicide method detailed in media reports in 1998; the increase in suicides following extensive coverage of the death of Hong Kong entertainer Leslie Cheung in 2003.

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Dr Andrew Cheng revealed the results of his own clinical study of the impact of the suicide of Taiwanese entertainer Ni Min-Ran in 2005, which demonstrated an almost immediate increase in suicidal behaviour following coverage that dwelled on both the suicide method and speculation as to its cause. In general media coverage of suicide in Taiwan was shown to be sensational and insensitive.

Media practitioners present appeared unaware that their output might have such direct consequences upon behaviour. Some objected to the prurient nature of their output, and several felt it was important to relay the message to work colleagues that the content of suicide coverage could result in fatal imitation.

However the over-riding emphasis of the Symposium and the subsequent lecture tour was on the positive – that responsible coverage that provides accurate information, avoids speculation and unnecessary detail, and supplies contact details for those who might be affected by the issues raised, could help to save lives. MediaWise offered free use of its training materials to assist journalism trainers to increase awareness about the importance of sensitive coverage, and encouraged the development and distribution of locally relevant guidelines.

MediaWise is planning several activities to encourage responsible reporting of suicide in Taiwan during 2007.

These include producing a local version of the guidelines for media professionals leaflet devised by MediaWise, training of journalists, use of the media training and follow-up research monitoring media coverage of suicide.

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ENDNOTE

Mike Jempson would like to thank all those whose kindness and generosity made his visit to Taiwan (15-25 Nov) so enjoyable and fruitful, and especially those who made arrangements for him to:

- contribute to the *Media and Suicide Symposium* organised jointly by the National Cheng-Chi University and MediaWise in Taipei (17 November);
- address students and staff at
 - Chang-Jung Christian University, Tainan,
 - Nanhua University Chia Yi
 - the National Chung-Cheng University, Chia-Yi, and
 - Tzu-Chi Buddhist University, Hualien
- hold discussions with
 - faculty members at all five universities
 - staff and management of the counselling and suicide prevention agency Lifeline in Taipei and Kaosiung
 - staff at the National Suicide Prevention Center in Kaosiung
 - numerous national print and broadcast journalists and suicide prevention experts.
- give interviews to the national Public Service TV Channel and the Da-Ai Buddhist TV channel.