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"There's help for just about everything"

Evaluation of the Petre campaign 1999

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From 14 to 28 February 1999 the Petre channel at the Norwegian Broadcasting (NRK) ran a comprehensive campaign focusing on young people and suicide. The Suicide Research and Prevention Unit at the University of Oslo and the project manager for the Norwegian National Plan for Suicide Prevention collaborated with NRK journalists on the planning and evaluation phases of the campaign. More than two months after the conclusion of the campaign a listener survey was carried out by Norsk Gallup Institutt AS. This article will examine the background for and content of the campaign, and present some findings from the subsequent listener study.

Since the channel was launched five years ago, NRK Petre has been committed to awareness-raising activities, both through their journalistic profile and through campaigns focusing on particular social issues. This winter's campaign focused on suicide, and was the largest effort ever undertaken by the channel.

The focal target group for NRK Petre is the 9 – 30 age group, with special emphasis on the 15 – 25 group. Listener surveys have shown that the average number of listeners for this channel is 12% of Norway's population, comprising approximately 480 000 persons. Petre's opportunities in the context of suicide prevention are virtually unique as they communicate directly with groups of young people it is assumed are otherwise difficult to reach.

Suicide and the mass media

Running suicide-prevention campaigns in the mass media poses a particular kind of challenge. From experiences in Norway and abroad we know that suicide and suicide acts may have a contagious effect. A number of independent studies document that sensational stories in newspapers and on TV may increase the risk of suicide, particularly among young people (Ystgaard 1997). Comprehensive studies of American suicide data have shown time and place restricted increases in the suicide rate, particularly among teenagers and young adults, in the wake of unfortunate media focus (Gould et al 1990). It has been estimated that 1-5% of suicides among young persons may be explained as the result of a "contagious" effect. A possible explanation of "suicide infection" is the imitation theory, called the "Werther effect". In "The Sufferings of Young Werther" (1774) Goethe tells the story of the young dreamer Werther who shot himself in his grief for a lost love. This book gained enormous popularity, and in the period after its appearance many young men shot themselves. The book was blamed for the many suicides. Imitation together with such factors as identification and suggestion were believed to be some of the mechanisms at work (Ystgaard 1997). Another discussion is whether the general increase in attention to suicide as a phenomenon may contribute to making suicide a more common and everyday issue, thus also causing an increase in the occurrence of suicide.

Because superficial treatment of the suicide issue may be detrimental and in its most severe consequence lead to more suicides, the following advice has been agreed on in situations where mentioning suicide in the media is unavoidable:

1. Avoid romanticizing or adulating the suicide or the person.
2. Avoid sensational news of suicides in the media.
3. Avoid describing the method of suicide.
4. Do not put suicides on the front page.
5. Avoid describing suicide as a solution to problems.

(Grøholt 1999)

It has also been pointed out that media mention may have a positive impact and favourable outcome. The mass media are in a unique position to illuminate a topic and to distribute information about where to turn for help. On a general basis, information about who is in the danger zone will make it easier for the general public to see who needs help and support. There are cases where the mass media have cited examples of persons who have received help and who have recovered from suicide crises. Such news may have a positive impact (Grøholt 1999). So far it has not been possible to prove that prevention measures focusing on the general population of young people have had any effect. This may be because the phenomenon has such a low frequency, and moreover, there is agreement that preventive schemes primarily should be focused on young persons with a particularly high risk of suicide (Grøholt 1999).

A professional anchor and collaboration are essential

When NRK Petre started planning their new campaign for young people, the Suicide Research and Prevention Unit at the University of Oslo (SSFF) and the project manager for the National Plan for Suicide Prevention were included as important partners throughout the entire planning, implementation and evaluation phases of the campaign.

NRK Petre's credibility with young people and the professional integrity represented by SSFF proved to be a good combination for the design of the campaign message. There was collaboration on the general campaign approach as well as more specific professional guidance by SSFF regarding individual campaign elements, such as the "radio spots". These spots consisted of excerpts from interviews with young persons who had attempted to commit suicide. A concrete example of the professional guidance is that these interviews were bracketed within the main campaign message "It's worth living", and "There's help for just about everything". *Hope and coping with life crises were in focus*. The radio programmes also frequently stated where assistance was available, including via various outreach telephones.

The campaign

Aim

The campaign had two main aims:

- To focus on suicide among young people as a social problem.
- To tell young persons who might be in the danger zone that regardless the problem, help is available.

The aim was to reach out with a concise and clear message focusing directly on the problem as much as possible. The campaign's approach was to speak directly to those who are at risk of committing suicide, and also to tell the remainder of the population that suicide is a problem in modern Norwegian society.

Description of the campaign

The campaign consisted of various "radio spots" or "sound bytes". Each spot comprised an interview with young persons who had attempted to commit suicide. Each interview was framed by the main message of the campaign, "There is help for just about everything" and "It's worth living". Moreover the radio programmes *Mamarazzi* and *NRQ* put an editorial focus on the topic with interviews and guests. The *Opptur* programme, Petre's daily three-hour morning airing, treated the topic more indirectly.

Mamarazzi is a programme with a wide scope focusing on news and issues featuring reports and interviews, while *NRQ* focuses on the youngest section of Petre's target group, i.e. the 10 – 14 age group. The campaign was aired during a two-week period, from 5 to 28 February 1999. The radio spots were aired just before the daily news bulletins every other hour. The campaign was concluded with a two-hour topic programme aired on Petre. Free postcards were also printed and distributed, and TV trailers were aired. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs provided NOK 250 000 to pay for the campaign, which was the total campaign budget.

Listener survey

Sample and method

Two months after the campaign was completed, Norsk Gallup Institutt AS carried out a major listener survey. This survey included six questions about the Petre campaign. The Suicide Research and Prevention Unit and the project manager from the Norwegian Board of Health formulated the questions that focused on the radio part of the campaign. The questions centred on whether listeners had noticed the campaign, whether they had heard the main message, and what they felt about airing such a campaign on Petre.

The telephone survey comprised 579 interviews (281 men and 298 women), which were nationally representative. Thus all listeners were asked, not only Petre listeners. Those interviewed were 15 years of age or older, and were divided into four age

groups: 15-29 years of age, 30-44 years of age, 45-59 years of age and 60 years of age and older. A total of 152 persons of the 15-29 age group were interviewed.

Findings

Recalling the campaign

Two questions focused on whether the listeners recalled the campaign. The aim of the first question is to ascertain whether the listeners recall the campaign with no prompting, and the second whether they recalled the campaign when reminded it was about suicide:

1 In February this year NRK Petre focused on a serious topic in various radio programmes. Can you recall the topic?

2 If no – the programme spots were about the topic of suicide. Can you remember whether you noticed anything of what was featured?

The findings show that approximately 2% of those asked were able to recall that during February NRK Petre broadcasted various programmes dealing with the topic of suicide (question 1). Approximately 10% of those asked recalled the programmes when they were reminded that they dealt with suicide (question 2). The total attention rate, i.e. those who either remembered spontaneously or when prompted remembered the campaign, was approximately 12% (68 persons). In the 15-29 age group 21 out of 152 (14 %) of those asked remembered the campaign. More men had noticed the programme (14 %) than women (9 %). There were also major geographical differences. While 17% of those asked in the county of Trøndelag and northern Norway had noticed the programmes, the corresponding figure for eastern Norway was 7%.

Due to the particularly sensitive nature of the campaign we were particularly interested in ascertaining how the listeners had perceived the campaign message. Below we shall examine how the 68 persons who had noticed the campaign assessed it. However, it is important to emphasize that we do not have the research basis to draw more general conclusions regarding Petre listener attitudes to the campaign on the basis of the figures we present here.

Attitudes to the topic being presented by NRK

3 What do you think about NRK presenting such topics in their radio programmes?

The majority of those who recalled having heard some of these programmes were positive to NRK presenting the suicide topic in their radio programmes. Sixty-three

persons (93%) responded that they were fairly or very positive to this. The responses are generally positive in all age groups, nor were there any particular regional differences.

Interest in the suicide topic

4 How interesting did you find this topic?

Fifty-six (82%) of those familiar with the campaign responded that the topic was fairly or very interesting. Interest was approximately equal in all age groups. In our target group, 15-29 years of age 81%, or 17 out of 21 respondents, stated that the topic was quite or fairly interesting to them. Almost all the women, 27 of 28, responded that the topic was very or fairly interesting. Of the men, 30 out of 40 (75%) responded that they found the programme interesting.

The campaign's main message

5 Can you recall what the main message of this campaign was?

Twenty-six (38%) of those who recalled the campaign had an opinion as to what was the main message of the campaign. In the 15-29 age group the response to the same question was 57% (12 out of 21). A total of 37 (54%) of those persons who were familiar with the campaign had no opinion as to the main message.

The function of the campaign

6 Has the topic presented by NRK Petre reinforced your belief that it is possible to get help in a crisis?

Thirty-five (52%) of those familiar with the campaign had reinforced their belief that it is possible to obtain help in a crisis. Sixteen (24%) responded negatively, and 17 (25%) did not know or did not answer the question.

Discussion

Twelve per cent (in the 15-29 age group 14%) remembered the campaign after two months. The percentage would probably have been substantially higher if only a selection of Petre listeners had been asked and not a selection of all the nation's listeners. It must also be assumed that the figure would have been higher if the Gallup survey had been performed immediately after the campaign had been concluded.

From previous listener surveys we know that Petre has a predominance of young listeners. Moreover, we know that more men and persons from rural districts listen to Petre. As shown previously, the figures from this campaign suggest that we have reached the same groups of listeners. This is important. We also know that with respect to the suicide rate, the relative figure for men and women who commit suicide is 3:1. The greatest increase of suicide figures in recent years has occurred among the younger age groups, particularly among young men. Another development trend for the suicide frequency in Norway in recent years is that the largest increase of suicide figures is now occurring in less central regions of the country. Airing the campaign on Petre thus allows important target groups to be reached by suicide prevention measures.

As to the responses from those who had noticed the campaign, we see that by far most of them were positive to the topic being presented and found it interesting. There may be several reasons why more than half of those who had noticed the campaign were unable to state what the main message was. First some may have forgotten as more than two months had passed since the campaign was aired. However, this may also be due to the fact that the topic recurred in so many programmes and types of programmes that it made the main message somewhat difficult to grasp.

Nevertheless, more than half of the listeners stated that the campaign had strengthened their belief that help could be obtained in a crisis. This is encouraging, as part of the main purpose was precisely to give listeners hope and belief that there is a point in seeking help. The fact that as many as 25% were in the response category "Don't know /No response", is both understandable and natural based on the exceedingly difficult and complex topics that were dealt with.

Conclusion

We are not aware that there have been campaigns previously with such a limited message focused on young people. The message was presented in a very clear form in a medium that communicates directly with the target group that has proven hardest to reach with preventive activities. In spite of the fairly long period of time that passed between the actual campaign and the user study, the findings are encouraging. Those who remembered the campaign displayed a very positive attitude to the fact that the topic was presented. They found the topic interesting, and more than half of them had their belief confirmed that help can be obtained during crises.

There are great challenges connected to the presentation of suicide-prevention campaigns in the media. This study raises some central issues in this context. The responses we have received from our listeners have given some uplifting signals. It is now vital to carry out more comprehensive studies in this field to provide a better research basis for illuminating these issues.

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