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Legal Protection For Children Regarding The Reporting Of Suicides In Digital Media: Content Exploitation And The Risk Of Copycat Suicide — A Case Study In Ngada, East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract	In January 2026, Indonesia was widely concerned by reports concerning the suicide death of an elementary school student in Ngada, East Nusa Tenggara. Digital reporting on a child's suicide raises complex legal issues. Although the press performs an informational and social-control function, sensational publication, explicit disclosure of a child victim's identity, repetitive narratives, and the use of photographs or social-media materials may undermine the child's dignity and increase psychological risks for bereaved families and vulnerable readers. This article examines legal protection for children in suicide reporting through a case study of the death of an elementary school student identified by the initials YBR in Ngada Regency in January 2026. It employs normative legal research using statutory and conceptual approaches, based on legislation, press guidelines, official reports, and scholarly literature. The analysis focuses on the Child Protection Law, the Press Law, the Child-Friendly Reporting Guidelines, and the Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide and Suicide Attempts. The study finds that Indonesia has a normative framework protecting children's identity and dignity and establishing standards for responsible suicide reporting. However, implementation faces challenges arising from the speed and participatory nature of digital media, content recirculation, and inadequate limits on excessive or sensational material. Copycat suicide should be understood as a population-level risk shaped by multiple factors, not as a causal relationship that can be inferred directly from a single case. The article recommends stronger correction and updating procedures, protection of child victims' identities, provision of help-seeking information, and more responsive complaint and monitoring mechanisms.
Keywords	Child Protection; Copycat Suicide; Digital Media; Content Exploitation; Ngada; Suicide Reporting

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INTRODUCTION

Digital media developments have transformed the ways in which people obtain and disseminate information. In the past, the public mainly received news through print media, radio, and television. With the growth of the internet and digital technology, supported by widespread mobile-phone ownership, information is now

increasingly delivered online. News no longer ends with its initial publication. It can be copied, reshared, excerpted, edited, expanded, shortened, given a new headline, and circulated across multiple platforms within a short period. These characteristics support information openness, but they also increase the risks of privacy violations, the circulation of traumatic material, and the exploitation of personal suffering for public attention.

This issue becomes particularly sensitive when the subject of reporting is a child who has died by suicide. Children are a vulnerable group and may be exposed to exploitative news through the digital devices they use. They have rights to life, development, protection from violence, and respect for their dignity and best interests. Such protection should not be disregarded merely because a child has died. In the context of reporting, surviving family members may also experience further harm if the child's identity, photographs, alleged final message, or details of the incident are disseminated disproportionately. Law No. 35 of 2014, amending the Child Protection Law, is an important normative basis for the obligations of the state and society to protect children.

The case examined in this article concerns the death of an elementary school student identified by the initials YBR in Ngada Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, in late January 2026. The incident attracted widespread attention after reports linked it to the family's economic limitations and the child's need for school stationery. Subsequent reports, however, quoted the police as stating that the investigation had not concluded that the inability to purchase stationery was the sole cause of the child's death. The government also indicated that possible psychological factors required further examination. Accordingly, this article does not assign a single cause to the child's death, nor does it treat any particular news report as proof that copycat suicide occurred.

The Ngada case illustrates how a simple and emotional narrative can dominate digital reporting. A child's tragedy may become a symbol of poverty, parental failure, school indifference, or state negligence, even though suicidal behaviour generally has complex causes that cannot be reduced to one factor. When such narratives are repeatedly circulated and accompanied by photographs, an alleged final note, the incident location, or other details, there is a risk that the child's suffering will become a commodity for media attention. The child may be exposed to content exploitation, while other children may be exposed to the potentially harmful effects of suicide reporting. A distinction must therefore be made between coverage that serves the public interest and exploitation that turns a family's grief into sensational material.

This issue deserves particular public attention in view of concerns about children's deaths by suicide in Indonesia and the need to protect children as the next generation. In an ANTARA report dated 4 February 2026, KPAI member Diyah Puspirarini stated that Indonesia had the highest number of child suicide cases in Southeast Asia. The figures reported in that source are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reported Number of Children's Suicide Cases in Indonesia

Year	Number of reported cases
2023	46
2024	43
2025	26

Source: ANTARA News, reporting KPAI's statement, "Indonesia has the highest number of child suicide cases in Southeast Asia," 4 February 2026.

The World Health Organization (WHO) explains that suicide reporting can either strengthen or undermine prevention efforts. Extensive, prominent, sensational, or method-focused coverage, as well as reporting that normalizes suicide, may increase imitation risks among vulnerable groups, including children. Conversely, reporting that emphasizes hope, recovery, and access to assistance can contribute to prevention. In Indonesia, the Press Council has issued Press Council Regulation No. 2/Regulation-DP/III/2019 on Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide and Suicide Attempts and Press Council Regulation No. 1/Regulation-DP/II/2019 on Child-Friendly Reporting Guidelines.

Although these guidelines are available, the digital environment creates implementation challenges. An article may be updated while retaining a sensational headline; old content may continue to appear in search engines; and users may recirculate material that an editorial team has removed. In the digital environment, audience attention is a valuable resource for account managers and media companies. The more users like, read, watch, access, and reshare a report, the greater its reach and potential economic value to its publisher. Child protection must therefore be discussed not only as a matter of journalistic ethics but also as a legal obligation connected to privacy, the best interests of the child, and press responsibility.

Against this background, this article addresses three research questions: (1) What is the legal framework for protecting children in digital media reporting on suicide? (2) How should content exploitation and copycat suicide risks be understood in reporting on the Ngada case? and (3) What more effective legal protection model can be formulated to prevent further harm to children, families, and society? This study is expected to contribute to scholarship on press law and

child protection while offering practical recommendations for editorial teams and policymakers.

METHODS

This study is normative legal research employing statutory and conceptual approaches. The statutory approach is used to examine legal norms concerning child protection, press freedom, and reporting guidelines. The conceptual approach is used to analyse the best interests of the child, children's dignity, the social responsibility of the press, content exploitation, and the risk of suicide contagion through media reporting.

Primary legal materials comprise Law No. 23 of 2002 on Child Protection, as amended, among other instruments, by Law No. 35 of 2014; Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press; Press Council Regulation No. 1/Regulation-DP/II/2019 on Child-Friendly Reporting Guidelines; and Press Council Regulation No. 2/Regulation-DP/III/2019 on Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide and Suicide Attempts. Secondary legal materials include journal articles, WHO guidelines, official government publications, and media reports used in a limited manner to reconstruct the context of the child suicide case in Ngada, East Nusa Tenggara.

Materials were collected through library research and searches of official documents. The materials were analysed descriptively and analytically by identifying applicable norms, comparing relevant protection standards, and applying them to the context of reporting on the Ngada case. This study did not conduct interviews, undertake a comprehensive audit of all digital reporting, or empirically measure the effects of reporting on readers' behaviour. Accordingly, the discussion of media compliance is a normative analysis and does not constitute a finding that any particular media outlet has violated the law. The discussion of copycat suicide is likewise framed as a risk recognized in the literature, not as a causal relationship established in the Ngada case.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Legal Framework for Protecting Children in Suicide Reporting

Legal protection in this context can be understood as a guarantee that children will not become objects of reporting that disregards their rights, dignity, privacy, and best interests. Such protection has preventive and corrective dimensions. Preventive measures include concealing the identity of a child victim, choosing appropriate language, avoiding details about the method and location, and assessing short- and long-term risks before publication. Corrective measures include correcting and

updating reports, anonymizing material that has already been published, handling public complaints, and stopping the circulation of inappropriate content.

First, the Child Protection Law positions children as rights-holders who must be protected from treatment that harms their development and dignity. In reporting, this principle means that the public interest cannot automatically be used to justify disclosing a child's identity or private details. An assessment must consider whether the information is genuinely necessary to understand a public issue or merely increases the news item's appeal.

Second, Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press guarantees press freedom while also regulating the press's responsibility in carrying out its informational function. Press freedom cannot be interpreted as freedom without accountability. Reporting must continue to observe accuracy, the public interest, and professional ethical standards. Particular caution is required when reporting concerns a child who has died by suicide because the child was a minor and can no longer provide consent, clarify what happened, or protect themselves against the dissemination of content.

Third, the Child-Friendly Reporting Guidelines require journalists to protect children's identities in the circumstances covered by the guidelines and to use factual, positive, and empathetic narratives and visuals. Identity is not limited to a name. Additional information—such as the school, village, photographs, family members' names, or detailed location—may enable members of the local community to identify the child. Replacing a name with initials may therefore be insufficient if other information still makes identification possible.

Fourth, the Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide and Suicide Attempts specifically remind the media not to exploit an incident as sensational news, not to describe methods in detail, to avoid explicitly identifying child victims or locations, to consider possible imitation effects among vulnerable groups, and to include help-seeking information and relevant expert opinions. These guidelines are the most direct instrument for assessing whether coverage is responsible and prioritizes child protection.

Legal protection therefore does not depend solely on whether a child victim's name is prohibited from publication. Compliance must be assessed comprehensively by examining the headline, photographs, captions, published article, language, and subsequent updates. In the digital ecosystem, identity may be disclosed indirectly, and content removed from a main page may remain available in search-engine snippets or through other users' reposts.

2. The Ngada Case and the Challenges of Digital Reporting

The death of an elementary school student in Ngada Regency in January 2026 attracted national public attention. Some initial reports emphasized that the child lived in poverty and had previously asked for money to buy books and pens, which the family could not provide because of its limited financial circumstances. Later reports included police statements that the investigation had not concluded that the school supplies were the sole cause. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection also stated that other aspects, including psychological factors, were still being examined.

Differences in emphasis among reports demonstrate the importance of updating information and exercising caution when framing the cause of a death. A premature or exaggerated narrative—particularly one that publishes an alleged final note and links the death to a single incident—may create an unverified impression of causation. In a case involving a child, such simplification may stigmatize the family, school, community, or a particular economic condition, while obscuring the need to understand the various factors that may have played a role.

This analysis does not claim that all media outlets reporting on the Ngada case committed violations. Compliance with the guidelines must be assessed in relation to specific articles, including their publication dates, headlines, visuals, details, and subsequent updates. Nevertheless, the case can be used to identify risks that arise when a child's tragedy goes viral: identity may be reconstructed from fragments of information; photographs or private messages may circulate without control; and the same article may be republished merely to increase likes or readership.

In digital journalism, content exploitation may take the form of emotionally manipulative headlines, repeated narratives of suffering, the use of photographs of grieving family members without adequate consideration, dissemination of a child's private messages, and unnecessary depictions of the location or manner of death. Not every emotional report automatically constitutes exploitation. The relevant criterion is proportionality: whether the material is necessary for the public interest, has been verified, respects privacy, and minimizes the risk of further harm to readers.

There is also a risk that content will remain accessible over time. News that was initially relevant may continue circulating for years, reappear on anniversaries, or be reposted with a new headline. For families, such repetition may revive the moment of loss, prolong grief, and expose them again to negative comments assigning blame. For children or adolescents experiencing psychological distress, repeated exposure to

suicide stories may constitute an additional risk factor. Excessive exposure may lead children to perceive death as a solution to poverty. Media responsibility therefore does not end when the first article is published.

3. Content Exploitation and Copycat Suicide Risks

The term copycat suicide refers to imitative suicidal behaviour associated with exposure to another person's suicidal act or to reporting about suicide. Public-health literature also uses the term Werther effect to describe an increased risk of imitation under certain conditions. WHO emphasizes that reporting can influence suicide prevention: extensive, prominent, sensational, explicit coverage, or portrayals of suicide as a reasonable response to problems may increase risks for vulnerable individuals. Conversely, stories of recovery and help-seeking may have a positive influence.

This relationship is not mechanical. Not everyone who reads a news report will imitate the behaviour, and a single report cannot be considered the sole cause of a death. Risk is shaped by the interaction of many factors, including psychological condition, life experiences, social environment, access to support, and the characteristics of media exposure. Because this study did not measure the effects of reporting on readers and found no direct evidence of imitative behaviour connected to the Ngada case, it concludes only that a risk exists and needs to be managed; it does not establish that copycat suicide occurred.

Risks may increase when the media disclose details of the method used, emphasize the location, display images or recordings of the incident, portray death as heroic or as the only way out of poverty, or repeat the content on a massive scale.

A responsible approach does not require the media to suppress all information about child suicide. Reporting remains important for revealing realities concerning mental health, poverty, social services, access to education, and failures in protection systems. The distinction lies in the focus: news should address social context, prevention efforts, and sources of assistance rather than the details of the act or the dramatization of an individual's suffering. In the Ngada case, the public interest can be served by discussing children's access to social and educational support, early detection of psychological distress, and service coordination without repeating unnecessary details.

Providing help-seeking information is also an important part of such reporting. The Press Council guidelines encourage media outlets reporting on suicide to include guidance for readers experiencing mental-health difficulties so that they can obtain assistance promptly. This information should be clearly presented at the end of the

report. Media outlets can also explain that mental-health difficulties can be addressed with appropriate support and that various avenues for assistance are available.

Table 2. Risks in Digital Reporting and Protective Measures

Aspect	Risk	Protective measure
Child identity	A child and family may be identified through a combination of names, photographs, school names, overly detailed locations, or family relationships.	Use initials where necessary and remove indirect identifying clues.
Headlines and narratives	Exaggerated and sensational headlines may obscure the cause of death and assign blame to particular parties.	Use factual, empathetic, non-judgmental headlines and update information that has been corrected.
Photographs, videos, and private messages	Sad and traumatic news may be recirculated, prolonging harm to the family.	Avoid images of the incident, private letters or messages, and material from the victim's account unless there is a strong public-interest basis.
Details of the act/location	Such details may increase imitation risks among vulnerable groups.	Do not describe the method or location in detail or publish the location; focus on context and prevention.
Digital distribution and archives	Old content may continue circulating through recommendations, search snippets, and reposts.	Implement corrections, renewed anonymization, restrictions on reposts that violate standards, and periodic reviews.
Reader support	Readers who are also experiencing difficulties may not receive guidance on how to seek help.	Include verified help information and narratives of hope and recovery for readers who may also be experiencing difficulties.

4. Implementation Gaps and an Ideal Protection Model

The main gap is not simply the absence of regulations but the challenge of applying them in the digital ecosystem. The Press Council guidelines provide normative standards, but day-to-day implementation requires measurable editorial policies, journalist training, visual-content review mechanisms, and complaint-handling procedures. Andriarti's 2024 study of cyber-media reporting identified several instances of non-compliance with suicide-reporting guidelines, including issues involving identity, potentially traumatic visuals, and event-oriented reporting without a mental-health context. These findings do not automatically represent all digital media, but they indicate the need for continuous evaluation, particularly to protect children.

First, editorial teams should conduct a risk assessment before publishing reports. This assessment should consider the necessity of mentioning identity, the relevance of photographs, details of the method and location, the possibility of blaming the family, and the impact of the proposed headline. For incidents involving children, editors should apply stricter standards, understand children's rights, and request additional review before publication. Editorial teams should also respond

openly and promptly when readers raise objections.

Second, digital corrections should cover every component that can be found by the public. If an article is found to disclose a child's identity clearly or contain unnecessary material, the editorial team should review related content and explain updates transparently without repeating sensitive material.

Third, digital platforms and account managers should provide accessible reporting channels through which users can request a review of content that discloses a child's identity or displays distressing or traumatic material. Responses should take into account the public interest, freedom of expression, and the feelings of the victim's family.

Fourth, digital literacy should be strengthened so that the public understands that resharing information about a child's tragedy has social consequences. Digital education is important because child protection in digital spaces depends not only on the press but also on the conduct of members of the public who participate in disseminating information.

Conceptually, an ideal protection model combines four layers. The first layer is editorial prevention based on the best interests of the child, children's rights, and responsible reporting on child suicide. The second layer is distribution governance, including comment moderation and the handling of reposts. The third layer is recovery through corrections, reduction of the negative effects of news coverage, and protection of families from further disturbance. The fourth layer is accountability through complaint mechanisms, public education for readers, and enforcement where legal violations are identified. This multilayered approach maintains a balance between press freedom and the protection of children's rights.

CONCLUSION

Legal protection for children in digital media reporting on suicide should be understood as protection of children's dignity, privacy, and best interests, as well as the prevention of further harm to bereaved families and vulnerable readers. Indonesia has a normative foundation through the Child Protection Law, the Press Law, the Child-Friendly Reporting Guidelines, and the Guidelines for Reporting on Suicide and Suicide Attempts. This framework requires the media to avoid disclosing identities, unnecessary visuals or narratives, method details, and sensational repetition, while providing context and information on how to obtain assistance.

The Ngada case in East Nusa Tenggara demonstrates the importance of reporting that does not oversimplify the background to a child's tragedy or turn the

child's suffering into sensational context and a primary source of attraction. This article does not assert that all reporting on the case violated the law, nor does it conclude that reporting caused copycat suicide. Imitation risk is recognized in public-health guidance, but a causal relationship in a particular case requires separate empirical evidence.

Strengthening legal protection for children should therefore involve improving editorial standards, protecting the identities of child victims, establishing effective complaint mechanisms, promoting digital literacy, and coordinating relevant institutions. These preventive measures are expected to maintain a balance between press freedom to disseminate news and the protection of children. Tragedies involving children may still be reported for public education, but coverage must be highly cautious, proportionate, respectful of children's dignity, and attentive to copycat suicide risks. Future research may examine actual compliance across a defined sample of digital news reports and empirically investigate how different reporting practices affect vulnerable audiences.

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