

Case Study 1: Teen suicide

Lecturer notes

A note for lecturers

This case study is designed to give students some practice in considering issues associated with reporting or communicating about mental illness and suicide so they will be better prepared to deal with such a situation, should it arise, when they are working as journalists or public relations practitioners. Mental illness and suicide are very sensitive and complex issues, and it is natural that some people may feel uncomfortable talking about them. Usually, these feelings are temporary and do not cause serious distress. Talking about mental illness or suicide in an educational and supportive environment provides lecturers with an opportunity to advise students about counselling and other services available on campus, and to encourage students experiencing problems to seek professional help by talking to a GP, health professional or call a crisis counselling service such as:

- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (5-25 years)
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

For online information visit: www.headspace.org.au or www.Reachout.com

For further information and advice about preparing your class for this case study, you should refer to the document 'Discussing sensitive issues' which can be found on the *Mindframe* for journalism and public relations education website at www.mindframe-media.info

There has been considerable debate about whether media portrayal of suicide leads to imitation or "copycat" suicide. A recent Australian review has concluded that there *is* an association between non-fictional media portrayal of suicide and actual suicide, and in some cases, this association is likely to be causal (Pirkis & Blood, 2009). This has implications for the way suicide is represented in the media. In particular, it becomes important to consider the potential effect of a report on an emotionally vulnerable individual. People in despair are often unable to identify solutions to their problems, and may be influenced by what they read, view, or hear. The effect may be more profound if someone feels able to identify with the person who died, perhaps because they are in the same age group or share similar experiences or ideals. An explicit report, particularly one that provides details about the method of suicide, may lead those who are vulnerable to take a similar course of action. Suicide is a legitimate topic for serious discussion in the media, like other mental health issues. However, the presentation of suicide should be done with great care. Journalists are urged to consider suicide in the context of a larger problem and emphasise the relationship between mental illness, particularly depression, and suicide risk.

The scenario and video material

This case study presents a scenario in which a body has been found at a local park. The body has been found by two boys walking home from school. A reporter is sent to the scene to conduct interviews with police and witnesses. The reporter discovers that the dead boy is the son of a former Mayor. The boy's mother is also well known in the community for her work in charity fundraising. The video provides footage



from interviews with the police officer at the scene, the two boys who discovered the body and the deceased boy's mother (with extra cut-ways on VHS/DVD). In addition to the video footage, a transcript of the interviews is provided at the end of these notes and in the student notes. The interviews and footage in the video provide students with choices about how the story could be reported. Some of the information, quotes and scenes could, if reported, lead to quite a sensational story. By providing students with these choices, they can develop an appreciation of how their decisions influence the potential impact of a story.

Questions for consideration

A number of suggested tasks relevant to this scenario and video have been provided in the document 'How can I use this case study?' When undertaking these tasks, you may ask students to consider the questions outlined below. A discussion of each question is provided in the following pages.

Question 1: Should this story be reported?

Question 2: How can the ethical issues inherent in this story be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?

Question 3: Are the interviewees appropriate?

Question 4: What other decisions need to be made before deciding to publish or broadcast the story?

Question 5: How should the story be reported?

Question 6: What are the specific issues associated with reporting this as a TV news story?

Question 7: How could this scenario be used as a basis for a feature story?

Question 8: Using this scenario for ethical debate

Note: The student notes contain only brief prompts for each question. The information provided in the following pages can be used to facilitate class discussion or to assess students' work. Alternatively, you may decide to provide students with a copy of this information.

Question 1: Should this story be reported?

News values

Audiences globally are usually considered to be most interested in things that affect them directly, which is why the deaths of five people in a local community is more newsworthy to that community than the death of 500 in a remote foreign country. Similarly, strong value is attached to information that could affect audiences directly in the future and also information about things that could potentially cause them harm. The basic news values are impact, timeliness, proximity, conflict, currency, unusualness and relativity (White, 1996).

Impact refers to the relevance the story has to the audience's lives. In this case, the dead youth's family is prominent in the local community and is well known to the audience.

Timeliness refers to information that helps people organise their lives. People may feel they need this information to understand risks to their own children.

Proximity refers to how "close to home" a story is. This story is a local issue affecting local people.

Conflict is the news value most people associate with media, and is often seen as the most important news value in today's media. Conflict is also present in news that "afflicts the comfortable" by making them

anxious or guilty. It is also what is meant by the tabloid dictum to "anchor every story to its emotional base". In this case, the anxiety and confusion felt by the parents and others in the community is a form of conflict.

Currency is the term used to describe how "hot" an issue is at any one time. Stories relating to the safety of children and young people are always "hot".

Unusualness refers to an incident or story being unexpected. Finding the body of a young man in a public place is unexpected, as is the second death in a family in a short period of time.

Relativity describes whether a story is news worthy compared to other possible stories, and across different media. This scenario meets the test of relativity because it could be reported in print, on TV and on radio as a set of facts, as well as having emotional content which could be highlighted in different ways across media.

'Public interest' and the impact of reporting

When evaluating the public interest and potential impact of reporting this incident, students may consider the following issues:

Answering the question "why"?

It is natural for people to seek an explanation following a tragic and unexpected incident and the media can serve an important public function in this regard. In this instance, the reaction and interest in the community may be even stronger since the dead youth's sibling also died in the "prime of his life" just two years previously, adding a tragic element to the family's story. Students might take the view that the suicide of a young person with seemingly every advantage is a question of public interest that may enlighten people about the problem of youth suicide. On the other hand, can a news report provide the answers the community is looking for? Can the interviewees provide real insight into the dead youth's state of mind? What harm could be done by reporting speculation?

Public profile

The deceased's parents are well known in the local community, so their misfortune is likely to attract public attention. The death also occurred in a public place in the local community. People will hear about the incident and may expect it to be reported. Would not reporting this death imply that some lives are more valued than others? Or would reporting the story imply this?

Risk of imitation suicide

There has been considerable debate about whether reporting suicide can influence other vulnerable people to take a similar course of action. Students may wish to look at research that has been conducted in this area (see www.mindframe-media.info). Students may consider that it is not so much whether or not a suicide is reported but *how* it is reported. Or they may consider that repeating stories about suicide can lead to normalisation of the act. These issues are the topic of ongoing research and students should be encouraged to critically evaluate the findings of the research to date.

Reporting on grief

People might be very interested to know what the parents of the dead boy are feeling after the death of their second son, but do they *need* to know? What are the limits on the public role of a public figure? Is there any benefit to the family in having their voice heard? Could reporting on the family's grief add to the community's understanding of suicide?



Question 2: How can the ethical issues inherent in this story be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?

Students can refer to the ‘ten questions to guide the journalist through the decisionmaking process’ outlined by Black, Steele and Barney (1997) or to Bok’s (1978) threestep model for making an ethical decision (for copies of each, see the document titled *Case Study 1 – Additional materials*). A summary of the key issues contained in these models, as applied to this scenario, is outlined below.

Appreciating the complexity of the topic

Journalists (and students) need to reflect on how much they know about suicide, and whether their knowledge is based on fact and evidence or public perceptions. For example, community attitudes towards suicide range from seeing it as “the ultimate selfish act” to “an unavoidable tragedy”. Journalists should be aware that there is a strong link between mental illness and suicide and that deaths by suicide can often be prevented if people receive appropriate help. By appreciating the complexity of social issues such as suicide, the journalist is in a better position to balance ethical issues with journalistic and commercial values.

Checking organisational policies and professional guidelines

Journalists should consider principles provided in the Media and Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA) Code of Ethics. Some media organisations also have their own policies and these may provide guidance in relation to issues such as privacy, reporting suicide and interviewing people who are bereaved. Journalists can also refer to the recommendations provided in *Reporting mental illness and suicide: A resource for media professionals*, available from the *Mindframe* website www.mindframe-media.info.

Reflecting on the motivations and emotional state of stakeholders

In this case, there is the mother of the deceased, the police officer, the two boys who found the body, the mother of the boys, the news organisation and the journalist. The potential motivations of each of the stakeholders needs to be evaluated as this can affect the credibility of the information provided. When reporting on grief, journalists also need to be aware that bereaved people can be very vulnerable and their emotional state will impact on their reliability as a source. These issues are discussed more thoroughly in Question 3.

Exploring alternative ways to report the story

For example, the journalist might consider running the story without names, but this may impact on the news value of the story. The information available to the journalist can be framed in a number of ways. Depending on the frame the news report could increase the community’s understanding of suicide or it could impact negatively on other vulnerable people. Alternative frames for the story are discussed further in Question 5.

Accepting responsibility

At one level, the journalist has an obligation to truth-telling and to acting independently of influence. However, the journalist also has an obligation to minimise harm and to be accountable for what he/she does. Some journalists seek to consign dilemmas such as the one outlined in this scenario to the “too-hard” basket and seek to shift the responsibility onto others. Such a journalist would produce the story and leave it to someone else to decide whether to report it. Even so, the journalist will have made choices about the angle the story will take and which parts of the evidence will reach the wider public, possibly shaping their understanding of what has happened. There is no escaping the consequences of individual choices about

news. The journalist controls the words he/she uses to tell the story, the points to emphasise, and the extent to which the story is sensationalised. The editor will also have an influence over what is published or broadcast but the journalist makes the original decisions about what to include and omit.

Justifying the decision

If journalists have ethical principles as a guide and can articulate their decision-making process and its values, they can ethically justify a decision even when others object to the outcome. Journalists need a process for evaluating their decisions because a process, or system, allows for the application of values, loyalties and principles to every new set of circumstances or facts. In this way, decision making will be fair to those who become part of the news.

Question 3: Are the interviewees appropriate?

The sources the journalist chooses and prioritises will direct what is eventually reported. In this scenario several interviews have already been conducted. Students should consider whether the people interviewed are the most appropriate sources of information, and who else, if anyone, should be interviewed. Students should evaluate the interviewees in terms of their strengths and weaknesses as sources of information and the type of information which can reasonably be expected from them. This would include deciding whether the information is specific or generalised, whether it can be verified, how it can be verified, whether the interviewees seem credible and whether they may have an undeclared motive. All these factors could significantly affect the priority assigned to each source. Mencher (1991, pg. 285) offers three questions to guide evaluation of an interviewee's information:

Was the person an observer of the incident, or did he or she hear about it from someone else?

The reporter might reasonably expect the police at the scene to provide verified facts about the discovery of the body. In interviewing police, the journalist is primarily seeking to establish verifiable facts such as the official record of events. The boys who found the body might be able to provide first-hand information about the circumstances of the discovery. Sometimes, however, the people who are closest to a story are not the best source of factual information. They can provide "colour" about the scene but can't provide accurate facts. The young boys may not be emotionally touched by the death so much as by their new celebrity, and may wish to appear to know more about the events than they really do.

Is the person a competent observer?

The dead youth's mother may be able to provide insight into the state of mind of her son, but the reporter must be aware that she is grieving and her emotional state of mind may affect her ability to answer questions. People experiencing grief may also be taking prescribed sedatives or other medication which can affect their perception in a way that is not immediately apparent. For example, the person may be confused in their thinking but still able to answer questions. The reporter also needs to decide if what the deceased's mother says is reliable just because she is describing her own experience. You may wish to discuss with students whether it was appropriate in this case to interview the dead boy's mother and which factors might influence this decision. For example, it is recognised that people bereaved by suicide may be at heightened risk of suicide themselves (Penrose-Wall et al, 1999). On the other hand, the mother has agreed to the interview and is keen to tell her side of the story. She also has a previously established relationship with the media from her charity work. Do these factors over-ride her potential vulnerability as a bereaved mother?



Can the source provide precise details that have a ring of truth and seem consistent with the facts?

The reporter will consider whether the interviewees can provide quotes that will enhance the audience's understanding of what has happened. A lot of the information provided by the interviewees in this scenario relates to speculation about the reasons for the dead youth's actions and this poses serious questions for the journalist. The journalist must be satisfied that the interviewees can provide an authoritative perspective because the act of publishing their comments will make them appear credible.

Question 4: What other decisions need to be made before deciding to publish or broadcast the story?

After completing preliminary interviews, the journalist is in a position to make the crucial decision about whether the emerging story should be offered for publication or broadcast. At this stage the journalist needs to re-visit questions about *public interest, news values and principles, credibility of source* and *accuracy of information*.

What are the facts?

First, the journalist must decide if any of the information collected cannot be verified. If it is unverifiable, is the information so important to the story that it cannot be left out? If the journalist decides to go ahead despite doubts about the verifiability of the information, what news value is the journalist assigning priority to in using unverified information?

Are the sources credible?

Sources will certainly appear to be credible once the media is used as a forum for their views. The process of deciding whether sources are credible includes considering whether some sources, for example "official" ones, are intrinsically more credible than others. The journalist must be satisfied on an individual level that they can substantiate everything that is asserted and that their decision can be defended, in court if necessary. As part of this, the journalist must once again ask themselves if any information is assumed to be "known" without substantiation.

Is there a single statement or quote that embodies the central issue in the story?

Can a story be structured around this? What news values are given priority as information is considered? Has "hero" or "villain" status been assigned to any party? Has anything been assumed about the audience's reaction to this story?

What would be achieved by reporting the story?

How this question is answered is a reflection of the sum of the decisions already made about the relative values associated with the story. Throughout the process the journalist has been making decisions based on their understanding of the audience, the public interest and the news values given priority by the news organisation. News organisations usually have a particular audience clearly in mind when they prioritise news values. In this scenario, it is fairly certain that human nature dictates the audience will speculate about the reasons for the death, and probably about the death of the older son as well. Is it the journalist's job to encourage speculation by providing opinions about the cause of the death(s)? Students should again consider the public interest in terms of what they are setting out to achieve.

Question 5: How should the story be reported?

Students can be referred to the resource *Fact or fiction?* for an overview of the general issues associated with reporting suicide. The following information covers the main issues students will need to resolve in developing a news report based on the scenario.

How should the story be framed?

A story with the elements described in this scenario creates the temptation to portray the events as a tragic narrative, built around the grieving parents doomed by fate to be robbed of their sons despite their success. The news value satisfied by this approach is the desire to tell a "good story", one that moves the audience. Students might feel an equal temptation to suggest that successful people with high profile careers are somehow less effective parents than those with "ordinary" lives.

Students should be careful of reinforcing the inaccurate notion that such incidents are either "acts of fate" or the result of unspecified failures of parents. The death of the boy by suicide should not be portrayed as the result of a social phenomenon which is unpreventable. Although thoughts of suicide may be quite common, acting on them is not. Psychological autopsy studies show that up to 90% of people who die by suicide may have been suffering a mental illness at the time of their death (Penrose-Wall et al., 1999). While there may be no clear answers as to why the boy died by suicide, the story could be framed around the major risk factors and warning signs for suicide, and the help that is available to people experiencing problems. Students can be referred to www.mindframe-media.info for information about warning signs and risk factors for suicide.

You may wish to have students make a list of the many alternative "angles" which could be applied to this scenario, and discuss the potential impact of each angle.

What facts should be included in the story?

To answer this question, students will need to resolve several related questions including "are *who, what, where, when, why* and *how* always appropriate information to include in a story?" In this scenario, the boy's identity is important to the story because if the journalist decides to report the incident without using his name, the name of his parents cannot be used. This is significant because the parent's high public profile would increase public interest in the news. If students decide to use names, does this mean the public interest in them is a more important value than the family's individual right to privacy?

Should any information be discounted as inappropriate for publication?

Even if certain information is accurately recorded and adds "colour" to the report, this does not mean it should automatically be reported. For example, the dead boy's mother has provided some emotional quotes which students may choose to use in reporting on the incident. Students should consider whether the mother's wish to tell "her side of the story" is mitigated by the fact that she is experiencing grief and her perception may be affected.

When it comes to describing *how* the death occurred, students have a lot of information at their disposal from the police and also the youths who found the body. Students might conclude that the general public would be very interested to know exact details of the suicide, but this needs to be weighed against the harm which could be caused by reporting this information. As well as being potentially very upsetting for the parents, reporting details of the method of suicide may influence vulnerable people to take a similar course of action. Any references to the methods used should be in general terms. If there is something particularly interesting or unusual about the method used, this should be referred to circumspectly rather than emphasised unduly. It is also recommended that reports on suicide do not feature photographs or



television footage of the suicide scene, precise location or method. Permission should also be obtained before using photographs of the deceased or their family.

Is the report balanced, fair and accurate?

As discussed in Question 3, information provided by each interviewee needs to be examined in terms of credibility of source and whether the information can be verified.

For example, the policeman at the scene tells the reporter that he suspects the dead boy was affected by alcohol. This is not yet a fact because only an autopsy will reveal the deceased's blood alcohol content. Other speculation, such as whether the death of the other son two years ago is significant, is also problematic. The journalist may be tempted to speculate that this was also a suicide. Can this inference be justified? Information from the interviews provides speculation on the motivation of the dead boy. Although students may be keen to explain to people why a needless death has occurred, they should consider whether this actually helps or hinders the community's understanding of suicide. For example, there may be a temptation to try to make sense of suicide by portraying the act as an individual's way of solving their problems. Students should be aware of how this may impact on other vulnerable people who may see or hear the report. People in distress often have difficulty identifying different options and ways to address their problems. Phrases such as "chose the time to die" and "the only way out" may inadvertently portray suicide as a romantic or courageous way to solve problems. For similar reasons, it is recommended that terms such as "successful suicide attempt" or "unsuccessful suicide attempt" not be used. "Fatal suicide", "completed suicide" or "died by suicide" can be used instead of "successful suicide". "Non-fatal suicide" can be used instead of "unsuccessful suicide". It is also recommended that the word "suicide" not be used in headlines or broadcast leads, to minimise the risk of sensationalising and/or normalising suicide.

A news story developed from this scenario should try not to glorify the dead boy or emphasise his positive characteristics (e.g. "he had everything to live for" or "he had lots of friends") without acknowledging that he may have had problems or worries. The story can be balanced by reference to the fact that suicide is caused by multiple factors and that most people who suicide have a history of psychological and/or social problems.

How would a member of the audience feel after seeing this report?

If the answer is sad, anxious or worried, students might consider the role of the media in providing support for readers or viewers instead of simply tapping into their anxiety as a news value. A news story about suicide should include a contact phone number for support services. This does not turn the story into an advertisement, but rather reinforces to the audience that something can be done to alleviate the cause of such events.

Question 6: What are the specific issues associated with reporting this as a TV news story?

Some questions to prompt students are:

- To what extent do the pictures drive the story?
- What news values are attached to the images? Which images take priority?
- Do the images selected affect the way the story is written? How?
- Are there some things that should not be broadcast about suicide?
- What issues are attached to broadcasting images of grief?
- What is the process for deciding which vision to select?

- Should the “talent” be given equal time? Why?
- What will the message of the story be?
- How should the voice-over be written? Should it be stand up? Why?
- What is the effect of including the question and the answer in a broadcast report?

Question 7: How could this scenario be used as a basis for a feature story?

Some questions to start the discussion include:

- What factors might influence a person to attempt suicide?
- What research exists about suicide prevention?

Students can access reference materials included on the website www.mindframe-media.info to gain a more thorough understanding of the warning signs and risk factors associated with suicide.

In developing a feature story about suicide, students will need to consider:

- How might a journalist shed light on the issue?
- What are the key points to get across?
- Whom would the journalist need to talk to? What would they ask?
- Where can the journalist get background information?
- What does the journalist need to know about reporting suicide statistics?
- How will the article be structured?

Reporting suicide statistics

An Australian study of the reporting of suicide has concluded that newspapers and broadcast news media frequently report statistical data about suicide (Blood et al., 2001). The study highlighted that there is a tendency for reports on suicide to dramatise selected statistical data about particular age or demographic groups, such as young people, and to present this data in an alarmist manner. In some cases emphasis is given to suicide stories by reference to the issue as an “epidemic”, which is not accurate. Although rates of youth suicide in Australia increased from the 1960’s to the early

1990’s, they have remained relatively stable since then. Suicide is still quite a rare event even if occasionally there are clusters of suicides. The problem with portraying suicide as a common behaviour is that it may normalise the act. As with stories about individual suicide, statistical or trend reports on suicide should include contact details for counselling and other services. Students can be referred to the references at www.mindframe-media.info for further information about suicide statistics.

Question 8: Using this scenario for ethical debate

To use this case study for an ethics-based task, you may choose to work through the questions at the beginning of these lecture notes:

Question 1: Should this story be reported?

Question 2: How can the ethical issues inherent in this story be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?



Some additional statements which can be used as the basis of a seminar or assignment are:

- Reporting suicide is good for society. Discuss.
- How does the Journalist's Code of Ethics deal with reporting suicide? How would respecting the guidelines affect the reporting of this story?
- Reporting this story has the potential to do greater harm than good. Discuss.

The resource *Fact or Fiction?* is a useful reference for students for an ethics task or seminar. Further reference materials are available at www.mindframe-media.info, including links to research on the impact of media reporting on suicide.

References

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