

Case Study 1.1: Teen suicide

Student notes

This case study is designed to give students some practice in considering issues associated with reporting and communicating about mental illness or suicide, so that they will be better prepared to deal with such situations should they arise, when they are working as a journalist or public relations practitioner.

Mental illness and suicide are 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. However, if students do become distressed as a result of using these materials or because of other problems, and these feelings continue, they should talk to someone they trust such as a lecturer, tutor, or counsellor at their university. Students can also talk 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 and www.reachout.com

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, 2010). 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, other risk factors 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.

One of the young people who discovered the deceased boy has a mobile phone, which he uses to immediately post an update to his own social networking page about what he has witnessed. His post read:

OMG just saw a dead body. Loser Lomas hung himself. Crazy.

The reporter overhears the young person discussing his intent to share detail about the death with peers via Facebook. The young person's social networking privacy settings are such that this information was



visible publicly. Within hours, other young people from the school have initiated a "memorial page" to the student who has died and started to post various tributes, condolences and personal anecdotes

This case study is designed to give you some practice in considering issues associated with reporting suicide, so you will be better prepared to deal with such a situation, should it arise, when you are working as a journalist.

Video 1.1: interview with two young witnesses provides footage from interviews with the two boys who discovered the body. It also depicts the social media page which featured information about the death. 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.

Using the scenario as source materials

The following questions provide a guide for analysing the scenario from a journalistic perspective. Your lecturer or tutor may ask you to look at all of these questions or a selection only. In considering this scenario and the questions, you should refer to "*Fact or Fiction? Reporting mental illness and suicide for an overview of the key ethical and journalistic issues involved in reporting suicide*". This resource, and further reference materials, are available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info).

Questions for consideration

Question 1: Should this story be reported?

Question 2: How should the story be reported?

Question 3: How can the ethical issues inherent in this story be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?

Question 4: How much of the information is reportable?

Question 5: Are the interviewees appropriate?

Question 6: What other decisions need to be made before deciding to publish or broadcast the story?

Question 7: What is the impact of the availability of information via social media?

Question 8: What are the specific issues associated with reporting this as a TV news story?

Question 9: How could this scenario be used as a basis for a feature story?

Question 10: Using this scenario for ethical debate (see below for further detail).

Question 1: Should this story be reported?

To answer this question, you will need to consider the basic news values - impact, timeliness, proximity, conflict, currency and unusualness – and how they apply to this scenario. In regards to news value, you may also consider the *relativity* of the story. You will also need to consider what public interest might be served by reporting the incident and the potential impact of the story. You may wish to look at research about the impact of reporting on suicide, which is available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info).

Question 2: How should the story be reported?

As the journalist responsible for writing the story, you will decide how much information the public is told about the incident. What you choose to include and omit will be affected by commercial pressures in this situation. It will also directly affect what your audience understands from the story. This in turn will influence what the audience understands about the general issue of suicide and how it might affect them. Sometimes the demands of the news room seem to be at odds with a journalist's priorities in the private exchange between reporter and interviewee, or circumstances where information is available which may need careful ethical handling. If you need to negotiate with an editor who favours sensationalism, you should ensure you are armed with the facts about the damage sensational or detailed reporting may do. You should also consider the impact of the details you report about the suicide (refer to *Fact or Fiction? Reporting mental illness and suicide*). If you critically reflect on what you are doing and why, you can meet the objectives of a "good" news story without doing unnecessary harm. Some questions you need to consider in developing the news story are:

- What is the appropriate frame or story angle?
- What facts should be included in the story?
- Should any information be discounted as inappropriate for publication?
- Is the report balanced, fair and accurate?
- How would a member of the audience feel after seeing this report?

Question 3: How can the ethical issues inherent in this story be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?

To answer this question you may wish to refer to the 'ten questions to guide the journalist through the decision-making process' outlined by Black, Steele and Barney (1997) or to Bok's (1978) three-step model for making an ethical decision (provided in the document Case Study 1 – Additional materials).

Question 4: How much of the information is reportable?

What do codes of practice, organisation policies and media guidelines advise about reporting this kind of story? Other than the suicide content, what other elements of this story might require the journalist to refer to organisational codes of practice or policies?

More information about codes and policies that influence media reporting about suicide can be found at www.mindframe-media.info

Question 5: 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, and further information is available via social media. Consider whether the people interviewed are the most appropriate sources of information, and who else, if anyone, should be interviewed.

What factors might influence your decision to seek additional interviewees? Evaluate each interviewee in terms of their strengths and weaknesses as sources of information and the type of information which can be reasonably expected from them. This would include whether the information is specific or generalised, if it can be verified and how can it be verified, if the interviewees seem credible and whether they may have an undeclared motive. All these factors could significantly affect the amount of credibility assigned to each source. As you consider the information that has been collected, you should also consider the impact of highlighting drama, violence, or sensationalism in the reporting of death or grief, particularly after a suicide.



Question 6: 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. What are the key questions involved in making this decision at this stage? What will be considered “newsworthy”?

Question 7: What is the impact of the availability of information via social media?

To answer this question, you will need to consider the ethical, moral, legal and commercial issues that are associated with social media, its uses and information obtained via this platform. How might your approach change if images were made available via social media? Be aware of the interaction between social media and traditional media - the way information is reported in traditional media may also circulate via social media. How might this influence your approach?

Question 8: What are the specific issues associated with reporting this as a TV news story?

When using the scenario as source material for a TV news story you will need to consider the relationship between the pictures and story angle, the values attached to each image, and how to do voice over. The images you select from some or all the interviews and/ or other sources such as social media will be guided by the news values and principles you have assigned to the story. Using “*Fact or fiction? Reporting mental illness and suicide*”, you should consider whether there are some things that should not be broadcast about suicide. There may be additional ethical and legal considerations with images extracted from social media, as noted in Question 7.

Question 9: How could this scenario be used as a basis for a feature story?

There are a number of issues raised in the scenario that could be used as the basis for developing a more in-depth feature story on suicide.

Some questions to consider are:

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

You may wish to use the reference materials at www.mindframe-media.info for further information about these and other issues related to suicide.

To write or produce a feature story, you will need to consider:

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

Question 10: Using this scenario for ethical debate:

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: Do new media technologies present different ethical dilemmas for journalists reporting about suicide?

The resource *Fact or Fiction?* is a useful reference for students. 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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