

Case Study 2: Mental illness and community attitudes

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 and 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

One of the most significant media influences on society is its role in defining a world where information or knowledge is often taken for granted, the aspects and values underpinning society and the things we assume to be "known" by all. In its reporting of mental illness, the media can either act to either reinforce inaccurate and harmful stereotypes, stigmatise people with mental illness, or dispels misconceptions, thereby effectively diminishing stigma. Stigma occurs when someone in the community is shunned or avoided because of circumstances outside their control. While individual journalists aren't alone in making decisions about what will and won't reach the public eye, they always have a measure of control over the information they provide for publication. For the journalist, it is not a case of political correctness. A journalist who writes about mental illness accurately can reduce stigma in the community. A journalist who reinforces inaccurate perceptions adds to it.

The scenario and video material

This case study presents a potential news story involving complaints against a family day care service because a person working there has schizophrenia. The service is currently run by an older woman, who would now like her daughter to take over the business. The daughter, who has been helping her mother for some years, has applied to "Community Welfare" for approval to run the service. On her application she has indicated that she receives treatment for schizophrenia. Community Welfare has disclosed this information to parents during interviews with them about the service. Prior to this the parents were not aware of the woman's illness.



The video scenes follow the journalist as he speaks to the parents, the woman who runs the family day care service, the director of Community Welfare and a psychiatrist (with extra cut-aways on the VHS/DVD version). In addition to the video footage, a transcript of the interviews is provided. Some of the information and quotes included could, if reported, lead to quite a sensational story. These choices are presented to allow students to 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?* In undertaking one of 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 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 preschool is in the local community and is well known to the audience, some of whom may have or have had children at the service.

Timeliness refers to information that helps people organise their lives. People may feel they need this information to make child care choices for their 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's also what is meant by the tabloid dictum to "anchor every story to its emotional base". In this case, the anxiety felt by the parents and child care workers 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 are always "hot".

Unusualness refers to an incident or story being unexpected. In this scenario it is unexpected for a group of parents to be publicly protesting about a family day care service.

Relativity describes whether a story is news worthy in relation to other possible stories, and across different media. The case at the family day care is a new disclosure and the type of incident is not common. The story also meets the test of relativity in that it works for TV, radio and print.

“Public interest” and the impact of reporting

Public safety

Parents using the service are concerned about the safety of their children. Students will need to decide whether their fears are justified and what evidence supports their fears. Students may consider that this is an issue for wider community concern – that Community Welfare has been negligent and this issue may impact on other family day care services. Students will need to determine if they need further information before they can conclude this, and how they would obtain this information.

Discrimination

An alternative argument is that the woman with schizophrenia is being unfairly discriminated against. Again, students will need to consider if they need further information before they can conclude this, and how they would get this information. If students consider this is an example of possible discrimination, they may think reporting the story will assist the woman’s case.

Community attitudes

If facts about schizophrenia are reported accurately, there may be a benefit in educating the public about the prevalence of mental illness in the community and challenging misconceptions about mental illness. However, it takes time to change attitudes, and in the short term reporting the story may lead to more anger and resentment in the community and cause people to stop using the service. To investigate the situation is one thing, but the way the story is reported will be a crucial factor in the community's reaction to the family at the centre of the story.

Right to privacy

The woman with schizophrenia may feel persecuted and prefer to be left alone.

Alternatively, if she feels she is being discriminated against, she may want to tell her side of the story. Her mother may be angry and feeling protective toward her daughter. The woman presumably doesn't want her daughter's illness made public and may fear it will cause stigma. Students may consider that the woman’s medical history is confidential and the credibility of the news organisation may suffer if the audience blames the journalist for making this information public. Alternatively, the woman’s right to privacy may be mitigated by the fact that she works with children, or that the information has already been disclosed to a number of people by Community Welfare.

Professional responsibility

Students may consider that the journalist is going against professional responsibility if he/she decides not to report the story. The news organisation could be accused of withholding important information if they don't run the story. In this scenario, the editor might say "mentally ill woman left with pre-schoolers" is news. The audience might want information to help them decide how they feel about the issue.



Personal values

To some extent, establishing the public interest in this case will be influenced by the journalist's own values e.g., how would they feel if their own child or relative attended the family day care service? Alternatively, the journalist might feel angry at the news organisation for reporting the story if he/she feels sympathy for the woman and her mother.

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 decision making process" outlined by Black, Steele and Barney (1997) or to Bok's (1978) three-step model for making an ethical decision (both included in the document titled *Additional materials*). A summary of the key issues contained in these models, as applied to this scenario, is outlined below.

Developing a better understanding of the topic

Journalists (and students) need to reflect on how much they know about mental illness, and whether their knowledge is based on fact and evidence or public perception. This is particularly important for schizophrenia, which is often portrayed inaccurately in fiction and drama. By developing a better understanding of mental illness, the journalist can present a more balanced story.

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 mental illness and dealing with vulnerable people. 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 of stakeholders

In this case there is the woman with schizophrenia, her mother, the audience, the welfare department, the psychiatrist, the news organisation and the journalist. The potential motivations of each of the stakeholders need to be evaluated. Motivations of the stakeholders can affect the credibility of the information provided.

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. Reporting the case sympathetically and including all the mitigating evidence may minimise the chances of the audience scorning the family.

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 public 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.

The parents may provide first-hand experience of the alleged problems and be a source of colourful quotes about their experiences that enhance the audience's understanding of the facts. These people may also feel very strongly about the issue and may even be prone to exaggeration, so information provided by them that is outside their personal experience would need to be substantiated in an authoritative way.

Community Welfare should be able to provide facts about its policies and official action taken but is unlikely to offer opinions.

A psychiatrist can contribute expert information about mental illness and offer authoritative generalised opinions, but can't comment on an individual case.

The woman and her mother, whose activities have been criticised, should have an opportunity to answer the allegations before they are published. Apart from a right of reply, they offer another perspective and may provide insight into the source of the complaints. They may offer colourful quotes to assist in bringing the story to life for the audience. These interviewees may also be highly emotional and this may affect the credibility of some comments. As "the accused" these people may also be defensive, thus influencing the type of information they are willing to disclose and perhaps even the accuracy of the information.

Interviewing a person with mental illness

In the video presentation, the woman with a mental illness was not interviewed. You may want to explore with students whether she should have been and what considerations this involves. For example, many people who have or have had a mental illness talk publicly about their experiences in an effort to promote awareness and positive attitudes. Others may find talking publicly distressing or may not wish to talk publicly about their experiences.

Some general principles for interviewing a person with mental illness are:

- Be sure the person is prepared to talk
- Avoid confrontational interviews
- Allow the person to speak for themselves



- Before the interview, discuss the questions you propose to ask and inform the person of the context of the interview
- Check the language the person uses to describe their illness
- Do not use names without permission

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 any information cannot be verified, is it important enough to report? If the decision is yes, what news values 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?

Is there a story worth telling here?

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 in mind when they prioritise news values.

Question 5: How should the story be reported?

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

Selecting the 'frame'

In considering whether this story should be reported (see Question 1) a number of alternative frames or story angles can be identified. Some of the possible frames include:

- Community Welfare is putting young children at risk
- Community Welfare and/or members of the community are discriminating against a person because they have a mental illness
- The public lacks understanding and knowledge about mental illness
- People with mental illness face significant stigma and discrimination
- The community needs to be protected from people with mental illness
- Community Welfare has made a mistake and is trying to cover it up (the mistake could be either not checking the person's medical history earlier OR breaking confidentiality by disclosing this information)
- Mental illness is common - many people in the community have a mental illness and lead "normal" lives

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.

How important are the views of local residents?

When it comes to describing how local residents feel about the issue, there is a lot of information at the students' disposal. Students need to think about the aim of reporting the story. On one hand, it is fairly certain that human nature dictates the audience will speculate about the case. On the other hand, is it the journalist's job to encourage that speculation by providing unsubstantiated opinions? As students reflect on the choices they've made so far, they must again consider the public interest in terms of their aims in reporting the story.

What facts must be included in the story?

The frame chosen will dictate the type of information that is included or prioritised. Within a given frame, however, students can still provide the audience with a balanced story by including all relevant information. Students should also ensure that the key message of their report is based on fact and evidence. For example, if Community Welfare is accused of disclosing confidential information, should the audience also be told the rationale behind their actions? If the story is reported from a public safety angle, the audience may need evidence about the risk of violence and other information about mental illness. Deciding which facts are relevant also involves several related questions including "are *who, what, where, when, why* and *how* always appropriate information to include in a story?" In this scenario, identity is important to the story because if it is reported without using names, the day care service can't be identified either. This is significant because the public may be very interested to know which service is involved. If names are used, does this mean the public interest in them is a more important value than the family's right to privacy? Students need to consider carefully the potential impact on an individual before deciding to publicise that they have a mental illness.

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

If the answer is sad, frustrated or worried, students might consider the role of the media in providing support for their audience instead of simply tapping into their anxiety as a news value. Accurate information about mental illness and contact details for mental health and other support services can be provided to give the story "balance". News reports should not give the audience the impression that mental illnesses are untreatable or that people can never recover.



Is the report fair as well as accurate?

Some considerations are:

References to mental illness are confirmed and relevant: For example, if the headline or lead asserts certain facts about mental illness, is this confirmed in the report and is it relevant to the story?

Appropriate use of medical terminology: If medical terminology is used, has this been quoted from an expert source?

Use of non-stigmatising language: In the scenario, terms such as “schizo”, “mad” and “psycho” are used by some of the interviewees. If these are quoted in the report, what effect might this have on the way the audience views mental illness? Similarly, describing someone as “a schizophrenic” instead of a “person with schizophrenia” focuses the audience’s attention on the illness and doesn’t present an accurate portrayal of the individual as a whole person. This can be particularly harmful if people automatically associate the word “schizophrenic” with danger and violence, due to a lack of understanding about the illness.

Avoiding stereotypes and sensationalism: News reports can either confirm or challenge stereotypes and myths about mental illness. In this scenario some of the myths portrayed include the belief that all people with mental illness are violent and dangerous, should not be trusted and cannot recover or manage their illness. There is also a risk of portraying all mental illnesses as being one and the same when in reality there are many different types of mental illness and each person’s experience is different. People with mental illness may also be inappropriately portrayed as “victims”, and the illness sensationalised as a “curse” or a “life sentence”.

Students should be wary of reinforcing stereotypes about mental illness because of the potential harm to the subjects of the story and to other people directly or indirectly affected by mental illness. 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. If a journalist needs to negotiate with an editor who favours sensationalism, they should ensure they are armed with the facts about the damage sensational reporting may do.

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?
- 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?

One or more of the alternate frames outlined in Question 5 could be expanded to develop a feature story. The resource *Fact or fiction?* may also assist students to identify broader social issues associated with mental illness. This might involve researching:

- The nature of stigma and discrimination against people with mental illness
- The risk of violence associated with mental illness
- Current policy and legislation about mental illness
- The prevalence of different types of mental illnesses and how they impact on people's lives

You could ask students to brainstorm a longer list of possible stories based on issues demonstrated in the scenario. Once a topic for the feature has been chosen, students will need to consider:

- How might a journalist shed light on the issue?
- What are the key points to get across?
- Who would the journalist need to talk to? What would they ask?
- Where can the journalist get background information?
- Is there anything the journalist needs to know before interviewing a person with a mental illness?
- How will the article be structured?

Question 8: Using this scenario for ethical debate

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 that can be used as the basis of a seminar or assignment are:

- When it comes to reporting mental illness, the media is always part of the solution or part of the problem. Discuss.
- How does the Journalist's Code of Ethics deal with reporting mental illness? 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 mental health and mental illness reporting.

References

- Black, J., Steele, B., & Barney, R. (1997). *Doing Ethics in Journalism* (3rd ed.). New York: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bok, S. (1978). *Lying: Moral choice in public and private life*. New York: Random House.
- White, S. (1996). *Reporting in Australia* (2nd ed.). Melbourne: MacMillan.