

Case Study 2: Mental illness and community attitudes

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

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 case study materials

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.



Using the scenario as source material

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?* for an overview of the key ethical and journalistic issues involved in reporting mental illness. This resource, and further reference materials about mental illness, are available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info).

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 on reporting on mental illness, which is available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info).

Question 2: 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 titled *Additional materials*).

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. Consider whether the people interviewed are the most appropriate sources of information, and who else, if anyone, should be interviewed.

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 includes consideration of whether the information is specific or generalised, if and 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 amount of credibility assigned to each source.

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. What are the key questions involved in making this decision at this stage?

Question 5: How should this 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 directly affect what the audience understands from the story. This in turn will influence what the audience understands about the general issue of mental illness and how it might affect them. Journalists must be careful to not reinforce 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 you need to negotiate with an editor who favours sensationalism, you should ensure you are armed with the facts about the damage such reporting may do.

You should also consider the connotations of the words you use in relation to mental illness (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?
- How important are the views of local residents?
- What facts must be included in the story?
- How would a member of the audience feel after seeing this report?
- Is the report fair as well as accurate?

Question 6: 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 will be guided by the news values and principles you have assigned to the story.

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

Using the resource *Fact or fiction? Reporting mental illness and suicide*, you will be able to identify a number of issues raised in the scenario which could be used as the basis for developing a more in depth feature story on an aspect of mental illness. You may also wish to use the reference materials at www.mindframe-media.info to assist in identifying a topic or for further information about a particular topic.

Once you have chosen a topic, 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?
- Is there anything you need to know before interviewing a person with a mental illness?
- How will the article be structured?