

## Case Study 3: Media, mental illness and violence

### 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](http://www.headspace.org.au) and [www.reachout.com](http://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](http://www.mindframe-media.info)

Evidence suggests that the increased risk of violence associated with mental illness is only moderate and is usually only seen in certain types of mental illness. Despite this evidence, it is common for the media to link mental illness and violence (Francis et al., 2001). Undoubtedly, there have been cases where mental illness has led to violence and even murder. It can be argued that news fulfils an important function in bringing these cases into the public agenda (Pirkis et al., 2001, 2008). These types of stories relate to relatively rare instances. The coverage they receive, however, can imply a much greater risk of violence associated with mental illness. Audiences are likely to draw general inferences about people with mental illness and the risk they pose to the community. Stories concerning the majority of people with mental illness, who are not violent, are not considered newsworthy or reportable. Hence, there is a lack of context to balance the dominant theme of violence and mental illness.

An Australian study of the portrayal of mental illness in the media found that approximately 15% of items about mental health/illness involved negative stereotypes about mental illness, including many references to violence, crime and unpredictability (Pirkis et al., 2001, 2008). This included repeated reference to the person's mental state (e.g. "mentally ill offenders") as well as attributing the cause of violence to a person's mental state, even in the absence of evidence to support this. The study found that although there are examples of positive reporting about mental illness, negative items are generally given more prominence (Francis et al., 2001). This research also suggests that negative images have more influence than positive portrayals on the development of attitudes towards mental illness. When a journalist sets out to "cover" a story, the aim is to gather all the pertinent information required to write an accurate and meaningful story. To achieve this, the journalist must ensure that not only are the individual facts they report accurate, but



also the context in which those facts are reported. Mental health issues are extremely complex and there are many different levels of understanding about them in the community. In order to produce a balanced and accurate report, journalists may need to seek out a broader range of sources of information. For example, a journalist may be told by a police officer that a person is "psychotic" when the police officer doesn't accurately understand the term. Even though police and courts are important sources of news, especially crime, this type of information should be confirmed by a medical source. Journalists and editors must also seriously consider whether a person's mental illness has significant relevance to the story.

### **The case study materials**

This case study consists of a comprehensive collection of materials relating to the escape of Neville Garden, a man convicted of murder, from a psychiatric hospital whilst on day leave. The materials are provided in six separate files:

- Media releases from the Victorian Police about Neville Garden's escape and his return to custody
- News reports from March 27-28
- News reports from March 29-30
- Editorials and opinion columns about Neville Garden and broader issues associated with his escape from custody
- Criticism and discussion resulting from the main coverage of the incident
- Audio of a radio interview between a journalist who criticised the media and Derryn Hinch

This range of materials will allow students to conduct a thorough analysis of media coverage of the incident, and provides an insight into reactions to that coverage. The case study also raises issues around criticism of the media e.g. Who is entitled to criticise the media? How do media organisations react to criticism? What values are reflected in both the criticism and the responses?

### **Questions for consideration**

A number of suggested tasks relevant to this case study have been provided in the section *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:** Why was this story reported?

**Question 2:** How was this story reported? What is the potential impact of the reports?

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

**Question 4:** Is the editorial reporting on this incident more or less ethical than the reporting found in the news section?

**Question 5:** Is the criticism published in relation to the news coverage of this incident appropriate? Is it ethical?

**Question 6:** How can this incident be used as a prompt for a feature story?

**Question 7:** Using the case study for a radio current affairs story

**Question 8:** Using the case study for ethics seminars or debates

*Note: The student notes for this case study contain only brief notes 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: Why was this story reported?

### Defining public interest

On one hand, a journalist could be fairly certain the audience will be concerned about the man's escape from custody. On the other hand, is it the journalist's job to encourage this concern by dramatising the level of risk? Is there a balance between raising awareness and causing alarm? As the journalist reflects on these decisions he/she must consider the public interest in terms of what he/she sets out to achieve. The escape of a man convicted of murder is a potential threat to public safety but students need to determine whether the level of danger warranted the media coverage received.

Questions they may consider are:

- How does this story compare to other escapes from custody? Are they always reported? What is similar or different about this incident?
- Who was actually at risk in this instance? Can reporting the incident reduce the risk?
- To what extent is this incident part of a larger issue? Is reporting this incident part of the media's role in agenda setting and investigative reporting?
- Does the reporting reflect community fears or incite community fear?
- What might be the motives of the various parties?

In this case, the editor would probably say "deranged killer on the loose" is a huge story. The readers might feel they have a right to know if they are in danger. The health authorities may feel that the media is doing more harm than good. The Victoria Police would want the media to voice their concerns.

### Media releases and news reports

Technological changes mean that journalists are exposed to more sources of news than ever before, which creates a great potential for freedom of information. But with changes in information technology have come information managers whose job is to manipulate the way journalists access their sources and evaluate information. The purpose of a media release is to get the media's attention and it is likely to be written in such a way as to lead the journalist to take a certain angle. For this reason, media releases should always be "interrogated" for misleading information, opinion and unsubstantiated assertions. It is easy to fall into accepting published material as fact, even for journalists who well know that constructing journalism is a subjective process. Physical news sources must be interrogated in the same way journalists scrutinise information provided to them by people.

In the case study materials there are seven media releases issued by Victoria Police between 26 March and 29 March. These were an important source of factual information in the Neville Garden case. But to what extent does the reporting reflect the information provided in the media releases? Students should consider the media releases in light of the following questions:

- Do the media releases issued 26 and 27 March imply that Garden is a danger to public safety? If so, how? Does any information in the media releases conflict with this image of Garden?
- The media releases mention Garden's medication and concern for his welfare. How has this information been interpreted in the reporting of 28 March? Is this interpretation appropriate?
- The media release of 28 March describes Garden as a potential danger to himself and others. Is this substantiated in the media release?



## Question 2: How was this story reported? What is the potential impact of the reports?

In news reporting, the way a story is reported, the prominence given to the story and the language used all contribute to the message received by the audience. You may wish to have students consider each of the news reports published between 26 March 2001 and 30 March 2001 in relation to the overall message sent by the coverage. Alternatively, you could focus on one of the reports (an analysis of the *Sun Herald's* report 30 March 2001 is provided below for this purpose). When considering the coverage as a whole, some issues and questions to prompt students include:

### Positioning

The two newspapers (the *Herald Sun* and *The Age*) have positioned the story differently. What does this reflect about the way these news organisations view the urgency of the news and the notion of public risk? What other factors come into play in positioning the story?

The *Herald Sun* (29 March 2001 and 30 March 2001) positioned an additional subreport about a patient assaulting a six year old girl. What message might this convey?

### Headlines and leads

- What connotations do words such as "deranged" in a headline or lead send? Are these supported by the text of the reports?
- To what extent are other dramatic and emotive words used in the headlines – "fears", "warning", "outrage", "escalate", "scandal", "rapist", "bundle", "terror" "attack" and "kill" – supported by the text of the reports? Are the headlines accurate?

### Medical history

- Is it significant that less emphasis was placed on the subject's physical illness (diabetes) than was placed on his psychiatric illness? Why?
- What is the effect of repeated references to the man's mental illness? Could these references reinforce the misconception that these factors alone made the man dangerous?
- What are the *medical* definitions of the terms used to describe his mental illness - "psychotic", "deranged", "paranoid" and "schizophrenic"? (Students can be referred to the glossary of terms provided at [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)). Do these descriptions match public perceptions?
- Do the reports suggest anything about Garden's health or circumstances at the time of the murder in 1994?

### Public safety

- Information in the reports suggests Garden had planned his escape and was calm in his interactions with others. What does this suggest about his mental state at the time of the escape? Does this support or contradict the assertion that he was dangerous?
- Are the newspapers consistent in the way they present the threat posed to public safety?
- To what extent is his escape used to emphasise fears about low security and the day release program? Conversely, to what extent are these general fears drawn upon in order to dramatise the current story?

### News article critique in detail: Herald Sun Friday 30 March, 2001

1. This report begins on the front page, followed by a two-page spread on pages two and three.

- What news values are reflected in this positioning?

- Could the report's position influence the perceptions of readers regarding the risk of violence associated with mental illness?

2. *Comment on the relevance and position of the additional sub-report about a patient assaulting a six-year-old girl.*

- Is this information, or part of it, relevant to the report as a whole?
- Could the context and positioning of this report lead to the misconception that the assault was committed by Neville Garden?
- Could the manner or context of this report influence the public's view of people who have a mental illness?

3. *How many times, and in what ways, does the report refer to Neville Garden's medical condition(s)?*

- Is it significant that one element of the subject's medical condition (diabetes) was referred to once, while a reference to mental illness was made several times? Why?
- Does the report suggest anything about Garden's health or circumstances at the time of the murder in 1994?

4. *What labels are used regarding his mental illness?*

- What do the words "paranoid" and "deranged" mean in medical terms? What might these terms mean to the general public?
- Do we know whether Neville Garden was experiencing paranoia or had unclear thoughts at the time of his escape? What is suggested by what we know of his preparations and his interaction with others?
- Can the reader assume from this report that the subject was volatile or unpredictable, or that his behaviour may have been unusual in any way? Might members of the public assume this?
- Does the report imply that the subject is dangerous because he has escaped custody, because he has been convicted of murder, or because he has a mental illness?

5. *How many times do elements of security occur in the report and in what manner are these reported?*

- Taking into account the interests of the public, is the emphasis on security in this report appropriate?
- What emotive or dramatic words are used in relation to the search for Neville Garden and his return to custody? What connotations are created by the use of these words?
- Does the report suggest that the police considered Neville Garden dangerous?

6. *What opinions are reported by people who knew Neville Garden or came into contact with him after his escape? Do these comments indicate that the people involved considered Neville Garden dangerous?*

7. *What elements of this report serve the public interest? Are the needs of the public and the roles of the media completely fulfilled by this report? Would students have written anything differently? If so, what might they have changed?*

### **Question 3: How could 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 perceptions. 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/or reporting crime. Journalists can also refer to the recommendations provided in *Reporting mental illness and suicide: A resource for media professionals*, available from [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info)

### **Reflecting on the motivations of stakeholders**

In this case, there is the escaped man, the police, the mental health and prison authorities, the audience, the news organisation and the journalist. Have any assumptions been made about the motivation of any parties? Has this affected the way the story is framed?

### **Exploring alternative ways to report the story**

The journalist must consider the potential for stigmatising all people vulnerable to stereotypes about mental illness. Would the story be different if the man did not have a mental illness? Is there a need to focus attention on the man's mental illness?

### **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 or not 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 reporter 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 4: Is the editorial reporting on this incident more or less ethical than the reporting found in the news section?**

Following the arrest of Neville Garden, a number of newspaper editorial writers and columnists also wrote about the topics of schizophrenia, crime and the incarceration of people with mental illnesses. Students can be referred to *Fact or fiction?* to review the approach taken by these writers in relation to guidelines for reporting about mental illness.

Questions to prompt students include:

- How do the different kinds of reporting compare?
- Are assumptions shared about mental illness?
- Has medical terminology been used appropriately?
- Could the editorials reinforce myths or negative stereotypes about mental illness? How?

**Question 5: Is the criticism published in relation to the news coverage of this incident appropriate? Is it ethical?**

These materials include an article published in the Media section of *The Australian* criticising the *Herald Sun's* coverage of the incident. Also included is the reaction to that criticism, in the form of letters and a transcript of a radio interview on the subject. Questions to prompt students in considering whether the resulting criticism is appropriate are outlined below.

**“Unhealthy Stereotypes”, *The Australian*, 24 May 2001**

- What are the facts asserted by this article? Are the assertions substantiated in the text?
- Is the writer fair to the *Herald Sun* journalists?
- Does the writer make any allegations against the *Herald Sun*?
- Does the article constitute an attack on the *Herald Sun*?
- Is the article ethically written? Was the information ethically gathered?

**Interview with Derryn Hinch, 25 May 2001**

- What is the wider issue identified by Hinch in his introduction?
- Does Hinch substantiate his claim the journalist has been unfair? How?
- What other information about the Garden case does the interview reveal? How does this information affect students' views of the coverage?
- How does the journalist ethically defend her position?

**Response from the *Herald Sun's* editor in chief, published in *The Australian* 31 May 2001**

- What facts are asserted in the letter from the *Herald Sun* editor? Are the assertions substantiated in the text?
- What ethical position is assumed by the editor in his letter?
- How does this weigh up against the views expressed in the letters from members of the public?
- Could a journalist realistically respond to all these views? How?



### Question 6: How can this incident be used as a prompt for a feature story?

Students could prepare a 1500 word article critiquing the overall media coverage of Neville Garden's escape, suitable for publication in the Media section of *The Australian*. The resource *Fact or fiction? Reporting mental illness and suicide* can be used as a reference for the article. Alternatively, the media coverage of this incident can be used as the starting point for a discussion about potential angles for a feature article that explores broader issues relating to mental illness, violence and crime. Some questions to start the discussion include:

- Is the perceived link between mental illness and violence accurate? What are the risk factors?
- How does the portrayal of mental illness affect people's experience of mental illness?
- What does the community understand or know about mental illness? Students can use the reference materials at [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info) for information on these topics.

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 7: Using the case study for a radio current affairs story

Students can be provided with the audio of the Hinch interview (provided on CD and VHS), and the printed transcript. Using the audio and their own research, students can record and edit a 3-minute current affairs story about either:

- The issues highlighted in the news coverage (e.g. security, public safety, rehabilitation programs)  
OR
- The controversy and criticism resulting from the coverage

Questions students will face include:

- To what extent does the audio drive the story?
- What news values are attached to the grabs? Which grabs take priority?
- What is the process for deciding which grabs to select?
- What will the message of the story be?
- How should the voice piece be structured?

### Question 8: Using the case study for ethics seminars or debates

Questions 1–5 provide a guide for working through the ethical issues raised in this case study. Additional topics for ethics discussions or assignments are provided below. These are listed under the different source materials included in the case study.



## News Reports

Looking at the news reports published between March 26 and March 30, students may consider one of the following:

- Truth is the first casualty in reporting crime. Discuss.
- The public interest dominates in reporting crime. Define the public interest in this context.
- Media reporting about mental illness and crime reinforces myths and negative stereotypes about mental illness. Discuss.

## Editorial and opinion pieces

This group of materials consists of printed reports in the form of editorials and opinion columns about Neville Garden and broader issues associated with his escape from custody.

Some suggested seminar questions to guide the discussion are:

- The public is responsible for the stereotyping of people with mental illness. Discuss.
- All the journalists in this case study "play God" with the truth. Discuss.
- Media reporting about mental illness is part of the problem or part of the solution. Discuss

## Ethical discussion

This group consists of the article in *The Australian* criticising the *Herald Sun* coverage, and response to this article. Some suggested seminar questions to guide the discussion are:

- Has *The Australian* journalist been unethical in her criticism of the *Herald Sun*? Why?
- Has the *Herald Sun* acted unethically in its reporting of the Garden case? Why? Can any harm done be justified ethically?
- Discuss the overall reporting of the Garden case in relation to the MEAA Code of Ethics.

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