

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

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

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 allows for a thorough analysis of media coverage of the incident, and provides 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?

### Question 1: Why was this story reported?

On one hand, a journalist could be fairly certain the audience would 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 journalist also needs to consider the motives of the various parties. Police media releases 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?

### 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 coverage and the language used all contribute to the message received by the audience. In analysing the coverage of this incident you should consider the effect of positioning, headlines and leads, and descriptions of the man's medical conditions and mental health. The resource *Fact or fiction?* will assist you in considering how these may impact on public perceptions of mental illness. Further information, including a glossary of mental health terms, is provided at [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info).

### Question 3: How could 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 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. Using *Fact or fiction?* you could review the approach taken by these writers in relation to guidelines for reporting about mental illness.

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

Consider the article published in *The Australian* 25 May 2001 criticising the *Herald Sun's* coverage. Is the article ethically written? Are the assertions substantiated in the text? In the interview with Derryn Hinch 25 May 2001, does Hinch substantiate his claim that the journalist has been unfair? Is the journalist able to ethically defend her position? In the response from the *Herald Sun's* editor in chief (published in *The Australian*, 31 May 2001), are the assertions substantiated in the text? Can this view be balanced with the views expressed in the letters from members of the public?

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

Your tutor or lecturer may ask you to write a 1500 word article critiquing the overall media coverage of Neville Garden's escape, suitable for publication in the Media section of *The Australian*. *Fact or fiction?* can be used as a reference for the article. Alternatively, the media coverage of this incident can be used as the starting point to identify potential angles for a feature article that explores broader issues relating to mental illness, violence and crime. You may also wish to use the reference materials at [www.mindframe-media.info](http://www.mindframe-media.info) to assist in identifying a 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?

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

Your tutor or lecturer may ask you to use the audio of the interview with Derryn Hinch (available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website), the printed transcript and your own research to 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

In developing the broadcast you will need to consider the message of the story, the extent to which the audio will drive the story, a process for deciding which grabs to select, and how to structure the voice piece.



## References

Black, J., Steele, B., & Barney, R. (1997). *Doing Ethics in Journalism* (3rd ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon

Bok, S. (1978). *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. New York: Random House.

Francis, C, Pirkis, J, Dunt, D and Blood, RW (2001) *Mental health and illness in the media: a review of the literature*. Produced for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra.

Pirkis, J, Francis, C, Blood, RW, Burgess, P, Morley, B and Stewart, A (2001) *The Media Monitoring Project: A Baseline Description of How the Australian Media Reports and Portrays Suicide and Mental Health/Illness*. Produced for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra

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