

Case Study 5: Publication of suicide methods in Parliamentary Hansard

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

On 30 August 2006, Parliamentarian Sandra Kanck delivered an address to the members of the South Australian state Parliament on the right to die. Ms Kanck acknowledged that the speech contained methods of suicide and as such, the publication of her speech as an electronic record on the website would be in opposition to federal legislation prohibiting the electronic publication and transfer of methods of suicide. She also noted that it would also be in opposition to state legislation if the transcript of her speech was not available to the public. She argued that, in part, her speech was intended to highlight the anomaly between the two laws. She agreed she was using State Parliament privilege to challenge a Federal law with which she did not agree. Given the controversy surrounding the speech it was not surprising that media coverage of the incident carried over a number of weeks, especially in South Australia.

The scenario and stimulus material

Students are invited to critically review six newspaper articles that provide comment on Ms. Kanck's parliamentary address. Articles one was printed on 31 August 2006 by *The Age* newspaper. Articles two, three, four and five were all printed on 1 September 2006 by *The Age*, *The Advertiser* (X 2) and *ABC Online* respectively and article six was printed by *The Advertiser* on 6 September 2006. The articles can be downloaded as a PDF in their original format or as transcripts from the *Mindframe* for Universities website. See the documents accompanying these notes titled



Questions for consideration

When undertaking 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: What news values are operating in these reports? Which elements of these reports serve the public interest in terms of informing public debate?

Question 2: What is the basis of “parliamentary privilege”, which deems that politicians are not subject to prosecution for things said during parliamentary debate? Is Ms. Kanck’s speech an appropriate use of parliamentary privilege? Why?

Question 3: What elements of article one and two could be considered best practice reporting in terms of issues to consider when reporting suicide? Would you have written anything differently?

Question 4: As a result of the controversial nature of the issue, media coverage panned over three weeks. Articles three and six have six days between them. How do the articles differ in content and tone?

Question 5: Although the media does not tend to report on suicide generally, there is an obligation to report on matters of public interest like the speech made by Sandra Kanck. Should the same considerations for reporting suicide be applied to the reporting of voluntary euthanasia? Why/ Why not?

Question 6: A number of the articles raise a public debate about possible copycat suicides due to media detailing methods of voluntary euthanasia. Do you think that raising the two issues together is appropriate? Can you think of any possible implications?

Question 7: While article’s five and six, “Kanck’s speech to appear on Nitschke’s website” and “Kanck’s mail order suicide”, do not publish the details of Sandra Kanck’s speech, specifically the methods of suicide, do you think it is responsible to report on where to locate the speech? Do journalists have a responsibility to minimise the risk of harm in these stories?

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. What news values are operating in these reports? Which elements of these reports serve the public interest in terms of informing public debate?

Discussion Notes

There are several news values operating throughout the examples presented here, which may account for the large amount of national coverage that this event received. Given that the speech was delivered as a state parliamentary address, it was obviously designed to affect a large number of people. Ms. Kanck was quite explicit about her intention to bring this issue to the attention of the Australian government and the public. The controversial nature of the voluntary euthanasia debate would also add to the threshold value of the story, as well as other values such as personalisation and meaningfulness. Other underlying issues such as terminal illness and depression affect many people and their families, so the story would resonate well with readers. It is likely that the public would be interested in this story. The speech itself was a sudden, one -off event, giving it a high frequency value in terms of media reporting. It would also fit well into news organisations’ schedules, in that this story would have been quite competitive in terms of its placement among other stories at the time. This is shown by its presence in the front or earlier sections of several news publications. The story is very “media -ready”, in that it is likely to arouse public interest and debate. The controversy surrounding euthanasia is an ongoing issue and a “hot topic” for media reporting. This event was most certainly perceived as shocking and incorporating key elements of conflict. Sandra Kanck used this tactic to bring attention to the issues of disparity between federal and state legislation related to electronic publication of suicide methods. Sandra Kanck is also considered to be a person of

power and influence. This would add to the “elite” values of the story. It also raises wider questions about whether politicians should be allowed to use parliamentary privilege to knowingly break Federal laws, which may be in the public interest.

Question 2. What is the basis of “parliamentary privilege”, which deems that politicians are not subject to prosecution for things said during parliamentary debate? Is Ms Kanck’s speech an appropriate use of parliamentary privilege? Why?

Discussion Notes

The term “parliamentary privilege” refers not to any special benefits or entitlements enjoyed by Members of Parliament but to the immunity from ordinary law that, together with the potential exercise of parliamentary powers, enables the Houses of Parliament to carry out their primary functions of legislating, debate and inquiry more effectively and independently. Parliamentary privilege in relation to Australian parliaments derives from the Westminster parliamentary tradition. This tradition is preserved and augmented by legislation in each jurisdiction. Probably the most important parliamentary immunity is freedom of speech in Parliament. Members of Parliament, witnesses and others taking part in the proceedings of Parliament cannot generally be sued or prosecuted for what they say or do in the course of parliamentary proceedings. Papers and documents published by the authority of either House of Parliament are similarly protected, as are petitions to Parliament. Due to the fact that Ms. Kanck was speaking in parliament, she cannot be prosecuted for detailing methods of suicide, the publication of which is prohibited by Federal law. She admits that she is aware of this breach of the law and argues that her use of parliamentary privilege is justified because it allows her to criticise a Federal law with which she disagrees (see Article 1). Implicit in this argument is Ms. Kanck’s contention that a greater good is achieved if the law is changed, even if it potentially poses a risk to those who may misuse the information about suicide methods.

Question 3. What elements of article one and two could be considered best practice reporting in terms of issues to consider when reporting suicide? Would you have written anything differently?

Example of preferred reporting Example of non-preferred reporting.

ARTICLE ONE

- Avoids outlining the actual suicide methods mentioned during the speech or giving any reference to where to find these details.
- Places the story in context, indicating that suicide may be related to a person’s mental state: e.g. “...publicising suicide methods could affect vulnerable people who may not otherwise have accessed the information”.
- Gives expert opinion on the dangers of discussing methods of suicide, especially to those at-risk, e.g. SA’s Chief Advisor in Psychiatry, Dr John Brayley appealed...saying the ramifications could be devastating”.
- Includes helpline numbers.
- Uses the word “suicide” in the title of the piece.



ARTICLE TWO

- Does not use the word “suicide” in the title.
- Does not use the word suicide excessively.
- Mentions, but does not include any expert comment.
- Does not list any helpline numbers.

Question 4. As a result of the controversial nature of the issue, media coverage panned over three weeks. Articles three and six have six days between them. How do the articles differ in content and tone?

Article three does not directly report on the event of the Sandra Kanck parliamentary address, but is portrayed more as a human interest story, hypothetically highlighting the implications of publishing the speech by telling the story of a woman affected by a family suicide. The story is designed to evoke an emotional response from readers. Generally, the article reports issues of suicide responsibly and emphasises the link between suicide and mental health problems. It also offers expert comment (Barbara Hocking from SANE Australia). Although the article is generally responsible, it does not list helpline numbers, despite encouragement from the interviewee for those with depression to “talk to someone”. It also appeared on the front page of the publication, despite research evidence that suggests a possible link between prominent placement of suicide stories in the media and the incidence of copycat suicide. Article six’s title explicitly draws attention to how to gain access to the speech delivered by Sandra Kanck outlining specific suicide methods. The article itself explains how to order the information via mail and at no point discourages people from doing so. The article uses the conflict between the banning of the speech on Australian sites and its easy access via other means to create public interest.

Question 5. Although the media does not tend to report on suicide generally, there is an obligation to report on matters of public interest like the speech made by Sandra Kanck. Should the same considerations for reporting suicide be applied to the reporting of voluntary euthanasia? Why/ Why not?

A challenge when reporting on suicide and related issues (such as voluntary euthanasia) is the potential conflict between professional, ethical and commercial values. What the public is interested in may not necessarily be what is in the public’s interest. The public interest in this case may be related to:

- Protecting public health and safety;
- Preventing the public from being misled by some statement or action of an individual or organisation;
- Detecting or exposing hypocrisy, falsehoods or double standards of behaviour on the part of public figures or public institutions and in public policy.

Sandra Kanck has claimed that her speech was designed to expose the double standards of federal legislation in preventing freedom of speech by making electronic transfer of details of methods of suicide, and thus voluntary euthanasia, illegal. Voluntary euthanasia arouses intense public and political interest and there is certainly an important role for the media in airing multiple views to further the debate. While there has been little separate research on the effects of reporting voluntary euthanasia, it would seem possible that vulnerable people in the community might be influenced by such reports, just as they may be affected by reporting on other forms of suicide. When reporting Sandra Kanck’s actions and future references to voluntary euthanasia, journalists may need to consider the potential overlap between suicide

and voluntary euthanasia and the possible implications that details of this speech could have on vulnerable members of the public and the family and friends of those who have lost someone to either suicide or euthanasia. Journalists should consider guidelines such as:

- Avoiding use of the word suicide – particularly in headlines or leads;
- Avoiding the description or photographic representation of the method;
- Including help-lines and other help-seeking information;
- Avoiding glamorising the death, using sensational language and prominent placement.
- As with any controversial issue, it is also helpful for media reports to present a variety of views and to seek comment from experts. Exploring the underlying issues associated with euthanasia and offering alternative views may encourage people to seek help.

Question 6. A number of the articles raise a public debate about possible copycat suicides due to media detailing methods of voluntary euthanasia. Do you think that raising the two issues together is appropriate? Can you think of any possible implications?

Sandra Kanck's speech has provided a unique opportunity for media professionals to raise public debate over the potential impact of reporting methods of voluntary euthanasia on rates of suicide. It also allows the media organisation and journalist an opportunity to explain to their readers their own apparent self-censorship and codes of practice around these topics. That is, it allows them an opportunity to explain to readers why they have not reported on details of suicide methods in the current story and past stories.

Covering an issue like this is different from covering an individual suicide or being explicit about the methods of suicide as it is of public interest and does not glamorise the act. It also exposes the conflict between federal and state legislation on this issue. Possible implications for raising this debate include the risk that vulnerable members of the community may copy methods of voluntary euthanasia. As Dr John Brayley states in article four, "One of the means of preventing suicide is by removing lethal means – by giving out this information it can make the means more available". Dr Brayley's comment suggests that discussion of the methods of suicide or drawing attention to how to obtain this information potentially increased the risk of suicide.

While research on the effects of reporting voluntary euthanasia specifically is scarce, it would seem possible that vulnerable people in the community might be influenced by such reports, just as they may be affected by reporting on suicide more generally. Given the possibility that some aspects of reporting voluntary euthanasia could have similar effects to reporting suicide (e.g. reporting of methods), it may be equally as inappropriate to expose the public to repeated coverage of either topic. A succession of stories can promote a dose-response factor and normalise suicidal behaviour as an acceptable option. Extended or prolonged media coverage can also glamorise and normalise the act of taking one's life, especially when celebrities and other prominent people appear to be in support of voluntary euthanasia.

When covering voluntary euthanasia, journalists should take care and be mindful of the guidelines such as avoiding the description or photographic representation of the method, not glamorising the issue or using sensational language, and avoiding prominence. As with any controversial issue, it is also helpful for media reports to present a variety of views and to seek comment from experts.



Question 7. While article's five and six, "Kanck's speech to appear on Nitschke's website" and "Kanck's mail order suicide", do not publish the details of Sandra Kanck's speech, specifically the methods of suicide, do you think it is responsible to report on where to locate the speech? Do journalists have a responsibility to minimise the risk of harm in these stories?

Media coverage of the Sandra Kanck address could be argued to be newsworthy on a number of different levels. Article six draws attention to Sandra Kanck's actions in disregarding the safety of vulnerable members of the community not once but twice by posting out copies of her speech which details methods of suicide to members of the community who requested it. By including expert comment to this effect as well as listing helpline numbers in the article, the journalist has attempted to cover the story responsibly. However, the article provides instructions on how to access Ms. Kanck's speech to other potentially vulnerable members of the community. The journalist has mentioned that the speech is available by contacting the office of Sandra Kanck and requesting a copy be mailed out, four times within the small article. ABC Online published "Kanck's speech to appear on Nitschke's website" with four references to how you could access the Kanck speech online at Nitschke's New Zealand website. It would have been possible for the journalist to report that the speech was being made available by post or website without detailing which sites to visit or how a printed copy could be requested.