

Case Study 5: Publication of suicide methods in Parliamentary Hansard

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

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. Article 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 *Case Study 5: Media articles* and *Case Study 5: Media article transcripts*.

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?