

Case Study 6: Death at a rock concert

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

There has been considerable discussion about whether media portrayal of suicide leads to imitation or "copycat" suicide. An Australian review conducted in 2001 (and updated in 2010) has concluded that there *is* an association between non-fictional media portrayal of suicide and actual suicide, and in some cases, this association is likely to be causal (Pirkis & Blood, 2010).

This has implications for the way suicide is represented in the media. In particular, it becomes important to consider the potential effect of a report on an emotionally vulnerable individual. People in despair are often unable to identify solutions to their problems, and may be influenced by what they read, view, or hear. The effect may be more profound if someone feels able to identify with the person who died, perhaps because they are in the same age group or share similar experiences or ideals.

An explicit report, particularly one that provides details about the method of suicide, may lead those who are vulnerable to take a similar course of action. Suicide is a legitimate topic for serious discussion in the media, like other mental health issues. However, the presentation of suicide should be done with great care. Journalists are urged to consider suicide in the context of a larger problem and emphasise the relationship between mental illness, particularly depression, and suicide risk.

The scenario

A large-scale one-day music festival is being held in your city today. The event is sold out to its capacity audience of 100,000 and is being headlined by international artists. One of the headline bands, appearing at 2pm is the popular band The Removed. The band recently won a Grammy and is the face of a popular youth clothing label. Twenty minutes after their performance, the female lead singer of The Removed,



Janie Smithfield, is found dead at the bottom of a lighting tower. Within minutes, individual recounts of the incident are being posted on Twitter and retweeted:

Smithfield just jumped off a tower at Homebound. So sad.

Some important facts are:

- The death occurred at a large public event and although it happened in the backstage area, the act was still witnessed by several festival goers;
- The band were scheduled for a national tour following the festival;
- There is little to no information available about Janie Smithfield's mental health and wellbeing leading up to the incident;
- Comments have started appearing on the band's Facebook page and a memorial / tribute site has also been established by fans on Facebook within an hour of the death;
- The concert continues to run as scheduled;
- As the day continues and throughout the week, there is considerable traffic on the band's website and a large volume of media interest in and coverage of the incident.

The following additional information has been provided as part of this case study and can be found in **Handout 6A** at www.mindframe-media.info:

- Statement from police;
- Statement from event organizers;
- Statement from The Removed.

Questions for consideration

Based on the scenario above, consider the following questions:

Question 1: Journalism codes of practice generally call for reports of individual suicides only to be reported where there is a "public interest" reason for doing so. When are suicide stories in the public interest? Why might this story be in the public interest?

Question 2: What are some of the other key ethical and professional considerations of reporting on suicide?

Question 3: How can responsible reporting practices be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?

Question 4: The news of the death has broken through Twitter. At this stage, you have no immediate information from witnesses, the band, or the event organisers.

How do you use this information?

Question 5: Along with initial tweets, a picture has been tweeted of the body, covered in a sheet. Can this picture be used as part of your story?

Question 6: Using this scenario for ethical debate (see below for more detail)

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: Journalism codes of practice generally call for reports of individual suicides only to be reported where there is a “public interest” reason for doing so. When are suicide stories in the public interest? Why might this story be in the public interest? ‘Public interest’ and the impact of reporting

When evaluating the public interest and potential impact of reporting this incident, students may consider the following issues:

Answering the question “why”?

It is natural for people to seek an explanation following a tragic and unexpected incident and the media can serve an important public function in this regard. In this instance, the community may have a strong interest in and perceived entitlement to information about the death due to Janie's popularity and role in public life. Community interest in this situation may also be stronger because of the way information is being circulated about the death in this scenario. The social media aspect of these communications, and the speed and brevity with which they are circulated, could potentially exacerbate the questioning or misinformation for those receiving the news via such platforms. Other new media communications such as the tribute / memorial page present an interface of public grieving which would likely include the exchange of questions arising for fans about the death and circumstances surrounding it. What might be the implications for journalists reporting these questions with or without answers? Students might take the view that the suicide of a popular and admired young person with seemingly every advantage is a question of public interest that may enlighten people about the problem of suicide. On the other hand, can a news report provide the answers the community is looking for? Can the witness comments provide real insight into the dead young woman's state of mind? What harm could be done by reporting speculation?

Public profile

- As a performer Janie is loved and admired by thousands of music fans. The band is particularly popular among young people and the wider community may therefore consider them to be role models for young people.
- The death occurred in a public place attended by 100,000 concert goers.
- The news of the incident has already been widely circulated in the public domain (i.e. thousands of concert goers, tweets, entertainment media covering the event) therefore people will hear about the incident and may expect it to be reported.

The effect on a vulnerable person may be more profound if they are able to identify with the person in the report. This can happen in two ways: because they identify the person as “someone like them” – because they are in the same age group or share similar experiences to the person portrayed; or because the person is “someone I would like to be” – that is, a role model, public figure or celebrity. As such, reporting on a high profile suicide should be handled with caution.

Risk of imitation suicide

There is now conclusive evidence that the way in which suicide is reported can influence other vulnerable people to take a similar course of action. The critical review of literature about this issue, *Suicide in the news and information media* found almost 100 international studies that have been conducted looking at the link between media portrayals of suicide and suicidal behaviour (Pirkis and Blood, 2010).

There is strong support for the relationship between media reporting and increases in completed and attempted suicide rates. These increases cannot be explained by suicides that may have occurred anyway, as they are not followed by commensurate decreases in rates.

Systematic reviews of the international research evidence have observed that the imitation or ‘copycat’ suicide is more evident under certain circumstances:



- Risk is related to the prominence of the coverage, with repeated coverage and prominent news items most strongly associated with subsequent suicidal behaviour (Hassan, 1995; Etzersdorfer, Voracek and Sonneck, 2004);
- It is accentuated when the reader or viewer identified with the person as either someone that is similar to themselves or someone they admire such as a celebrity (Wasserman, 1984; Cheng et al, 2007; Yip et al, 2006; Stack, 2005).
- Certain subgroups in the population (e.g. young people and people experiencing a mental illness) may be particularly vulnerable (Phillips and Carstensen, 1986; Cheng et al 2007);
- Explicit descriptions of method or location have been linked to increased rates of suicide by that particular method or at that particular location (Etzersdorfer, Voracek and Sonneck, 2004; Phillips and Carstensen, 1988; Ashton and Donnan, 1979)

Pirkis and Blood (2010: 33) concluded:

Irresponsible presentations of suicide in news and information media can influence copycat acts. The findings of the current review should not be interpreted as a call for censorship of the media; it is acknowledged that the media has a role to play in raising awareness of suicide as a public health issue. Rather, the findings should be interpreted as an indication that media presentation of suicide should be done responsibly, and balanced against the public's 'right to know'.

Students may wish to explore the research that has been conducted in this area (see www.mindframe-media.info). Students may consider that it is not so much whether or not a suicide is reported but *how* it is reported. Or they may consider that repeating stories about suicide can lead to normalisation of the act. These issues are the topic of ongoing research and students should be encouraged to critically evaluate the findings of the research to date.

Reporting on grief

People might be very interested to know what the friends, family, other band members etc. are feeling after the death of their loved one. What are the limits on the public role of a public figure? Is there any benefit to the family in having their voice heard? Could reporting on the band's grief add to the community's understanding of suicide? How could the public expression of grief via Facebook and Twitter be responsibly handled by journalists reporting on this story?

Question 2: What are some of the other key ethical and professional considerations of reporting on suicide?

What are the facts?

First, the journalist must decide if any of the information collected cannot be verified. If it is unverifiable, is the information so important to the story that it cannot be left out? If the journalist decides to go ahead despite doubts about the verifiability of the information, what news value is the journalist assigning priority to in using unverified information?

What facts should be included in the story?

To answer this question, students will need to resolve several related questions including "are *who, what, where, when, why* and *how* always appropriate information to include in a story?" In this scenario, the news of the woman's death and details about her identity are already widely known. Much of this detail, which is not officially confirmed, is important to the story because the woman's high public profile would increase public interest in the news. If students decide to use names, does this mean the public interest is a more important value than the individual right to privacy, of the deceased's family and fellow band members in their grieving? Students should also consider whether information received thus far could be

classified as “facts”. Given the nature of circulation of the information via social media forums, what kind of integrity of information can be assured? To make this decision, the student will need to consider questions of *public interest, news values and principles, credibility of source and accuracy of information*.

Is the report balanced, fair and accurate?

As discussed in Question 4, information needs to be examined in terms of credibility of source and whether the information can be verified. For example the journalist may be tempted to speculate that this was a suicide. Can this inference be justified? Although journalists may be keen to explain to people why a needless death has occurred, they should consider whether this actually helps or hinders the community’s understanding of suicide. For example, there may be a temptation to try to make sense of suicide by portraying the act as an individual’s way of solving their problems. Students should be aware of how this may impact on other vulnerable people who may see or hear the report. People in distress often have difficulty identifying different options and ways to address their problems. Phrases such as “chose the time to die”, “forever young” and “the only way out” may inadvertently portray suicide as a romantic or courageous way to solve problems. For similar reasons, it is recommended that terms such as “successful suicide attempt” or “unsuccessful suicide attempt” not be used. “Fatal suicide”, “completed suicide” or “died by suicide” can be used instead of “successful suicide”. “Non-fatal suicide” can be used instead of “unsuccessful suicide”. It is also recommended that the word “suicide” not be used in headlines or broadcast leads, to minimise the risk of sensationalising and/or normalising suicide. Journalists may also be tempted to re-visit suicide deaths of other rock musicians or draw links between the subculture itself and suicide. In framing a story this way, what might be the impact on vulnerable people who subscribe to this subculture? Consider the risks associated with linking the deaths of individuals, even if they share a certain trait such as celebrity, because this can normalise the act for people who are vulnerable, and make it appear to be a rational, common and acceptable option for dealing with problems. Journalists should further be mindful that reporting on celebrity activity sometimes has the potential to establish “trends” in behaviour or imitation. A news story developed from this scenario should try not to glorify the dead woman or memorialise her positive characteristics excessively (e.g. “she had everything to live for” or “she was loved by thousands” or “she was most talented musician of her time”) without acknowledging the aspects of her life that contributed to her decision to die. This is particularly challenging to achieve when the situation involves a celebrity who was admired and adored by thousands of people. The story can be balanced by reference to the fact that suicide is caused by multiple factors and that most people who suicide have a history of psychological and/or social problems.

Is the story in context?

Students should be careful of reinforcing the inaccurate notion that such incidents are either “acts of fate” or the result of “rock and roll lifestyles”. The death of the woman by suicide should not be portrayed as the result of a social or cultural phenomenon which is unpreventable. Although thoughts of suicide may be quite common, acting on them is not. Psychological autopsy studies show that up to 90% of people who die by suicide may have been experiencing a mental illness at the time of their death (Penrose-Wall et al., 1999). Suicidal behaviour in any person is usually influenced by a number of factors, and each individual’s situation is unique. A suicide should not be attributed to any single causal factor in a news report (such as pressures of fame or mental illness) as this may over-simplify the act, which does not improve community understanding of the issues. Below is a very brief overview of some of the risk factors associated with suicide. A more detailed overview can be found on the *Mindframe* for Universities website.

- Individual risk factors - male gender, experiencing psychological or emotional problems, physical health problems, stressful life events;
- Mental illness as a risk factor - major depression, bi-polar disorder, substance use disorder, history of psychiatric care, previous suicidal behaviour;



- Family related risk factors - family breakdown, family conflict or poor communication, child abuse, family history of suicidal behaviour;
- Social risk factors - socio-economic disadvantage, Indigenous communities, school disengagement, unemployment, isolation, rural communities;
- Environmental risk factors - access to the means (e.g. gun ownership), exposure to peers or people in the media who have shown suicidal behaviour.

While there may be no clear answers as to why the woman died by suicide, the story could be framed around the major risk factors and warning signs for suicide, and the help that is available to people experiencing problems. It is also important that the media have access to updated suicide statistics. The Australian Bureau of Statistics release comprehensive statistics on causes of death in Australia each year. For the most up to date statistics on suicide, refer to the section of the *Mindframe* for Universities website titled "Overview of Suicide in Australia".

Are the headline and placement appropriate?

It has been shown in research into news reporting about suicide that including the word suicide in the headline increases the prominence of the story, possibly attracting vulnerable readers. It is usually advised that reports on suicide or attempted suicide not be given undue prominence (i.e. placed on the front page, or use the term suicide in the headlines) as this may inadvertently glorify the act for those who are vulnerable, and may be distressing to the family.

Is the language appropriate?

Journalists should resist the temptation to sensationalise or glorify the suicide in news reports, particularly where a celebrity is involved. This is very important as it can make the act of suicide a more appealing option to vulnerable individuals. Similarly, reports should avoid use of language that suggests the suicide was a solution to problems, or a favourable outcome (i.e. such as a release from suffering or pain). Rather, the overall tone of the language should emphasise the tragic event as a significant loss. It is essential that journalists avoid any insinuation of blame, personal weakness or flaws of the person who has died.

Have I included explicit detail about method or location?

In some instances, media reports of locations used for suicide may result in these places becoming popular for suicide attempts. Particular care should be taken not to further promote these locations as 'suicide spots'. If it is important to make reference to a location, describe it in general terms only. Detailed descriptions of the method may prompt a distressed individual in the community to take a similar course of action, particularly when they identify with or admire the person in the news report. As such, omitting specific detail about the method is a simple harm minimisation technique journalists can employ. How might you articulate the information that has been tweeted (in the above scenario) to minimise potential harm?

How would a member of the audience feel after seeing this report?

If the answer is sad, anxious or worried, students might consider the role of the media in providing support for readers or viewers instead of simply tapping into their anxiety as a news value. A news story about suicide should include a contact phone number for support services – see the following suggestions about help-seeking information.

Have I included help-seeking information?

Research has shown that vulnerable audiences are often prompted to seek help if correct advice has been added to a media story. It is vital that the right contacts are added to help lines in media stories with a suicide or mental illness focus. The *Mindframe* National Media Initiative engaged in consultation with a number of suicide prevention and mental health experts to establish a resource which outlines 'priority'

crisis contacts for suicide and mental illness, and includes quick tips on how to use them correctly. Students can access this guide produced by the *Mindframe* National Media Initiative to assist them to include the correct help-seeking information to their reports. The Help-Seeking Quick Reference Card can be downloaded from www.mindframe-media.info

Question 3: How can responsible reporting practices be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?

Students can refer to the ‘ten questions to guide the journalist through the decisionmaking process’ outlined by Black, Steele and Barney (1997) or to Bok’s (1978) threestep model for making an ethical decision (for copies of each, see the document titled *Case Study 1 – Additional materials*). A summary of the key issues contained in these models, as applied to this scenario, is outlined below.

Appreciating the complexity of the topic

Journalists (and students) need to reflect on how much they know about suicide, and whether their knowledge is based on fact and evidence or public perceptions. For example, community attitudes towards suicide range from seeing it as “the ultimate selfish act” to “an unavoidable tragedy”. Such opinions and attitudes would be circulating via social media in response to the death and it may be tempting for the journalist to tap into this “community tide”. Journalists should be aware that there are a large number of risk factors that can lead to suicide and that deaths by suicide can often be prevented if people receive appropriate help. By appreciating the complexity of social issues such as suicide, the journalist is in a better position to balance ethical issues with journalistic and commercial values.

Checking organisational policies and professional guidelines

All peak media bodies have their own codes to guide practice around reporting about suicide. Some media organisations also have their own policies or codes of conduct and these may provide guidance around a range of issues such as privacy, reporting suicide, interviewing people who are bereaved and use of social media. Journalists can also refer to the recommendations provided in *Reporting mental illness and suicide: A resource for media professionals*, available from the *Mindframe* website www.mindframe-media.info.

Reflecting on the motivations and emotional state of stakeholders

In this case, there are a hundred thousand concert goers and fans, members and management of the band, the recording company, promoters of the event, police, entertainment media, the youth clothing label which is endorsed by the band. Family of the deceased have not yet become involved however it is likely that they would have contact with media soon after the news of the death has spread. The proximity and potential motivations of each of the stakeholders need to be evaluated as this can affect the credibility of the information provided. When reporting on grief, journalists also need to be aware that bereaved people can be very vulnerable and their emotional state will impact on their reliability as a source. This consideration applies whether sources are interviewed or if their comments are observed via Twitter, Facebook or other online forums. These issues are discussed more thoroughly in Question 4.

Consider also what is the role and responsibility of the journalist in interviewing people who are distressed or traumatised? People who have been traumatised are sometimes in shock and may not recall speaking with the journalist. What might be the potential impact on the journalist themselves in entering an environment with a large volume of people who are distressed or traumatised? Refer to the DART Center for Journalism and Trauma www.dartcenter.org for more resources about the challenges of working with traumatised sources and ways that journalists can look after themselves.

Exploring alternative ways to report the story

For example, the journalist might consider running the story without names, but this may impact on the news value of the story. The information available to the journalist can be framed in a number of ways.



Depending on the frame the news report could increase the community's understanding of suicide, alternatively it could misinform and at worst it could impact negatively on other vulnerable people. Alternative frames for the story are discussed further in Question 2.

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 might 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 to report it. Even so, the journalist will have made choices about the angle the story will take and which parts of the information available they will reproduce for the wider public, possibly shaping their understanding of what has happened. There is no escaping the consequences of individual choices about news production and consumption. 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 journalist makes the original decisions about what to include and omit.

What are the responsibilities of journalists with regards to the speed of circulation of information and detail via social media? Do consumers place a different value or credibility on traditional news media to information available through social media? How might repetition of the details of this story be differently consumed and interpreted when situated in traditional news media? How are the responsibilities of traditional news media journalists different to those communicating via social media? How are they the same?

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: The news of the death has broken through Twitter. At this stage, you have no immediate information from witnesses, the band, or the event organisers. How do you use this information? How reliable are your current sources?

The sources the journalist chooses and prioritises will influence what is eventually reported. Students should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of sources of information and the type of information which can reasonably be expected from them. This would include deciding whether the information is specific or generalised, whether it can be verified, how it can be verified, whether the providers seem credible and whether they may have an undeclared motive. All these factors could significantly affect the priority assigned to each source. On all these points the intersection of social media is significant. The journalist may be tempted to see the influx of information available via social media as "corroborating" the story or facts; however the "viral" nature of these communications may mean that inaccurate information is being circulated. How reliable is user-generated content? Inclusion of phrasing or quotes lifted directly from social media platforms should be exercised with caution, particularly where method or location are described. How might reliance on this information alone impact a story?

Are the sources credible?

Sources will certainly appear to be credible once the media is used as a forum for their views. The process of deciding whether sources are credible includes considering whether some sources, for example "official" ones, are intrinsically more credible than others. The journalist must be satisfied on an individual level that

they can substantiate everything that is asserted and that their decision can be defended, in court if necessary. As part of this, the journalist must once again ask themselves if any information is assumed to be "known" without substantiation. The information that is available via social media should be considered carefully by students. While this information is available publicly, the sources via Twitter and other social media platforms are anonymous, with their contributions character-limited and highly subjective. How might character limits on communication impact the information that is received? How might anonymity shape the way information is communicated? Mencher (1991, pg. 285) offers three questions to guide evaluation of an interviewee's information:

Was the person an observer of the incident, or did he or she hear about it from someone else?

Festival goers who have tweeted about the incident may have witnessed all or part of the incident; however news about the death would also have circulated amongst the crowd and could have been re-tweeted by those in attendance who had not necessarily observed the incident or its aftermath. At the same time, all festival goers could provide first-hand information about the reaction at the festival to the death rather than the circumstances of its discovery specifically. It is important for the journalist to remember, however, that sometimes the people who are closest to a story are not the best source of factual information. They can provide "colour" about the scene but can't provide accurate facts. Some festival goers may not be emotionally touched by the death so much as by the hype and likely media frenzy associated with it, and may wish to appear to know more about the events than they really do. The difficulty for the journalist is that the status of the "observer" and their proximity to the event is difficult to determine via social media. What steps should the journalist take to establish the credibility of sources and verify the information received? While publicly available, express consent for publication or use of the content has not been obtained and in many cases probably cannot be.

Is the person a competent observer?

Fans of the artist may struggle to recall or provide factual information in the confusion of their grief. Journalists will be tempted to contact individuals who have attended the festival and / or commented via social media, however in doing so should be mindful of the potential grief and shock that these individuals might be experiencing. Is it appropriate to seek further comment from festival goers who have tweeted about the event and / or their distress? What factors might influence this decision? While members of the band or family of the deceased may be able to provide insight into her state of mind, reporters seeking to contact these parties must be aware that they are grieving and their emotional state of mind may affect her ability to answer questions.

Can the source provide precise details that have a ring of truth and seem consistent with the facts?

The reporter will consider whether the tweets and posts can provide quotes that will enhance the audience's understanding of what has happened. A lot of the information available via social media in this scenario relates to speculation about the reasons for the deceased's actions and this poses serious questions for the journalist. Due to character limits, much of the communication exchanged via Twitter is condensed into an appealing format for journalists seeking quotes and quick summaries for inclusion in news headlines. Consider the potential risks associated with such abbreviations for a story like this. How might the condensed nature of information exchanged via social media be impacted in terms of precise detail and a "ring of truth" which seems consistent with fact? How is a "ring of truth" established in this volume of information exchange?

Is there a single statement or quote that embodies the central issue in the story?

Can a story be structured around this? What news values are given priority as information is considered? Has "hero" or "villain" status been assigned to any party? Has anything been assumed about the audience's reaction to this story? Journalists may be tempted to frame the story around the level of emotion that is often displayed upon social network tribute pages, to draw upon the "human" angle of the story.



There is a danger that this kind of attention to the memorial adoration of the deceased may glorify suicide and its after-effects: *“Reports that focus on outpourings of grief on Facebook or that include man-on-the-street interviews of shock and surprise give others who might consider suicide ideas that this might be a good option”* (Tompkins 2011). Similarly those tweeting or posting to tribute pages may be grieving and unaware of the potential for their posts to be published in other sources of news. It is important to present a balanced and broad picture of ways that people are experiencing and expressing the loss, rather than focusing on social media activity alone.

What would be achieved by reporting the story?

How this question is answered is a reflection of the sum of the decisions already made about the relative values associated with the story. Throughout the process the journalist has been making decisions based on their understanding of the audience, the public interest and the news values given priority by the news organisation. News organisations usually have a particular audience clearly in mind when they prioritise news values. In this scenario, it is fairly certain that human nature dictates the festival goes and the wider community will speculate about the reasons for the death, and probably about the influence of music culture and its role models on young people as well. Is it the journalist’s job to encourage speculation by providing opinions about the cause of the death(s)? Students should again consider the public interest in terms of what they are setting out to achieve.

Is it acceptable / ethical / responsible to quote directly from tweets or other online posts?

Twitter or Facebook users may not realise the impact that the death has had on them and thus the use of quotes or information they have contributed to such forums should be used with caution. Reflections, dedications and outpourings of grief on social network pages and discussion forums may not have been posted with an understanding that this information would become widely available for publication. There is also a possibility that audiences may respond differently to the traditional publication of such detail in the news than they have to its circulation on social media platforms.

If you choose not to use this information, who would you go to as a reliable source?

In this scenario no interviews have been conducted. Students should consider who if any stakeholders should be interviewed, and who would be the most appropriate sources of information. Consideration of journalistic principles will influence the decision of the journalist in this circumstance: Who is a source that might be able to verify facts and information? Who might be some official or credible sources to give the story news value? Revisit also some of the principles discussed further in Question 3.

Question 5: Along with initial tweets, some images have been tweeted of the body, covered in a sheet. Can this picture be used as part of your story?

What are some of the privacy considerations and legal obligations that will influence your decision? What do existing guidelines and codes of practice suggest about the inclusion of such content? In most circumstances, permission should be obtained before using any photographs of the deceased or their family, however in this circumstance the celebrity status of the deceased would mean that images are much more readily available. Consider also the delay on official comment about the identity of the deceased or the apparent cause of death.

What might be the legal risks of reporting this as a suicide death based on the information available from the tweet referenced? The source of the image may also not be traceable, in which case property and theft issues arise because images ripped from social media platforms can be classified as “stolen”. What are the ethical considerations?

Even if certain information is accurately recorded and adds “colour” to the report, this does not mean it should automatically be reported. While images are available, students and journalists should consider the ethics of the method by which they were obtained, their authenticity and the credibility of the source, as

well as the potential impact of their use. The ethics of using this image are informed by the frame of the story. Consider whether the inclusion of the image would promote help-seeking behaviour in audiences or mediate community panic or distress.

Is there a limit to how this picture might be used? Consider the information that the image conveys. When it comes to describing *how* the death occurred, students have a lot of information at their disposal. Students might conclude that the general public would be very interested to know exact details of the suicide and see firsthand images from the scene, but this needs to be weighed against the harm which could be caused by displaying this detail. Any references to the methods used should be in general terms.

This graphic image of the covered body of the deceased may cause distress for other fans, vulnerable people or even for people who have lost a loved one to suicide. It is also recommended that reports on suicide do not feature photographs or television footage of the suicide scene, precise location or method.

Question 6: Using this scenario for ethical debate

To use this case study for an ethics-based task, you may choose to work through the questions at the beginning of these lecture notes:

Question 1: Should this story be reported?

Question 2: How can the ethical issues inherent in this story be balanced with journalistic and commercial values?

Question 3: How does user-generated content impact the approach of journalists to responsible reporting about suicide?

Some additional statements which can be used as the basis of a seminar or assignment are:

- Reporting suicide is good for society. Discuss.
- How does the Journalist's Code of Ethics deal with reporting suicide? How would respecting the guidelines affect the reporting of this story?
- Reporting this story has the potential to do greater harm than good. Discuss.
- The need for careful reporting is negated in the age of new social media technologies. Discuss.
- The resource *Fact or Fiction?* is a useful reference for students for an ethics task or seminar. Further reference materials are available at www.mindframe-media.info, including links to research on the impact of media reporting on suicide.

As part of last question, or as a stand alone question:

- What is the role/responsibility of the journalist in interviewing people who are distressed or traumatised? What is an appropriate line of questioning?

References

Ashton, J.R. and Donnan, S. (1979) Suicide by burning: a current epidemic. *British Medical Journal* 2(6193), 769-770; Versey, M.J., Kamanyire, R. and Volans, G.N. (1999) Antifreeze poisonings give more insight into copycat behaviour [letter] *British Medical Journal*, 319 (7212), 1131.

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



- Blood, R. W., Putnis, P., Payne, T., Pirkis, J., Francis, C., McCallum, K. & Andrew, D. (2001). *How the Australian Media Report and Portray Suicide and Mental Health and Illness: The case studies*. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.
- Bok, S. (1978). *Lying: Moral choice in public and private life*. New York: Random House.
- Cheng ATA, Hawton K, Lee CTC, Chen THH. (2007). The influence of media reporting of the suicide of a celebrity on suicide rates: a population-based study. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 36(6):1229-34. The DART Center for Journalism and Trauma, www.dartcenter.org
- Hassan, R. (1995) Effects of newspaper stories on the incidence of suicide in Australia: a research note, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 29(3), 480-483
- Etzersdorfer E, Voracek M, Sonneck G. (2004). A dose-response relationship between imitational suicides and newspaper distribution. *Archives of Suicide Research*, 8(2):137-145.
- Mencher, M. (1991). *News Reporting and Writing*. New York: W. C. Brown.
- Penrose-Wall, J., Baume, P., & Martin, G. (1999). *Media Resource for the Reporting and Portrayal of Suicide*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Phillips, D.P., and Carstensen, L.L. (1988) The effect of suicide stories on various demographic groups, 1968-85, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 18, 100-114
- Phillips, D.P., and Carstensen, L.L. (1986) Clustering of teenage suicides after television news stories about suicide, *New England Journal of Medicine* 315, 685-68.
- Pirkis, J. & Blood, R. W. (2010). *Suicide and the News and Information Media: A critical review*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Stack S. (2005). Suicide in the media: a quantitative review of studies based on nonfictional stories. *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, 35(2):121-33.
- Tomkins, A. (2011) "Journalists at Tampa TV station use skill, care, expertise to cover child's suicide." found at <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/als-morningmeeting/128770/journalists-at-tampa-tv-station-use-skill-care-expertise-to-cover-childssuicide>
- Wasserman, I., (1984) Imitation and suicide: a re-examination of the Werther effect, *American Sociological Review* 49, 427-436
- White, S. (1996). *Reporting in Australia* (2nd ed.). Melbourne: MacMillan.
- Yip PSF, Fu KW, Yang KCT, Ip BYT, Chan CLW, Chen EYH, et al. (2006). The effects of a celebrity suicide on suicide rates in Hong Kong. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 93(1-3):245-52.