

Case Study 6: Death at a rock concert

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

This case study is designed to give you some practice in considering issues associated with reporting suicide, so you will be better prepared to deal with such a situation, should it arise, when you are working as a journalist. Suicide is a very sensitive issue, and it is natural that some people may feel uncomfortable talking about it. Usually, these feelings are temporary and do not cause serious distress. However, if you do become very upset as a result of using these materials, or because of other problems you are experiencing, and these feelings continue, talk to your lecturer, tutor, or a counsellor at the university. You could also talk to your GP or call a counselling service such as Lifeline on 13 11 14.

There has been considerable discussion about whether media portrayal of suicide leads to imitation or “copycat” suicide. A recent Australian review 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 scenario and additional material

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 organisers;
- Statement from The Removed.

The following questions provide a guide for analysing the scenario from a journalistic perspective. Your lecturer or tutor may ask you to look at all of these questions or a selection only. In considering this scenario and the questions, you should refer to *Fact or Fiction? Reporting mental illness and suicide* for an overview of the key ethical and journalistic issues involved in reporting suicide. This resource, and further reference materials, are available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info)

Questions for consideration

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).

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?

To answer this question, you will need to consider the basic news values and how they apply to this scenario. In regards to news value, you may pay particular attention to the public profile of the girl who has died and the large section of the community that will likely be impacted by the death. You will also need to consider what public interest might be served by reporting the incident and the potential impact of the story. You may wish to look at research about the impact of reporting on suicide, which is available on the *Mindframe* for Universities website (www.mindframe-media.info).

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

Consider the details and the facts that are available - you will need to resolve several related questions including “are *who, what, where, when, why* and *how* always appropriate information to include in a story?” As the journalist responsible for writing the story, you will decide how much information the public is told about the incident. What you choose to include and omit will directly affect what the audience understands from the story. This in turn will influence what the audience understands about the general issue of suicide and how it might affect them. Sometimes the demands of the news room seem to be at odds with a journalist's priorities in the private exchange between reporter and interviewee. If you need to negotiate with an editor who favours sensationalism, you should ensure you are armed with the facts about the damage sensational reporting may do. You should also consider the impact of the details you report about the suicide (refer to *Fact or Fiction? Reporting mental illness and suicide*). If you critically reflect on what you are doing and why, you can meet the objectives of a "good" news story without doing unnecessary harm. In developing the story consider the significance of language use, detail about method or location, placement and headlines. Some other questions you need to consider in developing the news story are:

- What are the facts?
- What facts should be included in the story?
- Is the report balanced, fair and accurate?
- Is the story in context?
- How would a member of the audience feel after seeing this report?

Question 3: How can responsible reporting practices 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 Case Study 6 – Additional materials).



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?

The sources the journalist chooses and prioritises will direct what is eventually reported. In this scenario information is available from unknown and unverifiable witnesses. Consider whether this is the most appropriate source of information, and who else, if anyone, should be contacted or interviewed. Evaluate each potential source in terms of its strengths and weaknesses and the type of information which can be reasonably expected from them. This would include whether the information is specific or generalised, if it can be verified and how can it be verified, if the witnesses seem credible and whether they may have an undeclared motive. All these factors could significantly affect the amount of credibility assigned to each source. As you consider the information that has been collected, you should also consider the impact of highlighting detail, drama, violence or sensationalism in the reporting of death or grief, particularly after a suicide.

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?

In this circumstance, what are the considerations for privacy? What are the ethical considerations? Look at the guidelines for reporting about suicide and consider the potential impact of this image on your audience. What would the inclusion of this image contribute to your story? You will need to consider the relationship between the pictures and story angle, the values attached to each image. The images you select or use will be guided by the news values and principles you have assigned to the story. Does the fact that the image is circulating via social media impact whether you will use the image in your story? If so, how?

Question 6: Using this scenario for ethical debate:

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?

You may wish to use the reference materials at www.mindframe-media.info for further information about these and other issues related to suicide.

References

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