Mindframe Media Monitoring Projects Snapshot

Snapshot of Media Monitoring Projects

Overall

When compared to reporting in the 2000-2001 period, reporting in 2006-2007 showed considerable improvement. Across all media, both suicide and mental health/illness items increased in volume, with approximately a two-and-a-half-fold Increase.

In the scale of quality, suicide items increased from 57% to 75%, and mental health/illness items increased from 75% to 80%.

Method and Location of suicide

The method of self-harm was described in 14% of media reports, down from 50% in 2001. Additional work has been conducted during the intervening years to create or improve formal industry codes that recommend journalists avoid describing the method of suicide.

- 4% of items included a photo, diagram or footage depicting the scene, location or method of suicide.

Language

- Only 6.1% of items on suicide used inappropriate language to suggest that completed suicide was a desirable outcome, using terms such as 'failed suicide attempt', 'successful suicide bid'. This figure is down from 41.7% in 2001.

- 5.8% of media reports on mental illness used language that was inappropriate, negative or outdated, compared to one fifth of items in 2001. Terms deemed to be inappropriate included 'cracked up', 'crazy lunatics', 'nutcase', 'a psycho', and 'lunatic asylum'.

- Medical language was used inappropriately or out of context in only a handful of items on mental illness, such as describing the Australian economy as 'schizophrenic'. This rate has remained steady since 2001.

Stigmatising mental illness

- The majority of items on mental illness did not stereotype people affected as violent, unpredictable, unable to work, weak, untrustworthy or unlikely to get better. However, 10.6% of items did stigmatise mental illness in 2006 compared to the previous rate of 14.3%.

- 16.2% of media reports labelled the person by their diagnosis, such as 'anorexics', 'manic depressive', or 'schizophrenic'– rather than identifying them as a person with a medical condition.

- The majority of items did not suggest that all mental illnesses are the same. However, 3.4% of stories suggested that all people with mental illness are alike or share the same experiences, down from 16.6% in 2001.

Headlines and story placement

- 22.9% of media reports on suicide were placed on the front page or as the leading item, an increase from 16.9% in 2001.

- Items that used the word 'suicide' in the headline have decreased from 29.5% in 2001 to 21.2% in 2007.

- 8.2% of stories on mental illness had headlines that were inaccurate or inconsistent with the story, compared to 4.2% in the previous study.

- Only 6.8% of headlines were found to be unnecessarily dramatic or sensationalised, compared to 29.3% of headlines in 2001.

Celebrity suicide

During the study period, there were a higher number of stories that referred to a person's celebrity status than in 2001, where 13.7% of stories made reference to the person as a celebrity.

Placing suicide in context

- Around one quarter of items in 2007 reinforced that suicide is related to mental disorder and other risk factors rather than merely a social phenomenon. This figure has halved from 2001.

Privacy

- In 15% of cases, stories about suicide included interviews with bereaved family and friends, which is similar to the percentage in 2001 (18%).

- In both 2001 and 2007 nearly one third of stories on mental illness disclosed that a particular person had a mental illness and identified the person by name.

Help- seeking services

- 17.7% of suicide reports and 19.8% of mental illness stories provided information on help services available. Often this was only a brief mention rather than a description of treatment and support options available to people. However, this is a significant increase from the 6.5% of suicide reports and 6.6% of mental illness stories that added information about help services in 2001.

About the Study

The Media Monitoring Project[3, 4] tracked reporting of suicide and mental illness in the Australian media over a 12 month period, from September 2006 to August 2007. This was a follow-up study, comparing the original 12 month monitoring period in 2000/01. The research found that the overall volume of media items had increased dramatically from 17,151 in 2000/01 to 42,013 in 2006/07.

Reporting of suicide during this period placed a greater emphasis on an individual's experience of suicide and less about policy and program initiatives. There was an increase in stories that discussed mental health care and individual experiences of mental illness. Almost without exception, there was a significant improvement in the quality of media reporting of suicide and mental illness.

In the 2006/07 study period 4,960 items recorded were on suicide, 33,350 on mental health/illness, and 3,403 on suicide and mental health/illness in combination. The number of radio and newspaper items were about equal, and far outnumbered television items – 46.8% newspaper, 6.9% television, and 46.3% radio items were recorded.

Media reports about mental health/ illness accounted for 80% of all items, with a drop to 11.9% of stories about suicide in 2007, down from 21.9% in 2001. There was a considerable variation from month to month within and across the year, indicating that reporting was dependent on events.
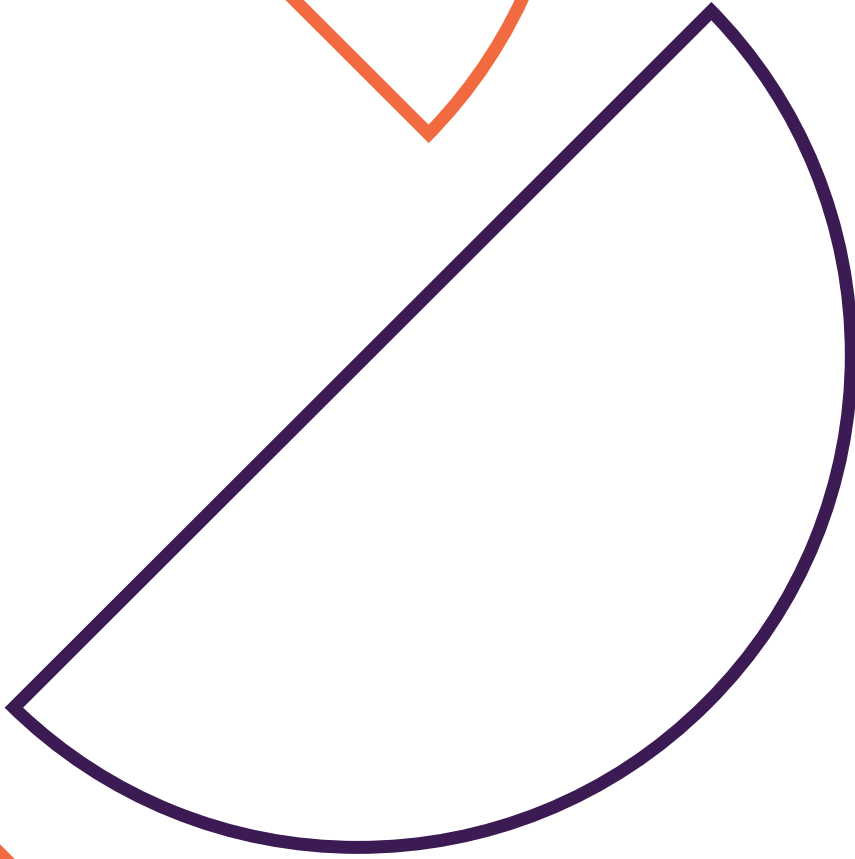
References

[1] Pirkis, J., et al. (2001). *The Media Monitoring Project: A baseline description of how the Australian media reports and portray suicide and mental health and illness*. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care.

[2] Pirkis, J., Blood, W. R., et al. (2008). *The Media Monitoring Project: Changes in media reporting of suicide and mental health and illness in Australia: 2000/01 – 2006/07*. Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia.

[3] Pirkis, et al. (2001). Op. Cit.

[4] Pirkis, et al. (2008). Op. Cit.

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