

Researching and reporting on suicide or mental illness: a student perspective

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Abstract

The Response Ability project for journalism education aims to support the responsible and accurate reporting of mental health issues via tertiary curricula. The aim is to produce graduates in journalism and communications who are aware of, and able to respond to, issues relating to suicide and mental illness in their professional work. One of the many strategies to increase uptake of the Response Ability resources in Australian universities is the sponsorship of an award for mental health reporting as part of the Journalism Education Association of Australia's annual Ossie Awards. Between 2005 and 2007, 22 Ossie Award entrants from seven campuses were interviewed to assess their methods of research and key learning outcomes. It is clear from the interviews that journalism academics generally take an active interest in supporting journalism students to report on mental health and suicide. While students appear to have an awareness of the need to be sensitive when researching and writing publications that cover suicide and mental illness, the results of this study suggest they have less specific awareness of the guidelines which Response Ability promotes, especially those related to the reporting of mental illness.

Introduction

Journalism education programs in Australian tertiary institutions face conflicting pressures from industry, the academy and society. They are required to produce graduates capable of working in Australian newsrooms; to educate their students in the Fourth Estate function of the news media; and to produce graduates with key critical thinking and problem-solving attributes. These pressures combine to produce another – the pressure to fit into a three-year curriculum all that is necessary and much that is desired, in order to produce acceptable and accomplished graduates.

Although the structures vary from institution to institution, most Australian university journalism programs require their students to complete 24 subjects for their degree. The subjects are

generally divided into one-third journalism-specific, one-third foundational/contextual communication subjects, and one-third other liberal arts electives (although the content varies from institution to institution). Industry pressure over the years has meant that many programs contain more than one-third journalism content, usually reducing the scope for electives from other disciplines. When this occurs, content deemed “desirable” but perhaps not absolutely central to the skill-set of a journalist can often be squeezed out of a program, sidelined, or reduced to a minimal representation. Where, for example, does education about cultural diversity fit into the curriculum? Despite Australia being one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world (ABS, 2006), education about cultural diversity is not a core part of journalism education (Butt, 2006). Other elements are similarly sidelined by the limits of a three-year degree designed to train as much as to educate – how to represent disability; how to deal with dangerous or traumatising incidents; and how to represent the aged.

The Hunter Institute of Mental Health’s *Response Ability* project, which aims to show journalism students how to represent mental illness and suicide responsibly, has worked hard to ensure its message is clearly heard by journalists of the future. The multimedia resources provide flexible teaching options that expose journalism students to the “conflict between professional, commercial, and ethical obligations” when covering these issues (Sheridan Burns, Reardon, Vincent & Hazell, 2001, p. 109). This tension is created when the desire to report sensitively is challenged by strong news values, such as public interest or celebrity. The resources are based on four key principles of professional journalism: accuracy, fairness, balance and ethical accountability. The project provides updated case study material to university lecturers, provides guest lecturers on a regular basis and maintains a website (www.responseability.org) designed to provide ongoing advice and information to both lecturers and students (Skehan, Sheridan Burns & Hazell, 2007). Past evaluation results for the project (for example, Greenhalgh & Hazell, 2005) show that students generally find the *Response Ability* material interesting and relevant to their studies. Results also indicate that students believe that lectures and tutorials improved their understanding of the issues related to reporting suicide and mental illness, may increase their confidence to develop a story and may have an effect on the development of stories in the future.

Since 2000, the *Response Ability* project has formalised its relationship with the Journalism Education Association of Australia and has sponsored a prize for mental health reporting in the national Ossie Awards for student journalists. Interviewing students who have submitted entries to the Ossie Awards can provide an additional measure of the project’s effectiveness. The responses would allow the project team to gain a greater understanding of the process that journalism students use to develop, research and present publications or broadcast pieces about mental illness or suicide. It would also allow investigation into the experiences of journalism students learning about the issues to consider when reporting on suicide or mental illness.

Methodology

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 22 of the 29 journalism students who entered the Ossie Awards category for “Responsible Reporting of a Mental Health Issue” over a three-year period from 2005 to 2007. Students interviewed in this study represented seven university campuses in Australia, all of which were known to the *Response Ability* project for their use of the *Response Ability* material. The majority of entrants had therefore developed their print or broadcast journalism pieces having previously attended a lecture in which the *Response Ability* resources had been presented. Participating students were advised that the interview had no bearing on the judgement of the award and each was given a book voucher as a token of appreciation.

Procedure

An interview protocol was developed and was administered by the researchers at a time that was convenient for each individual participant. Interviews lasted between 10 and 40 minutes and followed a structured interview protocol, which explored:

- Students' decision to develop the piece on a mental health topic;
- Key learning points as a result of researching the piece;
- Whether the issues were ever raised in their degree and how they viewed this information when it was presented to them in their degree; and
- Awareness of the *Response Ability* and *Mindframe* resources.

Data collection was completed in the following sequence: interviewing, transcription, coding, analysis and validation. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The coding of the qualitative text involved systematically segmenting the text into sentences and paragraphs that divided the text into workable sections. Once the text was segmented, a thematic analysis was carried out, in which major emergent themes were explored, with the purpose of gaining a descriptive and in-depth analysis. Following the practice used by Leary and Minichiello (2008) of publishing quotations from participants, quotations in this study are given against an alias for the purpose of maintaining participant anonymity. The present study adopted the transcription convention employed by Marshall & Wetherell (1989), which stresses readability of content as opposed to a detailed reproduction of speech features such as pauses, intonation, and length traditionally applied in conversation analysis.

Results

Mental illness, suicide and media representation

Student entries to the Ossie Awards for the *Response Ability* category explored a wide range of topics pertaining to mental illness and suicide. They included: suicide in the media; specific mental illness such as depression, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder; the current state of national mental health services; the treatment of mental illness; stigma associated with mental illness; rural suicide; and personal experience of mental illness or suicide.

In developing media pieces on suicide or mental illness, students stated that they had utilised a number of sources of information for their respective pieces. Some of the sources were: the *Response Ability* and *Mindframe* websites; Australian media guidelines on reporting suicide and mental illness; national and international research pertaining to suicide and mental illness; and conversations with experts and consumers. The students confirmed/affirmed that they had not written or prepared their pieces specifically for the Ossie Awards, but had produced them for university assignments. Hence, the impetus to enter the *Response Ability* category came from lecturers. Students reported that their pieces were exemplars of sensitive journalism, prepared with the intention of highlighting the media's role in portraying mental illness in a positive light.

As exemplified in the following quotation, for a number of students, reporting on suicide or mental illness was an important step in coming to terms with their own direct experience of these issues:

I've had a family history of mental health issues. My mother's brother committed suicide before I was born, and there have been family members, including myself, who have suffered from depression. And I just think it's important for people to be more aware that it is so common, so there is not that stigma attached. (Student A)

Student A's talk echoes a number of socially constructed understandings pertaining to mental illness and stigma that are available to journalism students. That is, mental illness is seen as occurring in a minority of the population (Mak, Poon, Pun & Cheung, 2007) and that a mental illness "conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (Crocker, Major & Steele, 1998, p. 505). While a number of students reported having had a personal experience of mental illness, others were keen to add to previous media coverage on mental illness by developing pieces for the purpose of mental health promotion. That is, by developing pieces that aim to educate the general public about mental illness, treatment options and where to access further information or support. As implied in the above quotation, mental illness is a commonly misunderstood phenomenon. According to students, the media not only occupy a central role in providing information about mental illness to the public, but also are commonly responsible for perpetrating misrepresentation:

Anyone constructing media of any kind, including fictional work, should be educated and informed about mental illness. It comes down to responsibility in a role of power where you have the ability to influence opinion. Journalism is a great way to expose people to issues like mental illness and try to dispel some of the myths, stereotypes and mistruths that exist. (Student B)

Concordant with existing research which indicates that both entertainment and news media provide overwhelmingly dramatic and distorted images of mental illness, emphasising dangerousness, criminality and unpredictability (Stuart, 2006), students noted that there is an absence of media stories or material that present alternative versions of those living with a mental illness. For a number of students, the motivation to produce a mental health piece was therefore to produce stories that countered dominant media misrepresentations of mental illness. In the following quotation, Student C reflects on her motivation to write a piece on Schizophrenia Awareness Week:

I was ... really upset that it's awareness week for mental health and schizophrenia, and there is no one there reporting on it...I wanted people to hear something positive about it (mental health). (Student C)

Student C's talk reflects a dominant news framing practice in which people living with a mental illness are rarely depicted as "living well" (Nairn & Coverdale, 2005). From a student's perspective, this framing practice restricts those living with mental illness to a limited number of descriptions including: violence and criminality (Wilson, Nairn, Coverdale & Panapa, 1999), instability and unpredictability (Francis, Pirkis, Dunt & Blood, 2001) and incompetence (Rusch, Angermeyer & Corrigan, 2005).

Learning process and outcomes

We were trying to find something that hadn't been covered I guess enough by the mainstream media, because it sort of made it easier for us as students to get people to talk about it. And it was also an issue that was going to be a bit of a challenge. (Student D)

Like Student C's comment, Student D's talk is indicative of some of the difficulties that students reported in compiling material for mental health stories outside of dominant negative representations of mental illness in the media. Through researching and preparing news items or features, students reported developing a greater understanding of mental illness and a number of related issues such as mental health promotion, mental health organisations and funding both in the government and non-government sectors. Furthermore, as illustrated in the following quotation, students were able to identify areas that have received minimal coverage:

... there isn't actually a lot of information on mental health issues amongst the elderly in particular and that was concerning because it's such a serious issue and

because so many people are affected by it. It was frustrating to know that it was going on ... sort of behind closed doors in some sense and I think that there needs to be a lot more awareness raised among the general public about the issues these people go through. (Student E)

Comments from students regarding their research indicated an appreciation of the importance of research in presenting balanced and accurate reporting of mental illness. Hence, students were able to demonstrate an ability to identify the negative social implications of misrepresenting suicide or mental illness in the story. As demonstrated in the following quotation, Student F's talk highlights a number of issues critical to the sensitive portrayal of suicide in the media in relation to copycat suicide. Moreover, this example highlights the role of the media in suicide prevention and mental health promotion:

The biggest thing I learnt was how careful the media have to be when you are presenting suicide, with this whole theory of copycat killing. It's a really important subject that we talk, social awareness, cause if people don't talk about it, it kind of pushes it underneath. (Student F)

Students disclosed that through this exercise they had developed an appreciation of the complexities involved in reporting suicide and mental illness, as some students were able to identify how the issues could be covered appropriately, such as using the correct terminology and language:

I gained a lot of knowledge about suicide and mental illness. I guess from a journalist's perspective, one of the most important things that came out of this for me was an appreciation of the ethics of reporting, the terminology that journalists use, and the way reporting angles can change the way a piece on mental illness is interpreted by the public. (Student G)

Recollections and perspectives of university material

An aim of this study was to ascertain if the issues around reporting suicide and mental illness were raised as part of the participating students' journalism degrees. Interview responses indicated that a number of students had attended lectures specifically on reporting of suicide or mental illness where lecturers had referred to the *Response Ability* resources. Of the two issues, suicide reporting received more attention in journalism education:

We had a full lecture/tutorial in an introductory journalism unit in the first year of my Bachelor of Communication degree. It was about ethical concerns of reporting suicide, youth suicide in particular. Issues raised included how much and what kind of information is appropriate to report, what to consider when interviewing bereaved loved ones and not reporting the specific details of how the victim died ... the method of suicide. (Student H)

The quote from Student H echoes some of the core practices pertaining to the responsible reporting of suicide as covered by the *Response Ability* resources, in particular, a focus on language and content, including responsible reporting of suicide methods and location. Despite receiving some exposure to the *Response Ability* resources, the majority of students indicated that they had learnt more about suicide and mental illness through their personal research in preparing a mental health or suicide piece:

I'd probably say that it did help me prepare, but only in that it helped me to write in a more sensitive manner ... it definitely helped me understand what's expected of you and what you can and can't write about. (Student I)

... we have been talking about ethics and stuff, but no one has put me in the direction of reporting on it. While I was doing the story, because I did a lot of research,

I went to the (schizophrenia) fellowship website to look through how you report on mental illness. In the degree, you get support and learn the technique, but most of the time you are out there doing it by yourself. (Student J)

Discussion

While students appear to have an awareness of the need to be sensitive when researching and writing publications that cover suicide and mental illness, the results of this study suggest they have less awareness of the specific guidelines promoted by *Response Ability*. This being the case, more attention could be given within journalism curricula to the issues involved in reporting on mental illness. Admittedly, the literature connecting the portrayal of mental illness to community perceptions and subsequent stigmatising views is not as strong as the link between reporting suicide and its impact on vulnerable members of the community. However, it is important to stimulate increased discussion around reporting of mental illness, as few of the young journalists were aware of the issues to consider, beyond “being sensitive”. This finding may point to a need to up-skill the lecturers themselves in this area. Journalism academics are mostly former working journalists. While many have experienced the situations referred to in the resource material, few are professionally trained in how to deal with them. In addition, media codes of practice have traditionally not provided guidance on the reporting of mental illness, as they have with suicide. Although many peak media bodies have added codes or editorial policies related to the coverage of mental illness in recent years, those codes restricting the coverage of suicide have existed for at least 10 years.

It may be that short courses or professional development sessions for academic staff members would be an effective way of up-skilling lecturers. Dart Centre Australasia has conducted a “boot camp” for working journalists to improve their knowledge and skills in the area of journalism and trauma, giving them the capacity to speak knowledgeably. Providing journalism academics with similar skills in media depictions of suicide, and particularly mental illness, may produce greater confidence in directing student action and, as a result, greater engagement with *Response Ability* resources in the curricula. These professional development sessions might also successfully encourage academic staff to consider where in the journalism curriculum they will include the *Response Ability* guidelines for reporting on suicide and mental illness.

All students felt the issues should be covered within the curriculum of an undergraduate journalism degree, and would be beneficial to younger journalism students with fewer life experiences, as well as those who wanted to focus on health reporting. While students think this would be a good idea, they also expressed their concerns over time constraints already placed on lecture material throughout their degree, reflecting the difficulties acknowledged at the start of this paper with respect to “core”, “desirable” and other elements of a program. Attempts to address this difficulty in the past have failed. One possibility canvassed by Green (2005) is for a four-year degree, similar to that enjoyed by journalism students in the US, where a four-year undergraduate degree is standard. This would provide extra “space” within the program for elements such as news media treatment of suicide and mental illness. However, given Australia’s standard of a three-year undergraduate degree, no university (other than Melbourne University) seems likely to adopt this structural change. The *Response Ability* team also notes that US journalism programs are limited to a minimum of 25 per cent journalism subjects within their degrees if they want national accreditation, thus making “space” for other, contextual subjects. While that may work in US with the four-year degree programs, Australian educators argue that such a restriction would make the program unattractive to industry.

It is clear from the interviews that journalism academics generally take an interest in encouraging journalism students to report on mental health and suicide. All students reported being

nominated for the Ossie Awards by their lecturer or tutor, and some mentioned assistance given by lecturers in getting the piece published in a mainstream publication. From the interview data gathered, it seems that if industry and student needs for training and education in coverage of suicide or mental health issues are to be realised, the *Response Ability* project should continue to provide its current level of resources and investigate ways of supporting academics to up-skill their knowledge of these areas.

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