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The Media Monitoring Project

A BASELINE DESCRIPTION OF
HOW THE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA REPORT
AND PORTRAY SUICIDE AND MENTAL
HEALTH AND ILLNESS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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THE MEDIA MONITORING PROJECT: A BASELINE DESCRIPTION OF HOW THE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA REPORT AND PORTRAY SUICIDE AND MENTAL HEALTH AND ILLNESS

This major Australian project, comprising two studies, set out to address some of the gaps in knowledge about the way the media report and portray suicide and mental health and illness.

A number of international studies have considered the *impact* of media reports of suicide and mental health and illness, and suggested that reporting of suicide can lead to imitation, and that reporting of mental health and illness can contribute to negative beliefs, stigma and discrimination. Much less work has looked at the *extent* and *nature* of media reporting of suicide and mental health and illness, but it has suggested that the media tend to report suicide in a sensationalist fashion and portray mental illness negatively. Few of these studies have been conducted in Australia.

The Media Monitoring Project: A Baseline Description of How the Australian Media Report and Portray Suicide and Mental Health and Illness was commissioned by the Mental Health Branch of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care to investigate the *extent* and *nature* of the reporting and portrayal of suicide, and mental health and illness, by the Australian media.

The studies

The Centre for Health Program Evaluation, at the University of Melbourne, was contracted by the federal Department of Health and Aged Care to conduct a *quantitative* study, looking mainly at the extent of reporting of these subjects in the media (J Pirkis et al, A Quantitative Analysis of the Reporting and Portrayal of Suicide, and Mental Health and Illness, in the Australian Media). Statistical analysis of the quality of the content was also carried out.

The School of Professional Communication at the University of Canberra was contracted to conduct a *qualitative* study (RW Blood et al, A Qualitative Analysis of the Reporting and Portrayal of Suicide, and Mental Health and Illness, in the Australian Media), looking at the nature of the material provided and how it is characteristically framed.

The two reports of these companion studies have been published together in this volume, and should be read together, and in conjunction with the other publications produced as a result of the Media Monitoring Project:

- RW Blood and J Pirkis, *Suicide and the Media: A Critical Review*, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, 2001.
- C Francis, J Pirkis, D Dunt and RW Blood, *Mental Health and Illness in the Media: A Review of the Literature*, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, 2001;
- RW Blood, C Francis, J Williams, K McCallum and J Pirkis, *Mental Health and Mental Illness in the Media: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Research Reported in Journals*, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, 2001; and
- RW Blood, P Putnis, T Payne, J Pirkis, C Francis, K McCallum and D Andrew, *How the Australian Media Report and Portray Suicide, and Mental Health and Illness: The Case Studies*, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra, 2001.

Method

The Media Monitoring Project collected media items over a 12-month period that began on 1 March 2000, with the assistance of a media retrieval service known as Media Monitors. Media Monitors retrieved all items related to suicide and mental health and illness from all national daily newspapers and Victorian suburban and regional papers, and news and current affairs items related to suicide and mental health and illness from all television and radio networks.

For the quantitative study, trained coders extracted identifying and descriptive information for all items, and, for the quantitative study, made quality ratings for a randomly selected 10% of items. The quality ratings were based on criteria outlined in *Achieving the Balance: A Resource Kit for Australian Media Professionals for the Reporting and Portrayal of Suicide and Mental Illnesses*, developed by the federal Department of Health and Aged Care to promote awareness among media professionals of the issues relating to suicide and mental health and illness. Both the quantitative and qualitative studies in this volume based their analyses on the same set of data, though the qualitative study assessed the material by analysing the framing of each item, rather than by the content analysis techniques used in the quantitative study.

Project aims

The Media Monitoring Project had two specific aims:

- to establish a baseline picture of how the Australian media portray suicide, and mental health and illness; and
- to inform future strategies intended to optimise media reporting of suicide and mental health and illness.

With respect to the latter aim, the Media Monitoring Project was closely aligned to *Achieving the Balance*. Towards the end of the Media Monitoring Project, the department commissioned an evaluation of *Achieving the Balance*, with the aim of producing a revised version of the kit. The Media Monitoring Project was therefore timely, because its findings influenced this revision.

A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE REPORTING AND PORTRAYAL OF SUICIDE, AND MENTAL HEALTH AND ILLNESS, IN THE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA

by Jane Pirkis, Catherine Francis, R Warwick Blood, Philip Burgess, Belinda Morley, Andrew Stewart and Peter Putnis

Key findings

The study found that reporting of both suicide and mental health and illness was extensive, retrieving 17 151 items (3762 on suicide alone, 12 338 on mental health and illness alone, and 1051 on suicide and mental health and illness in combination). Radio items outnumbered newspaper and television items in all cases. For all media, the *extent* of reporting varied from month to month, according to the types of events being reported (for instance, there were many reports at the time of the suicide of a prominent politician or during Mental Health Week and relatively few at the time of the Olympics).

The nature of the reporting was highly variable. Suicide items tended to be about completed suicide (as opposed to attempted suicide or suicidal ideation), and most commonly involved content related to an individual's experiences, policy or program initiatives, or statistical overviews of suicidality in the population. Mental health and illness items tended to be about policy or program initiatives, causes, symptoms or treatment of mental illness, mental health care or services, research initiatives or an individual's experiences.

Several demographic groups appeared more frequently than others: males and young people commonly featured in suicide stories, as did people living in rural areas, psychiatric patients, people in custody, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In the case of items on mental health and illness, young people were consistently given prominence.

When the quality ratings for each item were combined into a total quality score, the results were variable, with some very high-quality items, some very poor-quality items and a broad range in between. Suicide items, with a median total quality score of 57.1%, emerged as being of generally poorer quality than mental health and illness items, with median total quality score of 75.0%.

Several factors associated with item content were found to be predictive of quality. The poorest quality suicide items were those that provided a statistical overview of completed suicide in the population, described murder-suicides or mass suicides, or presented legal issues associated with suicide. The poorest quality mental health and illness items were those that described an individual's experience of mental illness, described mental health care or services, or used mental health language inappropriately or out of context.

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE REPORTING AND PORTRAYAL OF SUICIDE, AND MENTAL HEALTH AND ILLNESS, IN THE AUSTRALIAN MEDIA

by R Warwick Blood, Peter Putnis, Jane Pirkis, Catherine Francis and Trish Payne

Key findings

This study observed that newspaper and broadcast news reports on individual suicides in Australia were relatively uncommon in comparison to the number of actual suicides and attempted suicides. It found that individual suicide stories resembled other news stories in that they were framed in particular ways.

Many newspaper and broadcast news stories about suicide result from information collected by journalists at courts, coroner's courts or from the police, and this study found that these stories were the most problematic in terms of following the advice of *Achieving the Balance*. Common concerns were the use and placement of the word suicide in headlines and broadcast leads, video and photographs of the scene, details of the method of suicide, and the prominence given to the story. Most of the stories featured prominently in newspapers and broadcast coverage, either locally or nationally. Sensational or inappropriate language was common in the headlines or broadcast leads in these types of stories.

Many of the stories examined did not focus on suicide per se, but the authors of this study did not see this as a valid reason to ignore the guidelines provided in *Achieving the Balance*.

These stories did not normally include contacts for audiences about advice, counselling or access to mental health services, so the study concluded that there is an opportunity to

enhance news coverage of police rounds and emergency services by including this information when possible.

Because this type of news is produced by journalists based on information from official sources, these stories are a condensation of court proceedings and police investigations, and so context is an important concern. It is also possible that vulnerable groups could interpret reports in quite different ways. This study's authors allowed, though, that it may not be reasonable to expect editors and journalists to take account of all other possible audiences and readings.

Framing devices identified in other types of suicide stories included those involving public interest, national social or political interest, oddity/unusual, prominent person or celebrity devices. Suicide stories that did not fit these dominant frames were rarely reported. A significant type of news about suicide was found to be coverage of statistical data released by government, health agencies or researchers.

As is the case with the reporting of suicide, the most problematic type of news coverage of mental illness was found to be that based on information collected at courts, coroner's courts, or from the police. Many news stories from the courts or police about mental illness focused on violence, and included graphic images of violence. These stories related to specific and relatively rare circumstances, but the study concluded that audiences were likely to draw *generalised* inferences about mentally ill people as a result, because they mainly categorise individuals or groups according to the way events are framed by the media. News stories about extreme or rare cases, such as linking mental illness to violence, tend to stigmatise mental illness, and generate fear of mentally ill people in the community.

The authors suggested that editors and journalists strive to achieve a balance, and that the critical questions for editors and journalists centre on the relationships between the mental illness and the incident. They should ask themselves, the study concluded, whether the mental illness warrants headline or broadcast lead prominence, and whether the mental illness itself actually contributes to the story in a significant way.

This study found that this type of reporting did not usually include contact information for audiences seeking information about available

mental health services. It also found that some newspaper and broadcast news about mental illness is framed, and sometimes only made newsworthy, by its off-beat, curious or bizarre character. These stories have the potential to be particularly offensive to consumers and mental health professionals and carers, especially if they have a demeaning tone, if they trivialise issues, and if they marginalise individuals or groups.

Inappropriate language was a central concern, as particular framing devices and inappropriate language may together contribute to the stigma associated with mental illness. This study identified inappropriate language about mental illness in a variety of media, especially the inappropriate contextual use of the word schizophrenia.

Another important frame used in coverage of mental illness was the celebrity, a frame that often positions mental health issues in a positive light by offering the advice and help of a role model. Other mental health and illness news reflected national, state or regional issues or concerns, and still other stories were framed around themes of conflict, especially over government funding, government policies on mental health, and fears of funding cuts or shortages of services.

Conclusions

These studies concluded that the reporting of suicide, and mental health and illness, in Australia is extensive across all media types. The nature of the reporting of these subjects varied considerably, as did the quality. In general, good items outnumbered poorer items, particularly in the case of mental health and illness. However, there are still opportunities for improving the way in which the media report and portray suicide and mental health and illness.

Newspapers and broadcast media have a choice in the way they frame stories about suicide, and mental health and illness. The choice is not an issue of accuracy or objectivity, but it does have serious ramifications for the ways in which audiences may interpret news and information about suicide, and mental health and illness. If the right choices are made, they can help to destigmatise mental illness in our community and improve the lives of many people with mental illnesses.

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