

The *Response Ability* project: Does reporting suicide and mental illness belong in a journalism curriculum?

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Introduction

The *Response Ability* project is a landmark collaboration between mental health professionals and the Australian journalism education sector aimed at improving the reporting of mental health issues in Australian society. While many countries internationally have developed media guidelines that promote responsible reporting of suicide and mental illness, in the Australian context a more comprehensive approach has been taken by including this material in the undergraduate training of journalism students. Through the development of flexible, problem-based curriculum materials now being used in some capacity at all Australian universities, the project aims to influence the thinking of journalists in the pre-professional phase of their education. The *Response Ability* project advocates not for the avoidance of these important issues in the media, but rather some attention to ensuring accuracy and examining the framing of such reports. The project proposes that it is possible to discuss issues of public interest in relation to suicide and mental illness without increasing the risk of suicidal behaviour and without reinforcing stereotypes associated with people experiencing a mental illness. International experts, in fact, have argued that mindful reporting of these issues can have a positive impact (eg Hawton & Williams, 2001).

Background to *Response Ability*

In recent years there has been on-going international interest in the effect of portrayals of suicide and mental illness in the media. For example, research shows that certain representations of suicide may increase the risk of copycat behaviour among vulnerable people (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). There is also concern that people living with a mental illness are predominantly portrayed in a negative and stereotypical way (Francis et al., 2001), which may increase stigma and discrimination.

Most Australian media sectors have codes of practice on reporting and portrayal of suicide and many of these have been reviewed and revised in the past few years to better fit with the available evidence. Generally, the codes call for restraint in reporting about suicide but all allow for circumstances where the “public interest” may be deemed to more important than the harm done by breaching the codes.

The reporting of mental illness, however, has been largely overlooked as an area of concern within media codes. For example, the Code of Ethics governing Australian journalists mentions not placing “...unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability” (MEAA, 1999), but fails to include mental illness as a consideration. And yet journalists frequently cover suicide and mental illness stories, suggesting that proper training in this area is important. An Australian Study in 2000-20001 concluded that the coverage of both suicide and mental illness in Australia was extensive, retrieving 17,151 items in a 12-month period across selected media (Pirkis et al., 2001).

The *Response Ability* project acknowledges that the media is an important influence on shaping community attitudes, particularly to sensitive issues such as mental illness and suicide (Sheridan Burns et al., 2001). It is based on the view that an important way to influence the reporting of suicide and mental illness is to expose journalism students to the ethical and professional issues involved as part of their undergraduate studies. In the university environment, a potential journalist can work through the issues and develop appropriate strategies before being confronted with them under the pressure of the newsroom environment

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suicide and mental illness without increasing the risk of suicidal behaviour and without reinforcing stereotypes associated with people experiencing a mental illness. Some experts, such as Hawton & Williams (2001), have argued that mindful reporting of these issues can have a positive impact through promoting mental health literacy in the general public. They found that mindful reporting reduced the stigma associated with mental health problems and encouraged help-seeking behaviours among distressed individuals.

The *Response Ability* Resources

In 1997 the Australian Government launched the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy in response to escalating rates of suicide among young people. An identified objectives under this strategy was a focus on education and training, specifically through the development of curriculum materials for the pre-professional education of targeted groups. During 1997, the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, a self-funded not-for-profit unit specialising in education, training and health promotion in the areas of suicide and mental illness, surveyed undergraduate courses in nine professional disciplines at all Australian Universities with a view to identifying those disciplines best placed to address the issue of youth suicide (Sheridan Burns & Hazell, 1998). This process, led to the initial selection of four professional groups – journalists, doctors, nurses and secondary teachers. Each group was selected based on the likely proximity of the profession to unfolding mental health events requiring mindful responses.

For example, the pre-professional education of journalists was selected due to demonstrated influence of media reporting on the formation and maintenance of social values (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). The project aimed to ensure that journalists were more aware of the importance of responsible reporting of mental health and their potential to do harm by perpetuating inaccurate community perceptions.

The initial survey also indicated a wide preference for problem-based or experiential learning models that were flexible enough to accommodate changes to delivery and amendments to content. The journalism curriculum materials was reviewed by senior journalism academics and mental health experts before being piloted at seven university campuses across Australia between 1997 and 2000. In 2000, the materials were formally endorsed by the Journalism Education Association at its annual conference.

Building on the success of the suicide reporting materials, the focus of the project was broadened in 2001, to place suicide in the wider context of mental health reporting. The *Response Ability* curriculum resources for journalism education were then further developed and refined based on consultations with journalism educators around Australia between February and April 2001. The print-based pilot modules were developed as multimedia resources and widely disseminated among Australian universities late in 2001.

The resources provide flexible teaching options that expose journalism students to the “conflict between professional, commercial, and ethical obligations” when covering these issues (Sheridan Burns et al., 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. There is also the sensitive issue of using the media to increase public awareness of mental health issues without damaging vulnerable members of the community.

The *Response Ability* resources facilitate exploration of these issues through the use of video scenarios, discussion questions, exercises, guidelines for reporting, and examples of good and bad news reports. These are provided in the form of lecturer and student CD-ROMs, printed examples and a website at www.responseability.org. The resources are based on four key principles of professional journalism: accuracy, fairness, balance and ethical accountability.

During the development phase, the curriculum authors became aware that the university programs each maintained a point of difference in their approach to journalism education. It was important then, that the curriculum modules were not prescriptive in their content or delivery. Further, participating universities were not given any particular instructions about how the modules should articulate within existing curricula. Instead, the resources were developed in a flexible way so they could be used at various levels in the curriculum and in a range of content areas, including ethics, news writing, feature writing and broadcast journalism. These two factors were crucial in ensuring the widespread support of Australian journalism educators. Currently in Australia, all universities offering relevant programs in journalism have incorporated aspects of *Response Ability* into their curriculum.

The *Response Ability* project continues to be guided by an Advisory panel of journalism educators who are well known for their contribution to journalism education in Australia,

and industry representatives. This Journalism Advisory Group provides direction for the project, makes recommendations about further resource development and promotion. The project team, based at the Hunter Institute of Mental Health, continues to support universities and educators by offering consultation services, delivering guest lectures in new subjects, and supporting academic ownership of the issues. New course materials have been developed and disseminated to ensure the resources remain topical and relevant. Further, in December 2006 the *Response Ability Academic Research Scheme* was launched to encourage academics to contribute to the growing body of research on both the *Response Ability* resources and the general body of research on reporting suicide and mental illness.

The Australian Context and the Role of Journalism Education

The *Response Ability* project for journalism education preceded, and now forms part of, a comprehensive and mostly successful national strategy in Australia aimed at influencing media coverage of issues related to mental illness and suicide, to ensure responsible, accurate and sensitive representation. The success of the *Response Ability* model, in terms of partnerships between mental health and journalism stakeholders and the joint development and investment in resource material related to this area, were key in the development of other parts of the national strategy working with media organisations and journalists across the country.

The *Mindframe* National Media Initiative, under which the *Response Ability* project is now funded, has general media support and is guided by the National Media and Mental Health Group. This group, which meets three times per year, includes representatives from the peak media and mental health bodies and models the Advisory group structure set up under *Response Ability*. Since the pilot phase of the *Response Ability* project, the *Mindframe* Initiative has expanded to include a Media Monitoring Project (Pirkis et al, 2001) to provide a baseline picture of reporting in Australia and two critical reviews providing an update of the world literature on Suicide and the Media (Pirkis & Blood, 2001) and Mental Health and Illness and the Media (Francis et al., 2001). It has also established an online community action site (see www.sane.org), developed resources for journalists on *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006) and provided support to the *Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project* engaging journalists in discussions about the complexities involved in reporting the issues. New

work under the strategy has focussed on communicating the principles of *Mindframe* to the mental health sector and expanding the focus of the Initiative to include the portrayal of suicide and mental illness in film and television drama.

Key Outcomes and Achievements, 2004-2006

Comprehensive documentation of activities and objectives-based evaluations were implemented over the life of the project to assess reach, awareness, and use of project resources and the perceived value of the resources from the perspective of both lecturers and students. Six progress reports and a final evaluation report between January 2004 and December 2006 were retrieved and reviewed. In particular, statistics on the dissemination of project resources, usage of the website, documentation on engagement with universities in Australia and evaluation outcomes were analysed. An empirical study of the effects of the Project on published journalism is being implemented in 2007 using follow-up media monitoring.

Examination of project reports for the *Response Ability* Project for Journalism Education from 2004 – 2006 demonstrates the willingness of journalism educators to engage with the issues and to use the curriculum materials and web-based resources. In addition, journalism educators have demonstrated a willingness to engage with mental health professionals to provide guest lectures for students and considered research in the area. The Project also sponsors an annual award for excellence in student reporting of mental health issues which attracts entries from around the country. Much of this journalism is also published, enhancing the standard of mental health reporting.

Feedback from Journalism Students

Given the quite detailed feedback and support the project received from journalism educators between 2002 and 2005, a major focus of evaluation in late 2005 and early 2006 was to obtain feedback from journalism students. The project team knew from educators that the majority of universities offering journalism in Australia were using the *Response Ability* material in some capacity and that lecturers found the resources valuable assets to their teaching. The team now sought the opinions of journalism students about the ways in which reporting suicide and mental illness were raised in their degree, and how valuable they found the information. Studies show that early

opinions about the relevance and importance of these issues are likely to have an impact on the reporting practices of these journalists when their training ends.

To assess the views of journalism students, two separate evaluations were conducted in 2005 and 2006. The first evaluation surveyed the opinions of postgraduate and undergraduate journalism students who received a guest lecture from the Program Manager in 2005 and 2006. They were asked to comment on the *Response Ability* materials for journalism education and what impact (if any) exposure to these issues may have on their future careers. The second evaluation considered qualitative feedback from students who had developed a feature article on a mental health issue and sought their feedback on any particular learning or challenges experienced during the process.

1. Student feedback about guest lectures

Between April 2005 and May 2006 12 guest lectures by mental health professionals from the *Response Ability* project team were delivered at nine tertiary institutions across five states in Australia. Optional student surveys were disseminated at the completion of 10 of these lectures, accompanied by a “reply paid” envelope. The surveys asked students to rate whether they agreed or disagreed with seven statements on a 10-point scale assessing interest, relevance, understanding confidence, impact and interest in the issues. Approximately 270 questionnaires were distributed with a total of 70 received, representing a response rate of approximately 26%.

Building on evidence published by Greenhalgh and Hazell (2005), combined results for 2005 and 2006 show that on average, students attached quite high mean scores to each of the statements made, indicating that they found the material interesting and relevant to their studies. Ratings also indicated that students believed the sessions 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. Several low scores are observed in the range for a number of items (reducing the mean score for some items), however each statement received at least one rating of 10. A summary of results is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Student Questionnaire Results (N=70)

Statement	Mean level of agreement (Scale of 1 to 10)	Range of Scores
The guest lecture which asked us to consider issues involved in reporting suicide and mental illness, was interesting to me.	8.8	6 - 10
The tutorial which asked us to consider issues involved in reporting suicide and mental illness, was interesting to me. (N=40)	7.6	4 - 10
The information presented in the lecture is relevant to my studies as a journalism student.	8.9	6 - 10
The session has helped me develop a better understanding of the issues related to reporting on mental health, mental illness and suicide.	8.5	5 - 10
After this session, I feel more confident in my ability to develop accurate and sensitive news or feature stories about suicide or a mental health issue.	7.9	5 - 10
This session will have an effect on how I develop news or feature stories that involve mental illness or suicide in the future.	8.3	3 - 10
I am interested in learning more about reporting on mental health, mental illness and suicide in the Australian media.	7.7	4 - 10

As suggested by the quantitative data, the majority of comments left by students were positive...

I found this to be a very informative process that challenged my thinking with regards to mental health issues.

I felt that the session helped to highlight the fact that we need to move away from traditional news values and consider our role and responsibilities in a social rather than commercial context. I think that sessions like these are one of the ways we can refine and develop journalistic practices for the better.

...or constructive in nature.

I think maybe more examples of negative and positive media coverage of these matters would be very good.

It would also be helpful for lectures to show how broadcast journalists deal with these issues.

2. Student feedback from Ossie Award entrants

The evaluation process involved collection of qualitative data from journalism students who had provided entries in the 2005 Journalism Education Association Ossie Awards for 'Responsible Reporting of a Mental Health Issue'. Eleven students contributed to the nine entries that were received. Seven students across five institutions agreed to participate in the evaluation. The interviews lasted approximately 10-15 minutes, and were recorded with the permission of each participant, transcribed and qualitative analysis performed to identify key themes. A number of key issues and themes were raised in the interviews, as summarised briefly below.

Students indicated a number of reasons why they chose to develop a mental health story, including personal experience, a desire to highlight an important social issue, to further explore topics currently in the media or from everyday observations.

I've had a family history of mental health issues. My mothers' 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.

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.

Each interviewee reported being able to take away a learning experience from the process. These learning experiences generally included gaining a greater understanding of the issues, a recognition of how important it is to raise awareness of these issues and an understanding of the impact mental illness has on a person's life.

Just that it really opened up my eyes doing a story on it – especially a story on the media's representation of suicide and mental illness. It made me realize that it is a big issue and I might not have thought about it so much before.

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... But then you don't want to talk about it too much, because there could be these copycat effects.

The majority of students indicated that the issues of reporting suicide and mental illness were touched on briefly within their journalism degrees, with more attention given to the reporting of suicide than the reporting of mental illness.

What we covered was more about suicide, like saying people successfully committed suicide, or a failed suicide attempt. There are terms like that people don't realise the influence.... Sometimes they say it as if it's not treatable, or as if it's the persons own fault for being depressed. Whereas you have to emphasise that it is an illness and it is treatable, and a lot of suicide can be prevented through the treatment of depression – and other mental illnesses as well.

There were mixed responses about the relevance of these issues in a journalism degree with some students indicating its importance and others questioning its relevance.

I think it is something that does need to be discussed - how to go about reporting it, and the sensitivities to family members.

I'm not really sure that it is something the degree has to go into – that's more if that's the area you are placed in. It's not something that they would give to say, a junior reporter. It would be someone who would already be well experienced in the field.

Yeah – for sure. And obviously now, working in the field. And I still don't really know where we stand – we kind of publish some things and other times we don't. There are no hard and fast rules that we follow.

Response to Emerging Complexities in Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness

As mentioned above, the *Response Ability* Project preceded and now complements work being conducted in Australia with media organisations and journalists working in a variety of media formats. There have been many natural overlaps between strategies used for media professionals and journalism students. To ensure consistency and adequate preparation of journalists through their undergraduate and post graduate studies, the *Response Ability* project has responded to current complexities in reporting raised by media professionals and regulatory bodies.

Between January 2004 and May 2006 the *Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project* conducted over 140 in-house briefings with approximately 800 journalists about the reporting of suicide and mental illness. Discussions with journalists in this context

revealed a general understanding of the sensitivities of reporting individual suicides and reporting mental illness in certain ways. However, journalists communicated that the issues became more complex and less clear when they were required to cover suicide in other contexts, such as murder-suicides, deaths in police custody or voluntary euthanasia. Similarly, the reporting of mental illness became more complex when reporting about mental illness in the context of crime and in reporting about the mental health care system.

As a direct result of early discussions, more complex areas of reporting suicide and mental illness have become the focus of in-house briefings with journalists and formed the basis of a manual for media trainers developed in 2006. However, there remained a need to provide opportunities at the university level to further explore these dilemmas. A supplementary CD-ROM was developed in 2004 as an addition to the original *Response Ability* package distributed to universities in late 2001, and additional case studies have been added to the project website in 2005 and 2006. The aim of these supplementary resources was two-fold. Firstly, to maintain the currency and value of the existing resources and secondly, to provide educators with resources they could use to expose journalism students to current contentious issues about the reporting of suicide and mental illness.

The supplementary CD-ROM provides media examples grouped into a number of topic areas. These are accompanied by background information about the topics along with possible questions that can be used to provoke discussion. In the section on reporting suicide, the fundamental principles of minimising the risk of copycat suicide are reinforced, with a focus on situations such as murder-suicide, euthanasia and suicide in custody or care. The material on the reporting of mental illness examines the perceived link between violence and mental illness, criticism of the mental health care system, feature stories, and the representation of celebrity mental health issues.

Conclusions

The collaboration between mental health professionals and journalism educators to improve the reporting of mental health issues in Australia has been as positive as it has been successful. A consultation conducted with 40 journalism educators around the development of the original resources (Reardon & Vincent, 2001) identified a lack of time, from both an individual and curriculum perspective, as barriers to uptake. At that

time, several educators felt there was insufficient time in the program to teach specific knowledge on mental health issues. There were also concerns that use of the curriculum materials would lead to a form of national standardisation of curricula, eliminating the point of difference between courses. Other academics expressed concern that the project was a form of political correctness and a high-jacking of journalism education. The project team took all these concerns on board in finalising the materials. In particular, the team ensured that the curriculum did not avoid complex issues around suicide, mental health and public interest. It also ensured that the individual modules were relevant to journalism education broadly and were extremely flexible in the way they could be used, ensuring each institution could offer a unique approach. By 2006, all Australian universities had found a place for the resources somewhere within their curriculum, with variations on the amount of time devoted to the issues across universities.

The *Response Ability* project for journalism education, preceded and in many ways set the tone and agenda for a comprehensive national approach to raising awareness of the complexities of reporting both suicide and mental illness in Australia. The success of the *Response Ability* project has set a tone of collaboration in Australia that has been reflected in the subsequent success of the *Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project*, which has promoted uptake and use of resources for media professionals on reporting suicide and mental illness (see Skehan et al, 2006). It has also provided the model for other Federally-funded projects aimed at influencing the pre-professional education of journalists, including the *Journalism in Multicultural Australia* and *Reporting Diversity & Integration* project.

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