The Response Ability Project: Integrating the Reporting of Suicide and Mental Illness into Journalism Curricula

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The Response Ability Project is a collaboration between mental health professionals and journalism educators in Australia. It seeks to influence the pre-professional education of journalists so that graduates of university courses will be aware of, and are able to respond appropriately to, issues relating to suicide and mental illness. Importantly, the project situates this learning in the context of the core skills of journalism such as news writing, research, and interviewing. Multi-media resources were developed from pilot resources in 2001 and disseminated to Australian universities. This essay explores key achievements of the project, proposing a place for these issues in journalism curricula internationally.

For many years, the portrayal of suicide and mental illness in the mass media has been of international interest. Research shows that certain representations of suicide may increase the risk of copycat behaviour among vulnerable people.[1] That people living with a mental illness are predominantly portrayed by the mass media in a negative and stereotypical way,[2] which may increase stigma and discrimination, is of concern.

The *Response Ability* project is a landmark collaboration between Australian mental health professionals and journalism educators aimed at improving the reporting of mental illness and suicide. While many countries have developed news media guidelines that promote responsible reporting of suicide and in some cases mental illness (for example, the United States,[3] Canada,[4] the United Kingdom,[5] Australia,[6] New Zealand,[7] and Hong Kong[8]), a more comprehensive approach has been taken in Australia 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 relevant 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 news 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.[9]

Given that the evidence that underpins the resources is international and that the approach to journalism around the world has many similarities,[10] the *Response Ability* project could be replicated in other countries. This essay outlines the key components in developing and disseminating the curriculum resources, drawing from program evaluation data, in an attempt to highlight their relevance internationally.

Background to Response Ability

As noted, many news media sectors have codes of practice or guidelines on reporting and portrayal of suicide. In Australia, many of these have been reviewed in the past decade to better reflect the research evidence. Generally, codes call for restraint in reporting about suicide but all allow for circumstances where the "public interest" may be deemed 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, in Australia, the Code of Ethics governing 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,"[11] but fails to include mental illness as a consideration. Frequent coverage of suicide and mental illness in news reporting suggests that proper training in this area is important. An Australian Study in 2007 concluded that coverage of both suicide and mental illness in Australia was extensive, retrieving 42,013 items in a twelve-month period across selected news media.[12] This represents more than a 200% increase in the volume of news media items when compared to the same study in 2001.[13]

The *Response Ability* project acknowledges that the news media have an important influence on shaping community attitudes, particularly to sensitive issues such as mental illness and suicide.[14] The project 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 student of journalism can work through the issues and develop appropriate strategies before being confronted with them under the pressure of the newsroom environment. Some experts, such as Hawton and Williams,[15] have argued that

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mindful reporting of these issues can have a positive impact through promoting mental health literacy in the general public. These findings suggest that mindful reporting reduced the stigma associated with mental health problems and encouraged help-seeking behaviors among distressed individuals.

The Curriculum 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 objective under this strategy was a focus on education and training. The Hunter Institute of Mental Health, a self-funded, not-for-profit organization based in Newcastle, Australia, specializes in education, training, and health promotion in the areas of suicide and mental illness. During 1997, the Institute surveyed undergraduate courses in nine professional disciplines at all Australian universities. The survey's purpose was to identify those disciplines best placed to address the issue of youth suicide.[16] Each group was selected based on the likely proximity of the profession to unfolding mental health events requiring mindful responses.

The pre-professional education of journalists was selected due to demonstrated influence of news media reporting on the formation and maintenance of social values.[17] The project aimed to ensure that journalists were more aware of the importance of responsible reporting of suicide and their potential to do harm by romanticizing or glamorizing the act.

The journalism curriculum materials were developed by a senior journalism educator at The University of Newcastle and mental health educators at the Hunter Institute of Mental Health. After being reviewed nationally by senior journalism academics and mental health experts, the materials were piloted at seven university campuses across Australia between 1997 and 2000. Both partners had been previously involved in the development of curriculum resources either for different professional groups or related to different topics.[18] In 2000-2001, the project's focus was broadened to place suicide in the wider context of mental health reporting. The curriculum resources for journalism education were then further developed and refined based on consultations with journalism educators. The print-based pilot modules were developed as multimedia resources and widely disseminated.

In 2001, the project team visited every Australian university to demonstrate the resources and plan curriculum integration. The materials were formally endorsed by Australia's Journalism Education Association (an organization similar in function to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) at its 2001 annual conference. Resources provide flexible teaching options that expose journalism students to the "conflict between professional, commercial, and ethical obligations" when covering these issues.[19] 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 news 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, student 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 Web site at www.responseability.org.[20] The resources are based on four key principles of professional journalism: accuracy, fairness, balance, and ethical accountability. For example, one resource includes print and audio-visual source materials relating to the alleged suicide of a public figure's son. Students must negotiate their way through potentially sensational material to create reporting that meets professional standards.

During the development phase, the curriculum materials' authors became aware that university programs in journalism education can vary significantly. It was important, then, that the curriculum modules were not prescriptive in their content or delivery. 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. For example, materials provided in the example of an alleged suicide described above may be used in the preparation of a radio, TV, online, or print news stories, as a trigger for a feature article or in a discussion about the complex ethical challenges faced by journalists when reporting about death, mental illness, and/or the private lives of public figures.

These factors were crucial in ensuring the widespread support of Australian journalism educators. Despite barriers to uptake identified in initial consultations, such as a lack of time (from both an individual and curriculum perspective), a reluctance to tackle difficult issues in the classroom and a fear that the curriculum may be hijacked by "political correctness," a 2008 review[21] indicated that all 26 university campuses offering relevant programs in journalism had incorporated (or were planning to incorporate) aspects of *Response Ability* into their curriculum. Understanding potential barriers to the project at the development stage allowed the project team to incorporate strategies to overcome these barriers into the project planning. The flexible format and high quality of resources, and the emphasis on teaching core journalism skills, rather than teaching students about suicide or mental illness, have been key contributors to subsequent high levels of uptake.[22]

The *Response Ability* project has been guided by an advisory panel of key stakeholders and journalism educators who are well known for their contribution to journalism education in Australia since the pilot phase in 1998. Given the project is driven by a mental health organisation, the Journalism Advisory Group provides direction for the project, and makes recommendations about further resource development and promotion, to ensure the activities are relevant to journalism educators and students. 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 on an ongoing basis to ensure the resources remain topical and relevant. For example, new case studies have looked at the reporting of euthanasia as it may relate to suicide, reporting of indigenous suicide, and reporting about mental illness and violent behaviour.[23] 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 national strategy in Australia aimed at influencing news media coverage of issues related to mental illness and suicide, to ensure responsible, accurate, and sensitive representation. Recent research indicates that the approach may be having an impact on reporting practices, with a follow-up news media monitoring study indicating that despite widespread variability in reporting, there was a significant improvement in the quality of news media reports about both suicide and mental illness.[24] The Response Ability model's success is demonstrated by the 100% uptake of the curriculum materials by Australian universities. The partnership between mental health and journalism stakeholders, and the joint journalism and investment in development and resource material related to this area, have also been key to the development of other parts of the national strategy, which involves working with news media organizations and journalists across the country.

The Mindframe National Media Initiative, under which the Response Ability project is now funded, has general news 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 news 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 news Media Monitoring Project[25] to provide a baseline picture of reporting in Australia and two critical reviews providing an update of the world literature on suicide and the news media,[26] and mental health and illness and the news media.[27] It has also established an online community action site.[28] developed resources for journalists on reporting suicide and mental illness[29] 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 focused on communicating the principles of Mindframe to the mental health sector,[30] police,[31] courts,[32] and expanding the focus of the Initiative to include the portrayal of suicide and mental illness in film and television drama.[33]

Key Outcomes and Achievements

Comprehensive documentation of activities and objectives-based evaluations were implemented over the project's life to assess reach, awareness, and use of project resources and the perceived value of the resources from the perspective of both lecturers and students. Ten progress reports and a final evaluation report between January 2004 and December 2008 were retrieved and reviewed. In particular, statistics on the dissemination of project resources, usage of the Web site, documentation on engagement with universities in Australia, and evaluation outcomes were analysed. An empirical study of the project's effects on published journalism, conducted from 2006 to 2007, revealed a positive impact on the quality of published journalism in the area of suicide and mental illness reporting.[34]

Examination of project reports for the Response Ability Project for Journalism Education from 2004–2008 demonstrates the willingness of journalism educators to engage with the issues and to use the curriculum materials and Web-based resources. While the resources are used throughout the three years of a journalism or communications degree in Australia, they are most commonly used in the second year of a three-year degree. Consultations with educators revealed that the materials were most commonly used in an ethics-related subject, but also across subjects such as news writing, broadcast journalism, health journalism, public relations, and introductory journalism subjects.

In addition to uptake of the resources, journalism educators have demonstrated a willingness to engage with mental health professionals to provide guest lectures for students (with forty-five lectures provided between 2005 and 2008). The project Web site also receives a steady stream of visitors (average of 8,000 visitors per month) with usage increasing during university semester times. The project also sponsors an annual award for excellence in student reporting of mental health issues, which attracts entries from across the country. Much such journalism is also published, enhancing the standard of mental health reporting.

Feedback from Journalism Students

In addition to feedback and support from the project receives from journalism educators, evaluations strategies have been implemented since 2005 to obtain feedback from journalism students. The evaluation's objectives are to assess opinions of journalism students about the ways in which reporting suicide and mental illness are raised in their degree programs, and how valuable they find 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.[35]

To assess the views of journalism students, two separate evaluations have been conducted in recent years as part of ongoing program evaluation, and these are reported here. The first evaluation surveyed the opinions of postgraduate and undergraduate journalism students who received a guest lecture from the project team between 2005 and 2008. 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.

Quantitative Analysis of Student Impressions

Between April 2005 and October 2008, forty-five guest lectures by mental health professionals from the *Response Ability* project team were delivered at seventeen tertiary institutions across all seven states and territories in Australia. Optional student surveys were disseminated at the completion of twenty-four of these lectures. Surveys asked students to rate whether they agreed or disagreed with seven statements on a ten-point scale assessing interest, relevance, understanding, confidence, impact, and interest in the issues. Approximately 1,400 questionnaires were distributed, with a total of 445 received, representing a response rate of approximately 32%.

Building on published evidence,[36] combined results between 2005 and 2008 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 effects on the way they develop stories in the future. Several low scores were observed for a number of items (reducing the mean score for some items); however, each statement received at least one rating of ten. A summary of results is presented in Table 1.

As suggested by the quantitative data, the majority of comments left by students were positive, highlighting the usefulness of the lectures or providing constructive comments about expansion of the issues:

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.

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

Qualitative Analysis of Student Opinions about Stories

The evaluation process involved collection of qualitative data from journalism students who had provided entries in the Journalism Education Association Ossie Awards for "Responsible Reporting of a Mental

Table 1

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS (N = 445)

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.	8.6	6 - 10
The information presented in the lecture is relevant to my studies as a journalism student.	8.6	4 - 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.	8.2	2 - 10
I am interested in learning more about reporting on mental health, mental illness, and suicide in Australian media.	7.4	1 - 10

Health Issue" between 2005 and 2007. Interviews were conducted with twenty-two of the twenty-nine journalism students who entered the award competition. Students represented seven university campuses in Australia, all of which were known to the *Response Ability* project. Interviews lasted approximately ten to fifteen minutes, and were recorded with the permission of each participant, transcribed, and qualitative analysis performed to identify key themes. As outlined in published research,[37] a number of key issues and themes were raised in the interviews and summarized briefly below.

Students indicated a number of reasons why they chose to develop a mental health story; including personal experience of the issues, a desire to highlight an important social issue, or to develop a story that challenged the dominant frames about mental illness that often come through the mass media, particularly around dangerousness, unpredictability, or criminality.[38]

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

Mental Health and a range of resources to assist journalism, journalism students, and their teachers. These include the publication, "Fact or Fiction?" which summarizes major issues facing journalists, teaching notes to assist educators, and other factual resources including a list of useful publications. Copies of CD-ROMS are available free to journalism educators in Australia and have been provided on a cost recovery basis to educators in the United States, the United Kingdom, Nigeria, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and New Zealand.

Conclusions

With an estimated one in four people affected by mental illness at some time in their life,[44] and suicide rates a concern internationally, the need to ensure that reporting of these issues does minimal harm is transparent. Many countries seek to improve news media reporting by issuing guidelines to assist journalists to be fair, balanced, and ethical in reporting these matters; but in Australia a landmark project has taken this aspiration further.

By working together, mental health educators and journalism educators have contributed to an innovative curriculum resource that seeks to influence the pre-professional education of journalists and improve their skills in this area. The *Response Ability* model, developed and refined over more than ten years, has contributed to the improved reporting of mental illness and suicide in Australia and has been taken up in some form by all universities providing journalism education.

Given the universal nature of the problem, it is argued that the solution developed in Australia is easily modified to achieve similar results in the United States and other developed countries offering journalism education.

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