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The search for sensitive coverage of the tragedy of suicide: An Australian story

BY LEO BOWMAN, QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA · APRIL 17, 2013

In a downtown cafe, I sit listening as the deputy editor of the *Newcastle Herald* tells his story. I had made the one hour and 20 minute plane trip south from subtropical Brisbane to Newcastle, an industrial city on Australia's south-eastern seaboard, to learn what Heath Harrison had come to know about the way journalists cover instances of tragic death — especially suicide. At 38, Harrison is still a young man, but his career in journalism stretches back 16 years. Like most journalists with his experience, Harrison has developed a repertoire of stories about his often-fraught dealings with ordinary people who have been struck by human tragedy, loss and grief.

He recounts how as a young reporter he "missed the story" surrounding a road accident death in his newspaper coverage area. The victim's family declined Harrison's "death knock" interview request, but they later granted an interview to a television news journalist. Harrison recalls that his editor was not impressed with his lapse, but Harrison is philosophical about his perceived failure to deliver in the competitive and time pressured world of daily journalism. "I mustn't have had the sort of approach to get it (the interview) across the line," he reflects. It is a simple statement, but it says much about what is expected of journalists amid the pressures and tensions that always surround the journalist/grieving family interrelationship — the self-same things that have led to the stereotyping of the journalism profession as brash, bullying and even ghoulish. In a few short years, the time pressures under which Heath Harrison works have taken on a quickening tempo, with 24/7 programs and "new media" platforms providing instant news. In the coverage of trauma and grief, though, Heath Harrison has done something unusual: He has helped move coverage in another direction, a kinder, gentler direction.

A young woman's death inspires journalists to end "suicide silence"

The story of this change begins in another part of Australia — the inland, 719 kilometres southwest from Newcastle's Pacific Ocean beaches. Here the river gums line the iconic Murray River as it parts the cities of Albury and Wodonga, dividing them between the states of New South Wales and Victoria. A few short months ago, Heath Harrison was the editor of the local daily newspaper, *The Border Mail,* that serves the combined city

population of 90,000 and a region of 150,000 people. The idea behind what would eventually become the newspaper's 2012 campaign, Ending Suicide Silence, had gestated in the minds of the *Border Mail* team for some time. Then in 2011 came the death of 15-year-old Mary Baker, from Albury. In a strong show of community support, 1000 mourners attended Mary's funeral in the civic square. The tragedy, Harrison explains, crystallised the issue in the minds of the community and the staff at the *Border Mail*. A few months later the Australian Press Council (APC) issued new guidelines, acknowledging that the reporting of suicides could be beneficial, and might act as a deterrent to suicide deaths. Perhaps the new approach also reflected a public readiness to discuss a former taboo?

This was Heath Harrison's perception, and he speaks about the range of his private conversations in his community, that seemed to reflect a growing willingness to discuss the topic. As a journalist, he was ready to listen. In the year 1998, he had reported on a nationally significant suicide statistic related to deaths in southern New South Wales and northeastern Victoria. And then there was his own personal experience with the suicide death of a friend. In a tragically direct connection to the current issue, Mary's brother Jack, still in his twenties, is a journalist at the *Border Mail* where he works alongside a friend of the Baker family, Jodie O'Sullivan. Somewhere around the same time, cadet journalist Ashley Argoon had been arguing for the publication of a story dealing with suicide. But, as Harrison recounts, as editor he remained cautious as he weighed up the interests of the newspaper and of the families whose story he wanted to tell. There was a need, he felt, to stop and wait; to wait until the story was ready to be told. "If we got it wrong it was a disaster for them and for us", he reflects. So he waited, and the campaign development was gradually progressed across a twelve-month time period.

Bringing mental health issues out of the journalistic shadows

Some prominent experts assisted through the provision of advice and material for the campaign. There was input from the 2010 Australian of the Year Patrick McGorry, a psychiatrist and Professor of Youth Mental Health at the University of Melbourne, Victoria. Harrison credits Professor McGorry's counsel with his decision to go ahead with the coverage. Then there was the contribution from Jeff Kennett, Chairman of Beyond Blue, an organisation concerned with involving the Australian community in the fight against depression, a common contributor to suicide. The former Victorian Premier had given an interview to *Border Mail* senior reporter Brad Worrall. Afterwards, Jeff Kennett suggested looking to the resourses of Headspace, the National Youth Mental Health Foundation's nationwide support network for early intervention in depression-related problems. Kennett thought the newspaper's campaign could focus around gaining a Headspace centre for the region. This was an approach that Heath Harrison was soon to adopt.

The campaign preparation presented an arduous task for Harrison, his deputy editor Di Thomas, and the rest of the team. They worked with affected families to prepare campaign material. There were countless interviews and discussions between the journalists and the families to shape a sensitive, subtle message acceptable to all, and with the potential to provoke a positive community reaction. Then there was the shaping and reshaping of various stories as the editors and journalists worked to refine the ultimate message. In the end, there

were 54 feature articles, including 12 front-page stories that formed the basis of a campaign, ultimately stretching across two weeks in August 2012. The campaign made strong use of social media, through Facebook, where young journalist Matt Cram facilitated conversations amongst an audience that included many young people. Here, the participants were able to communicate with each other in their own way, representing their feelings both through the use of images and of text.

Finally, the campaign was launched. It was greeted with overwhelmingly positive responses, even though a nervous Heath Harrison confesses to the "worst night's sleep of my life." He gives credit to the community for the courage that they showed in sharing their stories, and cites this as a case of "communities being able to tackle big issues, over time, in a meaningful way," and he echoes the community praise for his journalists who he says "handled the story ethically and with integrity in a way that raised the community opinion of journalists." The campaign reached its natural conclusion (although there is some ongoing coverage), but the story did not end there.

A small newspaper's courage and compassion wins a national award for "leadership of the highest order"

Late last November I watched on as Heath Harrison and his team accepted the Walkley Award for Journalism Leadership at Parliament House in Australia's national capital, Canberra. To the warm applause of the more than 600 journalists, media personnel and sponsors attending the 57th annual presentation of Australia's most prestigious journalism awards, the team unfurled a banner inscribed with a large butterfly, the symbol of their campaign for the Headspace centre. Their work now stood as an exemplar of outstanding journalism practice in covering traumatic events, and, in particular, the delicate matter of suicide. The Walkley Board of Governors doesn't comment on its deliberations beyond a written citation that is read at the award ceremony. The citation captured the David-and-Goliath feel that permeated the audience, and must have reached those watching live on national television.

Journalists from the Border Mail accept their 2012 Walkley Award for Journalism Leadership

In the words of one board member: "This is a small newspaper with great vision. The *Border Mail* wasn't frightened to tackle the issue head-on. It was handled with style and sensitivity and the benefits to the readers are obvious. This was leadership of the highest order," The citation highlighted an excerpt from a *Border Mail* penned by young Mary Baker's brother Jack Baker, during the campaign:"You don't fix problems by sweeping them under the rug. Out of this tragedy, and countless other tragedies, there has to come a positive. By talking about suicide and seeing it for what it really is – needless

death — we can help shed light on the darkness."

The Walkley Awards are now some months in the past and, on as we sit in the cafe on this this February day in Newcastle, Heath Harrison thinks back on Jack Baker's involvement in the campaign. "We asked him whether he wanted to go on holidays until it was over," he says. "But Jack said he wanted to stay because although he had his own family he was part of the *Border Mail* family, too."

I take my leave of Heath Harrison as he heads across Bolton Street towards the *Newcastle Herald* offices. He will work late into the evening. I stroll a short distance through nearby streets to reach the Newcastle Hospital. In Newcomen Street, I approach a small wooden door in a side wall of the hospital building. Above it, an unpretentious sign announces the Hunter Institute of Mental Health.

Here in Newcastle, The Institute houses the Mindframe National Media Initiative, a key Federal Government initiative designed to foster improved media coverage of mental health issues, including suicide.

A call for ethics and integrity in mental health reporting

Inside, I'm greeted by the *Mindframe* Acting Program Manager, Marc Bryant, a former journalist, who worked for British newspapers (1996-2004) before switching to the health sector to ply his wares, firstly in Great Britain and later in Australia. Here, his program seeks to encourage "responsible, accurate and sensitive representation of mental illness in Australian mass media," through a range of ongoing initiatives. The team works to build relationships with the media and those people they'll talk to when discussing mental health, suicide or suicide prevention, and facilitates the research needed to inform the courses it prepares and delivers to working journalists and to journalism students at Australian universities. The course information is detailed and wide ranging (as can be seen at their website www.mindframe-media.info) but, amongst other things, it highlights the benefits of doing stories that emphasise the effects of suicide on families, friends, workplaces and communities; It seeks to encourage thoughtful stories about those bereaved by suicide; it suggests that coverage of personal accounts from people who have found ways to combat suicidal thoughts might assist others with similar problems. Frequent and prominent use of information that outlines where people can access professional help is also encouraged.

During a late lunch overlooking the Newcastle ocean front, Bryant notes that there is evidence to suggest that such measures are paying off. In 2000-2001, Melbourne University research showed that 57 percent of the nearly 5,000 suicide stories in the media met good quality criteria. In the 2006-2007 survey, the numbers topped the 8,000 mark and 75 percent of such stories were considered good quality. A 2010 federal senate inquiry sought to provide the impetus for additional approaches that could foster such improvement. A 2010 report, "The Hidden Toll: Suicide in Australia," recommends the development of measures designed to foster more "positive" suicide prevention stories. ". . . [W]e've contributed to reviews of guidelines at the APC, and at the ABC (Australia's national public broadcaster)," Bryant says in describing how his organisation is moving to foster such "new positives" in the emerging media activity around mental health coverage. *Mindframe* benchmarks its

programs against international best practice, but there is “strong reference” to the Australian experience in 2012 United States and United Kingdom policy documents on media suicide coverage, Bryant says.

It has been a long day and I gaze out over the ocean as I await a taxi to Williamtown Airport to catch the last flight back to Brisbane. The surfers are still there, dotting the horizon amidst a foaming ocean, apparently still affected by the final influences of a severe tropical storm emanating from Cyclone Oswald. The tropical storm had swept all before it, venting its fury along the Queensland coastline before entering into New South Wales late the last week. It had even raised a swell in Sydney Harbour, as heavy rain and winds lashed the” Emerald City” more than two hours by road to the south of Newcastle.

Earlier, I had seen a surfer somehow catch a wave in what had seemed impossibly choppy conditions. He had prevailed. So too, I think, can those journalists who seek to chart the chop of the 24/7 news cycle in search of ethics and integrity in the reporting of mental illness and suicide. I think that they now have some good places to start.

Longtime journalist Leo Bowman is associate professor of journalism at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, and a contributing writer for the Center for Journalism Ethics.

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