



Washington State Newspaper Coverage of Mental Health Issues



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Overview

For this report, we completed a content analysis¹ of Washington (WA) State newspapers to assess if there is evidence of the use of derogatory terms and negative stereotypes to describe people with mental illnesses and other inaccurate portrayals of mental illness. Such evidence would raise the legitimacy of this issue and help shape a course of action. The analysis demonstrates several ways WA state newspapers can sometimes provide inaccurate portrayals of mental illness:

- News stories about a person with mental illness being violent and harming others are, by far, the most common topic of news stories in which mental illness is a factor. This creates the misperception that there is a strong link between mental illness and violence where none exists.
- The language used to describe people experiencing mental illness is predominately negative and reinforcing of negative stereotypes that are harmful to people experiencing mental illness and to their families.
- There are typically multiple causes of mental illness, but rarely is this reported.
- When symptoms of specific diagnoses are described they are often inaccurate.
- There are few news stories with any mention of recovery or prevention.

This report demonstrates these findings. In response to these them, we developed a companion Media Guide entitled, “Background Information and a Guide for Reporting on Mental Illness”, which can be found at www.mentalhealthreporting.org, which includes practical tips for reporting when mental illness is part of a news story. The purpose of this guide is to raise awareness among news organizations, journalists, journalism students and educators, and news story informants on how to improve reporting on mental health issues.

¹ Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts.

Media Portrayals of Mental Illness

The public's world view is informed both by personal experience and by information that is learned from a lifetime of media exposure (Shapiro 1991, Shrum 1995). A growing body of research indicates mass media coverage of mental illness contributes to negative stereotypes, inaccuracies, and to the perception that people with mental illness as fundamentally different from non-mentally ill persons (US Department of Health and Human Services 1999).

Analyses of newspapers, movies, and television paint a consistent picture. Individuals with mental illnesses are portrayed rarely in a positive light. Language and images of dangerousness, unpredictability, unemployment, and incompetence dominate (Berlin and Malin 1991, Diefenbach 1997, Wahl 1997). A related issue is the use of labels that have been shown to have overwhelming negative connotations for people with mental illnesses such as terms like, "nuts", "psycho", "loony", "insane", and "crazy" (Rose, Thornicroft, Pinfold, Kassam 2001), which can be used colloquially to refer non-mentally ill persons or in reference to persons with mental illness. The use of terms to refer to persons with mental illness by their diagnoses (e.g. the "schizophrenic" or the "borderline") is also derogatory because it negates personhood by equating individuals with their diagnoses.

Media accounts that link mental illness to violence are also common (Williams and Taylor 1995, Matas, el-Buebalay, Harpe, Green, Peterkin 1986). Research shows as many as 75 percent of news stories that deal with mental illness focus on violence perpetrated by people with mental illnesses (Shain and Phillips 1991). These portrayals exaggerate the much researched conclusion that people with mental illness are much more frequently the victims than the perpetrators of violent crime (Appleby, et al., 2001) and that the vast majority of people with mental illness are not involved in violent crimes (APA 1994).

Accurate reporting about mental health issues would reflect today's realities about recovery and prevention and accurate descriptions of the causes and symptoms of mental illness. New scientific advances in how to treat and prevent mental illness come every year. Today we know that for most individuals with serious mental illness substantial improvements including the ability to live a meaningful and productive life in some cases, without major symptoms of illness are likely (Harding, Brooks, Ashikaga, Strauss, and Breier 1987). Little is know about how these facts about mental illness is portrayed by the media. One content

analysis shows that only 4% of news stories mention positive treatment outcomes (Corrigan et al 2005).

The knowledge that recovery from serious mental illness happens frequently has led to a fundamental rethinking of how to provide services and treatment (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health 2003). There is a new focus on issues such as employment for people with mental illnesses and the need for reasonable accommodations in the workplace, on providing treatment instead of incarceration, on increasing supports for people experiencing mental illnesses to live independently in the community, and a growing number of individuals recovering from mental illness are now actively involved in providing treatment, social support and education to others. While medication, case management and various forms of therapy remain important to treating mental illness, to accurately portray the treatment and the service system in support of people with mental illness today, these additional themes need attention by the news media. It is unknown how accurately the media reports on these topics.

Although scientists have long demonstrated that various medical illnesses can be prevented by vaccines, early-screening tools, or risky behaviors, in the past decades studies are also showing the devastating consequences of mental disorders can be prevented. For example, research shows improved childhood nutrition can mitigate antisocial behavior, that drug treatment can help to prevent schizophrenia or bipolar disorder in young people at high risk, and that suicide prevention programs are effective (Institute of Medicine 1994)). There is a lot of optimism about prevention of mental illness within the scientific community (Institute of Medicine 1994). Thus, accurate reporting of mental health problems would include stories about prevention.

As journalists are charged with providing accurate information to the public, misinformation about mental illness, its causes and symptoms, is another concern. Rarely does a mental illness have a single cause rather, a combination of biological, psychological and environmental factors contribute to etiology. When a person's mental illness is described as having a single cause, it can lead to negative attitudes especially if that cause is described as due to personal weakness, to bad parenting or to bad genes because then people are seen as unable to recover (Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan, and Kubiak MA 2003; Phelan 2005). Inaccurate descriptions of the causes of mental illness also misinform the public; it is not known the extent to which this is an issue for the news media.

The Impact of Stigma

Media coverage that uses derogatory terms and negative stereotypes to describe people with mental illnesses or provides inaccurate portrayals of mental illness not only misinforms the public, but has the power to adversely impact people with mental illness and the nation's mental health. First, people with mental illness experience prejudice and discrimination such as in a job or in finding a place to live because of negative attitudes that are shaped in part by the media (Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan and Kubiak 2003). Second, negative portrayals of people with mental illnesses and of the treatment systems that serve them lead to structural discrimination in terms of policy and financing for mental health (Corrigan et al. 2005). News media coverage informs the decisions of policy makers in the arenas of involuntary commitment and gun control. Third, the negative attitudes that exist about mental illness in society contribute to people not seeking treatment or services that can help to prevent illness or exacerbate the symptoms of illness (Corrigan 2004). Finally, people with mental illness sometimes internalize the negative stereotypes that exist in society as represented by the media contributing to negative outcomes such as lowered self-esteem and impaired social interactions (Link et al. 1989; Rosenfield 1997).

Methods

For the content analysis, we chose to concentrate on newspapers because they often inform the agenda of broadcast news and provide more substantive material for analysis. We used the search terms “mental illness”, “mentally ill”, “schizophrenia”, “schizophrenic” and “mental health” to search WA State newspapers catalogued in Lexis/Nexis in three time periods over a ten year time span: January–April 1995; May-August 2000; and September-December 2005. News stories were the unit of analysis. We chose different time periods during a year to note any tendencies in the increase or decrease of harmful coverage overtime and to avoid a skew of greater coverage of mental health issues corresponding to different times of the year (e.g., in May during mental health awareness month). There is little reason to think this baseline analysis will vary much from current coverage as a sustained, systemic effort has not been made within the state or nationally to educate news organizations about negative portrayals of mental illness, scientific advances in mental health research, or major initiatives to transform mental health and treatment systems.

Seven papers representing all regions of WA State contained news stories that matched the search terms in any of the three time periods including: *The News Tribune*, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *The Columbian*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Seattle Weekly*, *The Lewiston Morning Tribune*, *The Spokesman Review*. We coded 856 news articles that appeared in these papers in these time periods including: 207 news stories in 1995, 359 news stories in 2000, and 290 news stories in 2005 using the coding scheme described below.

For each news story we coded the newspaper in which the story appeared, its placement (the front page, editorial page, sports page, entertainment review and other) and whether the story was written by a news service or by local reporters. Two people (a professor and a journalist) coded the first 100 news stories together to aid in refining the codes and then an additional 100 articles towards the end to assess the level of agreement between coders. The agreement of the coders was high; intercoder reliability on each variable ranged from 90 to 100%.

We coded for negative descriptive language used to describe person(s) with a mental illness including: identifying a person by his/ her diagnostic label (e.g., schizophrenic), using a popular derogatory words to describe a person with a mental illness (e.g., crazy, nuts), using terms to describe a person(s) with a mental illness as dangerous or unpredictable,

incompetent or in a negative emotional state (e.g., disturbed, confused). From these codes, we created a new code based on *any* use of negative language. We also coded for any positive language that was used to describe a person(s) with a mental illness. In addition, instances where persons(s) with mental illnesses were used to make reference to abnormal aspects of “normal” people and colloquial uses of mental illness for example, the basketball team was schizophrenic in its performance over the course of the season were coded. Lastly, we coded for use of the phrase “the mentally ill” as opposed to writing “people with mental illness”.

News stories were coded thematically. Any mention of a theme in a news story was coded so each news story could contain many themes. The major themes and subthemes we coded for include:

(1) Any mention of dangerousness including the subthemes: descriptions where a person with mental illness is involved in committing a violent act to oneself or others, is the victim of a violence, where a person with a mental illness commits a non-violent crime, is using drugs and alcohol and is involved in violence, and stories where the competence of a person with a mental illness is questioned in the context of legal proceedings.

(2) Any cause of mental illness including the subthemes: biologic, environmental (e.g., stress, war), parental failure (e.g., abuse, neglect), personal weakness, more than one cause or other.

(3) Treatment including the subthemes: a report on new research, biologic treatments such as medications or electric shock therapy, therapy, integrated service delivery systems such as the Program for Assertive Community Treatment (PACT) or case management, if persons in recovery from mental illness are described as part of the treatment approach and other forms of treatment including inpatient treatment.

(4) Advocacy Concerns and Actions including subthemes about poor quality or abusive treatment, a shortage of treatment resources, the availability of a new funding resource,

homelessness or housing concerns, insurance parity for persons experiencing mental health problems and the use of seclusion, restraint or involuntary commitment.

(5) Prevention. Any effort to promote mental health, intervene early to address mental health problems, and reduce the potentially devastating consequences of mental illness.

(6) Person with a Mental Illness in Recovery. By this theme, we mean a person(s) with a mental illness is described as being able to live a meaningful and productive life even with symptoms, or has achieved full recovery meaning living without major symptoms of illness.

(7) Diagnosis. We coded for any mention of a specific diagnosis in the news story and if any symptoms were mentioned in connection with that diagnosis. If symptoms were mentioned, we compared the description of such symptoms with the descriptions of diagnoses given in Wikipedia (the largest encyclopedia on the internet). Wikipedia reflects in lay person language accurate information conveyed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).²

² The DSM is an [American](#) handbook for [mental health professionals](#) that lists different categories of [mental disorders](#) and the criteria for diagnosing them.

Results

Table 1 provides information about the news stories we coded including the newspapers in which they appeared, where in that newspaper it appeared, and whether the story was written by a news service or by a local reporter. The majority of the news stories containing our search terms appeared in the Seattle Times and in The Seattle Post-Intelligencier. A story incorporating any one of our search terms appeared most often in a news section, but not on the front page. Nearly three quarters of the news stories were written by local reporters as opposed to being repurposed from a wire service.

Table 1. Descriptive information about news stories (N=856)

	Total		1995 January- April (N=207)		2000 May- August (N=359)		2005 September- December (N=290)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Where story appears								
Columbian	140	16.4	49	35.0	52	37.1	39	27.9
Lewiston Morning Tribune	38	4.4	7	18.4	11	29.0	20	52.6
Seattle Post Intelligencier	220	25.7	74	33.6	88	40.0	58	26.4
Seattle Weekly	15	1.8	0	0	5	33.6	10	66.6
The Spokesman Review	99	11.6	0	0	41	41.4	58	58.6
Seattle Times	329	38.4	77	23.4	162	49.2	90	27.4
The News Tribune	15	1.8	0	0	0	0	15	100
Placement in paper								
Front page	103	12.0	10	9.7	57	55.3	36	35.0
Editorial page	74	8.6	21	28.4	35	47.3	18	24.3
Sports	48	5.6	38	79.2	4	8.3	6	12.5
Entertainment review	56	6.5	15	26.8	18	32.1	23	41.1
Other	575	67.2	123	21.4	245	42.6	207	36.0
Story written by a news service	230	26.9	52	25.1	105	29.2	73	25.2

Table 2 reports the frequency of descriptive language used in news stories to describe a person(s) with mental illness. Almost a third of all news stories described a person(s) with a mental illness using negative descriptive language. By contrast, only 6% of news stories used positive descriptive language to describe a person(s) with a mental illness in a news story. Negative descriptive language most often appeared in news stories found on the front-page or in entertainment reviews of plays or movies.

Table 2. Prevalence of descriptive language used to describe a person(s) with mental illness and where it is placed in newspaper stories (N=856)

	Total	
	N	%
Any negative language used	268	31.3
Label	78	9.1
Popular derogatory	44	5.1
Dangerous or unpredictable	108	12.6
Incompetent or disabled	71	8.3
Negative emotional state	77	9.0
Positive language used	51	6.0
Where does negative language Most commonly appear?		
Front page (N=103)	48	46.6
Editorial page (N=74)	23	31.1
Sports page (N=48)	9	18.8
Entertainment reviews (N=56)	32	57.1
Other (N=575)	156	27.1
Other descriptive language		
Person(s) with mental illness are used to make reference to abnormal aspects of “normal” people	21	2.5
Use of a colloquial reference to mental illness	50	5.8
Use of the phrase “the mentally ill”	63	7.4

Table 3 lists many of the descriptive words that appeared within all 856 news stories to describe person(s) with mental illness that are reaffirming of negative stereotypes.

Table 3. Examples of negative descriptive language to describe people with mental disorders in news stories (N=856)

	Language used in news stories
Label	Schizophrenic, borderline, bipolar
Popular derogatory	Madman, crazy, insane, looney, nuts, psycho, screwball, scumbag, freak, wacked out, odd duck, bonkers
Dangerous or unpredictable	Threat, dangerous, knife wielding, aggressive, armed, violent, frenetic, bizarre, belligerent, out of control, bedeviled, brink of suicide, violent outbursts, hostile, taunting, cold-blooded killer, unpredictable, possessed, reckless, ticking time bomb, wildly gesticulating, mental patient on the edge, menacing, angry, penchant for knives, gun-toting, uncontrollable, evil, hard-drinking, child-killer, agitated, wild, twisted, wild-eyed, ranting, unstable, deranged, impulsive, self-destructive
Incompetent	Can't care for themselves, condemned to a very difficult life, easily manipulated, dependent, broken souls, broken people, regressing, decompensating, debilitating, barely able to get by, illiterate, broken, incoherent, incompetent, helpless, can't function in a room with four walls, damaged, well-managed, stable enough, unable to concentrate, non-compliant, graduated from law school despite his depression, limited for learning, unable to work, oblivious, childlike, uncooperative, limited mental abilities, stupid, mentally defective, mentally incapacitated, retard
Negative emotional state	Sullen, loner, distraught, desperate, withdrawn, dark, shy, foul mood, misfit, shy, socially awkward, lonely, depressed, cranky, anguished, alienated, grungy misfit, anxious, disturbed, brooding, catatonic, sluggish, glum, dark-side, troubled, irrational, rambling, sad-eyed

Table 4 shows the prevalence of story themes mentioned within the news stories included in the content analysis as well as the prevalence of subthemes within each major theme. The most prevalent story theme was any mention of dangerous (52%), followed by a theme of advocacy and action (32%), treatment (28%), cause of mental illness (22%), prevention (6%) and a story describing a person in recovery (3%).

Within the theme, “any mention of dangerousness”, the subtheme of a person(s) described as having a mental illness doing something violent to harm another person was contained in 62% of the stories and was by far the most prevalent subtheme. Within the theme, “any cause of mental illness mentioned” environmental causes of mental illness were the most common (59%), followed by biologic causes (26%). In about one-fifth of news stories where any cause of mental illness was mentioned was more than one cause ascribed. Biologic treatments were the most common subtheme within the treatment theme (48%) followed by therapy (40%). In six percent of stories with a treatment theme, was a person with a mental illness in recovery described as part of the treatment approach. The most common subthemes that emerged under the advocacy and action themes included: a shortage of resources (36%), homelessness or housing issues (26%) and poor quality treatment (25%).

Table 4. Prevalence of story themes given any mention in news stories (N=856)

	Overall Prevalence		Prevalence of subthemes within each story theme
	N	%	%
Any mention of dangerousness	443	51.8	
Violent crime against others	272	31.8	61.6
Non-violent crime against others	92	10.7	20.8
Suicide/ suicidal	103	12.0	12.0
Victimized due to mental illness	100	11.7	11.7
Substance abuse related to mental illness and violence	58	6.8	13.1
Accused of crime and competence to stand in stand trial is in question	106	12.4	24.0

Any cause of mental illness Mentioned (N=187)	187	21.8	
Personal cause	9	1.1	4.8
Parental cause	34	4.0	18.1
Biological cause	48	5.6	25.5
Environmental cause (e.g., war)	110	12.9	58.5
More than one cause	36	4.2	19.1
Other	32	3.7	17.1
Treatment (N=239)	239	27.9	
Report on new treatment findings	41	4.8	17.2
Biological treatments	112	13.1	47.5
Therapy	94	11.0	40.0
Integrated service delivery	18	2.1	7.7
Person with mental illness in recovery is an explicit part of treatment approach	14	1.6	6.0
Other	66	7.7	28.0
Advocacy concerns and actions	326	32.4	
Poor quality or abusive treatment	82	9.6	25.2
Shortage of resources	117	13.7	35.9
Availability of a new funding source or Resource	68	7.9	21.5
Homelessness or housing issues	85	9.9	26.2
Insurance parity	7	0.8	2.2
System or program change to promote Recovery	29	3.4	8.9
Use of seclusion, restraint, involuntary Commitment	60	7.0	18.4
Prevention	54	6.3	16.4
News story describes a person in Recovery	28	3.3	

We examined if there are any patterns in terms of how major themes are covered across time periods. Table 5 shows that there is no clear pattern by time period of the theme “any mention of

dangerousness” appearing in the newspapers. This theme is the most common in the 2000 news stories and does not appear to be on the decline. There is a significant decrease in news stories that describe “any cause of mental illness” in the 2000 and 2005 stories as compared to the 1995 news stories. There is also a significant increase in news stories that describe the theme of “advocacy or action” in the 2005 articles as compared to the 1995 and 2000 articles.

Table 5. Story themes by and within time periods (N=856)

	Total		1995 January- April (N=207)		2000 May- August (N=359)		2005 September- December (N=290)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Any mention of Dangerousness	443	51.8	92	44.4	208	57.9	143	49.3
Any cause of mental illness Mentioned	187	21.8	63	30.4	58	16.2	66	22.8
Treatment	239	27.9	47	22.7	103	28.7	88	30.3
Advocacy concerns and Actions	326	38.1	67	32.4	114	31.8	114	49.7

Table 6 shows nearly half of all news stories mentioned a diagnosis of mental illness with depression, schizophrenia and substance abuse being the most common. In 15% of all news stories, at least one symptom of a specific diagnosis of mental illness was mentioned and more than half of the time these symptom descriptions contained inaccuracies.

Table 6. Mention of diagnosis, symptoms and accuracy of symptoms (N=856)

	N	%
Story mentions any diagnosis	405	47.3
Depression	137	16.0
Schizophrenia	110	12.9
Substance abuse or dependence	100	11.7
Bipolar disorder	69	8.1

Post traumatic stress disorder	35	4.1
Attention deficit disorder	12	1.4
Dementia including Alzheimers	11	1.3
Panic disorder	3	0.04
Borderline personality Disorder	9	1.1
Pedophilia	7	0.08
Other	86	10.0
At least one symptom mentioned	130	15.2
Accuracy of description when symptoms mentioned (N=156)		
inaccurate	45	28.8
somewhat accurate	47	30.2
accurate	64	41.0

Discussion

We coded a year's worth of newspaper stories in WA State newspapers to inform a larger educational effort aimed at the local news media to improve the accuracy of reporting on mental health issues. Approximately, one-third of news stories used negative or derogatory language to describe a person(s) with mental illness. By far, the most common theme of newspaper stories was to report an instance where a person identified as having a mental illness did something violent to another person. We found few stories that discussed significant improvements in quality of life or a reduction of symptoms people with mental illness or that reported on prevention. We identified instances where newspaper stories gave inaccurate descriptions of the symptoms or the cause of mental illness. Collectively, these findings suggest a need to improve reporting on mental health issues in WA State newspapers.

For a long time, journalists have recognized the power of the words and images they use in defining and characterizing their subjects. At least since the civil rights era of the 1960s, reporting guides and practices have encouraged reporters and editors to avoid stereotypical language and ensure careful use of images when referring to ethnic and racial minorities and to people with disabilities. This effort is no different. Our goal in doing this study was to inform this effort and to provide concrete evidence of the need to make improvements in one local media market. A companion Guide "Background Information and a Guide for Reporting on Mental Illness", which can be found at www.mentalhealthreporting.org, provides practical tips to address the problems in news reporting identified by this research.

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