



Journal of Promotional Communications

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://promotionalcommunications.org/index.php/pc/index>

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To cite this article: Everett, A. 2015. The Newsworthiness of Mental Illness: An Exploration of Representations of Mental Health and Illness in the UK National Press, *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 3 (2): 302-310

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Abbey Everett

The Newsworthiness of Mental Illness: An Exploration of Representations of Mental Health and Illness in the UK National Press

Mental illness has recently made headlines in a variety of high-profile circumstances. Past research indicates a tendency for media representations of mental illness to be sensationalised, inaccurate, and reliant on negative stereotypes. Through a content analysis of news articles from UK national newspapers, this research seeks to confirm or deny the relevance of past findings in contemporary society; more specifically during a period of increased media focus. This study also goes further by examining a less-researched area of the debate: the 'newsworthiness' of mental illness, through an exploration of recurring news values and media frames. The findings reflect past research and suggest that media representations of mental illness are still flawed, and ultimately that stories related to mental illness receive coverage for the wrong reasons, as 'newsworthy' mental illness involves violence, risk, negativity and sensationalism.

Keywords: Mental illness, news values, media representation, stigma



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INTRODUCTION

Political rhetoric surrounding mental health and illness seems promising, but the pace of change is slow. While politicians may be legislating to bridge the divide between mental and physical health, and work towards a parity of services, cuts to government funding (see Wesley 2015) and issues of stigma are preventing a significant progress from being made. In the case of media reporting, the recurrent issues are even more neglected. Mental illness has made headlines in a variety of high-profile circumstances, from the recent Germanwings plane crash and revelations of the co-pilot's struggles with depression to two high-profile celebrity stories in 2014: actress Amanda Bynes' public struggle with mental illness and actor Robin Williams' death by suicide. These sensationalised cases and the frequent negative stereotyping of people with mental illness cast shadows on more appropriate news reporting of events such as Mental Health Awareness week. Research during the 1990s and early 2000s repeatedly highlighted concerns regarding news coverage of mental health and illness, most prominently with its

negative stereotyping of those with mental illness as violent and 'other' (see for example Philo et al. 1994; Salter 2003; Wahl 1997). Since much of the existing research on media representations of mental health is potentially outdated, this research seeks to confirm or deny its relevance in contemporary society, and more specifically during a period of increased media focus. This study also goes further by examining a less researched area of the debate: the 'newsworthiness' of mental illness. It explores when and how journalists cover mental illness in addition to what such media representations might look like. How the news media select stories about mental illness, and the way in which they are framed, has important implications. As Salter (2003) highlights, "mental illness will generate raw news material indefinitely" (p.123), but what makes mental illness newsworthy and how it is covered may contribute to the stigmatisation of mental illness.

Media Representations of Mental Illness

The media's representation of mental illness is problematic at best. Wahl (1997) outlines that the news media convey "grossly inaccurate representation[s] of people with mental illness" (p.86), and argues that the emerging stereotype contrasts greatly with the reality of even the most severe of mental health problems. Examples of "dehumanisation, inaccuracy and sensationalism" (Salter 2003, p.123) are frequent; perhaps the most extreme and concerning being the frequent connections made by the media between violence and mental illness. For example, Philo et al. (1994) identifies how violent crime is often reported using "loaded terms" (p. 279) such as 'maniac', 'madman', and 'psycho', which forge a link with mental illness. Moreover, there is a tendency for the media to convey people with mental illnesses as being fundamentally different from others (Wahl 1997), presenting an image of those with mental illness as having little identity beyond their diagnoses. Wahl (1997) identifies how the media tend to "identify individuals in terms of their illnesses as if that were their only and most important characteristic" (p.43), and refer to 'the mentally ill' with little or no recognition of individual identity or characteristics, thereby dehumanizing people with mental illness. This conveys those with mental illness as a distinct and separate group who are implicitly different.

There is also a distinct lack of sympathetic coverage and where sympathetic coverage does exist, it still tends to offer an overwhelmingly restricted view of mental health. As Philo et al. (1994) argue, sympathetic coverage is often in keeping with the view of those with mental illness as different, as it isolates them as a group of "helpless 'victims' in need of 'expert' help" (p.279). Depictions of those with mental health problems as relatively competent and independent are extremely rare. This can be seen simply in the representation of 'expert' views, rather than the voices of those with direct experience of mental illness (ibid.).

Frames and News Values of Mental Illness

There is a close relationship between media representations and the way in which news stories are selected for reporting. McQuail (2013) argues that news values can be problematic as "the selection of some items out of many for attention cannot really reflect a reality that is for the most part not 'newsworthy'" (p.15). In other words, the promotion of one story over another cannot give an accurate picture of events, since it means that something will not be reported. News is also event-oriented, as identified by the seminal news values study by Galtung and Ruge (1965). McQuail (2013) goes on to point out that events are also typically treated as 'good news' or 'bad news', and intense competition between media sources to pursue the same content that fits dominant news values means that a single understanding of a topic may dominate the news. This demonstrates the key role that the media are said to play in reproducing dominant social ideas and given that

“journalists will tend to play up the extraordinary, dramatic, tragic etc. elements in a story in order to enhance its newsworthiness” (Hall et al. 1999, p.250), media coverage can be seen as even less reflective of reality. In the case of mental illness, such inaccuracies in coverage may be seen to lead to public stigma and discrimination.

While there is no definitive list of news values, much less one for stories about mental illness, various scholars have identified values that echo each other in terms of what makes something newsworthy. Some news values relate directly to the news process, such as the continuation of a story that is already in the media spotlight (Galtung and Ruge 1965), or the recency and exclusivity of a story (Bell 1991; Golding and Elliot 1979). Others lie solely with the actors and events seen in a story. For example, references to elite people, or something negative, mean that a story is far more likely to be selected for coverage (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Similarly, Golding and Elliott (1979) identify that stories containing some form of drama or entertainment – including ‘human interest’ stories – are seen to have more news value than others. Galtung and Ruge (1965) propose that the more news values a story meets, the more likely it is to make the news, but also that once a story makes the news, its ‘newsworthy’ factors will be emphasised. It can be seen that in the context of mental illness, the selection of stories that fit some of these criteria, and the accentuation of those criteria, could easily produce unrealistic representations, as suggested by McQuail (2013). In the context of mental illness, the selection of stories that fit some of these criteria, and the accentuation of those criteria, could, returning to McQuail’s point about how far the news reflects reality, easily produce sensationalized representations of mental illness and those who live with it.

Gamson (1982) argues that a journalist’s understanding of news values and what is ‘newsworthy’ can lead them to frame issues in a particular way. Framing refers not only to the way in which news content is put together within a familiar frame of reference – in other words, how an individual or issue is represented – but also to the effects on the audience in their adoption of frames in the way they see the world (McQuail 2013). It is based on the assumption that media characterization of issues, people and events can shape and influence audience understanding (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). The process of framing can therefore be seen to open the way to stereotypes and unbalanced or unfair representation (McQuail 2013). This is particularly problematic when considered in the context of mental illness due to the exceptional influence that negative reporting of mental illness can have on public attitudes, beliefs, and stigma (Thornton and Wahl 1996; Philo et al. 1994), and the potentially devastating impact of such stigma. It is believed that some framing devices “may lead audiences into specific interpretations of mental health and mental illness issues” (Blood and Holland 2004 p.327). According to Kitzinger and Reilly (1997) the UK news media play an instrumental role in generating risk concern among the British public, and highlight that “media coverage of risk is selective” (p.320). Blood and Holland (2004) draw attention to a study of Australian print and broadcast media by Blood et al. (2002), which identified that editors and journalists tend to use news frames of violence, deviance, risk and fear to report on mental illness. This means that audiences were likely to take away a heightened sense of risk and fear regarding those with mental illness. They also highlight how in this case, “news stories were about specific and relatively rare circumstances but reports were generalized to all people diagnosed with mental illness” (Blood and Holland 2004, p.327). This leads to the implications of such representations in the news.

As mentioned, media coverage of mental health and illness has been found to shape audience deliberation and understanding to an overwhelming extent. Salter (2003) argues that “the meaning that any individual gives to new ‘facts’ about mental illness depends crucially upon their pre-existing framework of knowledge” (p.123). However,

Philo et al. (1994) identified that while audiences will reject negative presentations of mental illness in many cases based on personal experience, "some media accounts can exert exceptional power over readers" (p.278). In some cases, media messages are even preferred to experience and non-violent experiences of mental illness are overlaid by media representations. Philo et al. (1994) uphold that despite this, the relationship between our beliefs, experience and reception of media messages is complex. What is more certain, is that negative experiences of mental health can be confirmed or developed by negative media messages (Philo et al. 1994), and that the media play some role at least in fuelling stigmatised views of mental health which, in turn, elicits stereotypes.

The stigmatisation of mental illness, including in the news media, presents further issues in itself; most notably that it may act as a barrier to treatment. Schomerus et al. (2009) highlight that despite being highly prevalent, mental illness frequently goes untreated. Although social-cognitive processes are just one of several reasons for individuals not to seek or continue mental health treatment (Corrigan 2004), the fear of public stigma and the harm it brings may deter those who show symptoms of mental illness from seeking help or fully participating in care (Komiti et al. 2006; Barney et al. 2006; Corrigan 2004). Furthermore, if an individual internalises public stigma, the anticipated shame and embarrassment of seeking help may "significantly decrease the readiness to seek psychiatric help" (Schomerus et al. 2009, p.304). In addition, public stigma can even cause problems with obtaining and keeping a job, or leasing property (Wahl 1999), and the criminalisation of mental illness makes sufferers more likely than others to be arrested (Teplin 1984). Altogether, this demonstrates the potentially damaging impact of negative representations of mental illness and the related stigma.

In summary, this review of existing literature has sought to bring together the prevailing ideas and issues with the reporting of mental illness. Ultimately, it can be seen that people with mental illness are generally constructed as being violent and fundamentally different to what is deemed 'normal'. Stories relating to mental illness are often dramatised and sensationalised to make them more newsworthy, in turn giving an inaccurate representation of the realities of mental illness. Additionally, it is clear that the impact of such negative reporting is particularly concerning where mental health is concerned, and that the resulting stigma can have an impact upon the lives of people with mental illness to a distressing extent. However, while the existing research addresses many of the issues with media constructions of mental illness, it lacks consideration for the links between such constructions and journalistic processes. To address this gap, this research analyses recent media representations of people suffering from mental illnesses, by investigating what frames and news values are prominent. In doing so, it aims to explore processes of news selection in relation to mental illness and why these are problematic.

METHODOLOGY

This study analysed a random selection of UK national newspaper articles during the project's duration. A total of 32 articles (every third article from a total population of 92 articles) were taken from a search for all news coverage of mental health and illness in daily newspapers between August and November 2014. This particular time period was selected to include news coverage of actress Amanda Bynes' public struggle with mental illness, the high profile celebrity death of actor Robin Williams by suicide and Mental Health Awareness week. Arguably, these events made for a time period when mental illness was in the spotlight and the events themselves could provide a variety of frames for mental health.

The sample was analysed using content analysis through which multiple factors were investigated. Content analysis was deemed the most appropriate research method for the study because it is useful in producing “empirical data that is generalisable and representative” (Macnamara 2005, p.18). Although the sample was small, it was still representative of the otherwise small population of articles that addressed mental health during the four-month period, and was appropriate for a small-scale research project of this type. Additionally, a more quantitative approach was necessary for the study given the aim to explore representations, framing and newsworthiness to address the lack of existing research on the three areas of focus. In aiming to draw together research on these areas, it was useful to measure the number and frequency of certain factors in the texts, which content analysis allows. As discussed, issues of representation, framing, and newsworthiness are closely intertwined on the topic of mental illness so it was therefore important that the analysis addressed all of these areas.

The coding schedule addressed the research aims by coding for the tone of articles and the representations of those with mental illness as identified in the literature, specifically drawing on Philo et al. 1994, Salter 2003 and Wahl 1997. Second, it identified frames and news values, including those seen in the literature as problematic for stigmatising mental illness and people living with it. Coding for the tone of the articles was important in determining whether articles were considered ‘good news’ or ‘bad news’ (McQuail 2013). The news values were selected from those identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Golding and Elliott (1979). In order to increase the specificity of the analysis to the context of the study, not all of their news values were included, and some were adapted slightly. Some news values were broken down into different parts where they could be seen to apply in different ways within the context of mental illness. For example, based on Golding and Elliott’s (1979) news value of ‘drama’, both ‘conflict and violence’ and ‘drama’ were included in the coding schedule, due to the prevalence of links between mental illness and violence in the media (Philo et al. 1994). In addition to the news value of ‘reference to elite persons’ (Galtung and Ruge 1965), ‘ministerial accountability’ was included in this part of the coding schedule. This was based on a pilot reading of the articles, which seemed to indicate a distinction between political elites and social elites in discussions of mental health.

The frames for coding were formed in conjunction with the selection of the news values since frames and news values are closely linked (Gamson 1982). For example, the frames of ‘failures of government’ and ‘success of government’ were included as two varying ways that ‘ministerial accountability’ might be framed. Others were an interpretation of how the selected news values might apply to mental illness. For example, a story framing mental illness as ‘comedy’ might result in its selection for reporting based on Golding and Elliott’s (1979) news value of entertainment. Additionally, the inclusion of the frames ‘crisis’ and ‘public risk’ was based on the observation of Blood et al. (2002) that risk and fear were commonly used frames for stories relating to mental illness. The inclusion of “other” options in the coding schedule allowed for the identification of additional factors, representations, frames and other news values, where present that were not otherwise identified in previous research or the pilot reading of the sample.

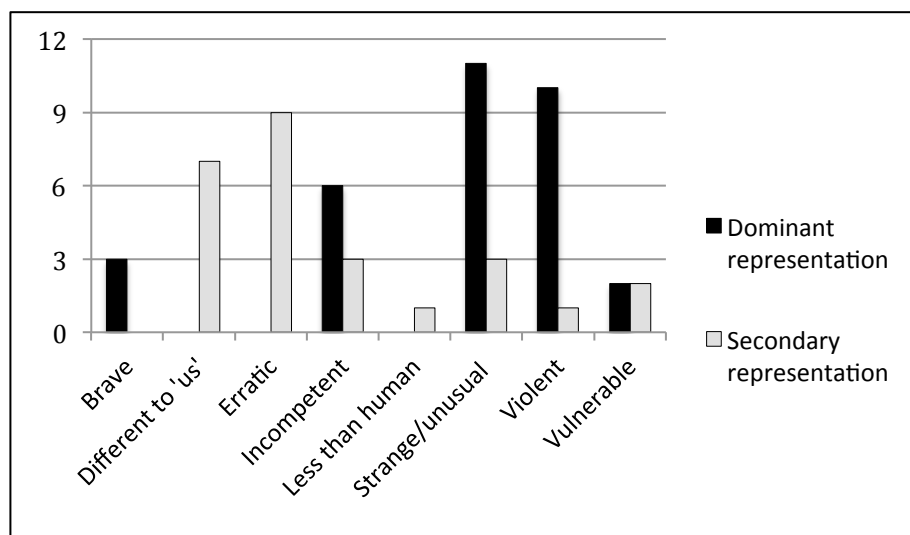
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

On the whole, the news coverage of mental illness during the study period demonstrated a narrow and negative view of mental illness. At the most basic level, an overwhelming majority of articles – 21 out of the 32 – were identified as being negative in their tone, which suggests that mental illness is broadly treated as ‘bad news’ (McQuail 2013). This is furthered by the presence of ‘negativity’ as the most prominent news value in just over

half of the articles. Only six articles were identified as positive in their tone, all of which were in the context of celebrities or the praising of legislation, or in one case, of the newspaper itself. This seems to suggest that mental health-related stories can only be presented positively within certain parameters, which will be discussed in more detail below. Additionally, events were framed in terms of the ‘negative outcomes’ of mental illness in 13 of the articles, addressing topics such as murder, suicide and poor quality of life. This can be seen to promote a negative conception of mental illness within society and may in turn increase both public stigma and self-stigma as Philo et al. (1994) suggest.

All of the articles in the sample were found to have some form of problematic representation and stereotyping of individuals with mental illness, and one or more of the negative representations identified in the literature were found in every article. Figure 1 below identifies the most frequently identified representations, including both dominant and secondary representations, and some of the more concerning in terms of stigma were found to be the most common ways of representing individuals with mental illness. Representation of those with mental illness as ‘violent’, ‘strange/unusual’, ‘erratic’, and ‘different or ‘other’ were all present in a significant proportion of the articles. These findings reflect the literature review that suggests that those with mental illness are often presented as being “fundamentally different” (Wahl 1997, p.43), and that links are often forged between mental illness and violence (Philo et al. 1994). This additionally confirms the relevance of these studies today. Links between mental illness and violence were furthered by the identification of ‘conflict and violence’ as a common news value and frames of ‘disorder and violence’ in a large proportion of coverage. So, despite twenty or more years since the publication of these studies, we continue to see these negative representations as the most common way of reporting about people with mental health problems.

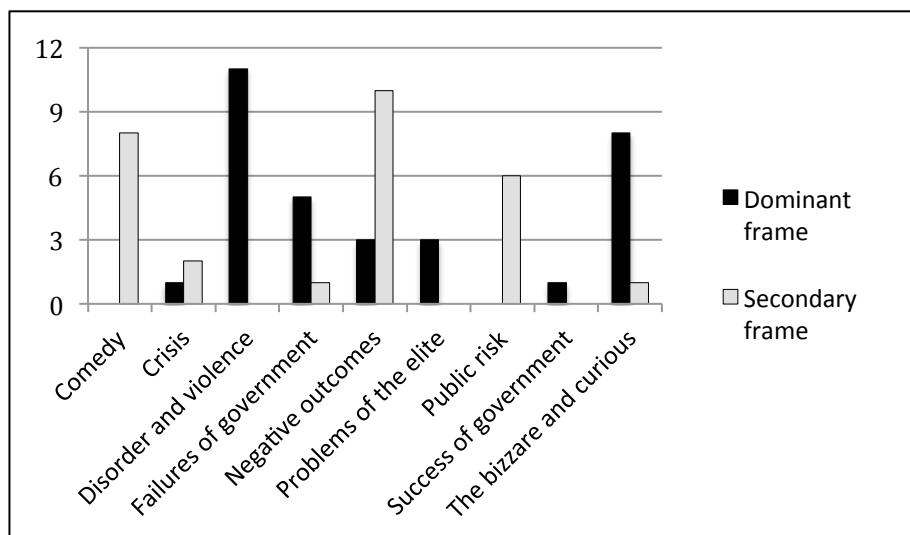
Figure 1: Identified Representations of Those with Mental Illness.



Representations of those with mental illness as strong or brave were only present in three cases, when those individuals were celebrities or war veterans. While Philo et al. (1994) identified that sympathetic coverage was lacking in terms of mental illness, findings from this research suggest that only a certain type of person is seen to warrant this type of coverage. Further research could explore this in greater depth. More broadly, a quarter of all articles made some references to elite persons, which demonstrates that the topic of mental illness is more likely to receive any form of news coverage when it involves people

within the social and political elite. The frequent representation of those with mental illness as ‘incompetent’ in over a quarter of the articles indicates that attempts by journalists to be sympathetic in their treatment of mental illness falls short, thereby potentially further stigmatising people with mental illness. As such, this finding suggests the existing sympathetic coverage may be flawed and falls in line with the findings of Philo et al. (1994): that coverage offers a restricted view of those with mental illness as “helpless victims” (p.279) who cannot lead independent lives. The prevalence of the news value of ‘strong human interest’, found in seven of the articles, is in some ways encouraging. Emotional discussion of people alongside mental illness may be seen to humanise the topic, although generally the findings support Salter’s (2003) findings that coverage tends toward “dehumanisation, inaccuracy and sensationalism” (p.123). Moving on to the framing of mental illness (see Figure 2 below), perhaps the most concerning frame is that of ‘comedy’, which was found to be present in quarter of articles. Although only identified as being present as a secondary frame, this is still problematic. It confirms that editors and journalists often see mental illness as newsworthy in terms of its entertainment value, and that it is open to being mocked by the public. Together with the frequent framing of mental illness as ‘the bizarre and curious’ or ‘out of the ‘ordinary’, this enhances an image of those with mental illness as peculiar and different to ‘normal’ people, to the extent where mocking or laughing at the ‘unusual’ behaviour of those with mental illness is acceptable.

Figure 2: Identified Dominant and Secondary Media Frames.



As the chart above indicates, a significant number of articles were framed as being ‘public risk’, or held a ‘sense of growing public risk’ as a news value. The potential for the media to stimulate public concern about a particular risk (Kitzinger and Reilly 1997) makes this link with mental illness all the more concerning in terms of stigma. It is also particularly interesting when paired with nearly half of the articles holding ‘ministerial accountability’ as a news value. Some articles may be framed to suggest that the government are not doing enough to protect the public from certain ‘risks’, but qualitative analysis would be needed here to explore further whether coverage suggests that the government are not doing enough to support and treat those with mental illness effectively, or to keep the public ‘safe’ from those *with* mental illness.

CONCLUSIONS

Altogether, this period of heightened media coverage of mental health has been a missed opportunity to publicly open discussion about mental health in a meaningful way and may instead further enforce negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of mental illness. The news coverage demonstrates that mental illness is only newsworthy in limited and often negative circumstances. Furthermore, the representations of those with mental illness were considerably inaccurate, and produced extreme generalisations and stereotypes based on rare circumstances.

The existing media coverage of mental illness seems to serve as an entertainment to the public, for example by mocking unusual behaviour or frequently covering rare but dramatic events. It fails to offer a diversity of frames for understanding mental illness or a diversity of representations of people with mental illness, therefore not sufficiently informing the public on or about mental health and illness. The frames and news values used have not been selected out of accuracy or objectivity, but instead in line with what is deemed most newsworthy. Ultimately, stories related to mental illness received coverage for the wrong reasons, as 'newsworthy' mental illness involves violence, risk, negativity and sensationalism. This study was limited in its scope and size, but offers a useful starting point for further research, including a qualitative exploration of individual frames and news values in order to gain a greater understanding of the underlying issues. In particular, future research could elaborate on the findings here and explore in more detail frames for mental illness around comedy, public risk, and ministerial accountability. Similarly, this study has indicated that there may be deeper issues to be explored in terms of how discourses about mental health are different depending on the individuals involved, which a qualitative study could expand upon. However, analyses of the texts would also benefit from exploration through audience studies, as Neuendorf (2002) points out that text-based studies do not allow analysts to make inferences about audience interpretations. That said, however, content studies such as this draw attention to the texts themselves as important cultural and social artifacts and identify the prevalence of certain characteristics – in this case news values, frames and representations of mental illness – that are present within these texts. In summary, this study found news coverage of mental health and illness has not improved significantly in the last 20 years and, as Philo et al. (1994) suggest, fundamental changes are *still* needed within news coverage of mental illness – “journalists and broadcasters need to be made aware that inaccurate reporting and stereotyped portrayals are unacceptable” (p.280), as this in turn may contribute to an inaccurate understanding of mental health and illness among the public, with troubling implications for stigmatised individuals.

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