

Media Influence on Public Perception of Mental Illness

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Introduction

- I began to wonder about public perception of mental health ... Sandy Hook shootings—December, 2013.
- I wondered how different ways of reporting on these sort of events could influence public perception of mental illness.

Ways Communication Affect Us

“Words and images have power. They have the power to hurt or soothe, to honor or insult, to inform or misinform. Words reflect and shape prevailing attitudes, attitudes that in turn shape social behavior.”

Media Messages are Powerful...

“The mass media’s power to impact public perception, and the degree to which people are exposed to media representations, makes the mass media one of the most significant influences in developed societies.”

Some Statistics...

- The average American watches 4 hours of TV each day
- 1.36 billion movie tickets are sold annually
- 1.71 million DVDs were rented and over one billion were sold in 2007
- The average internet user spends 61 hours per month using the internet/online

Ways the Public Learns about Mental Illness

- Research has concluded that the media is the public's most significant source of information about mental illness
- One study found that media representations of mental illness are so powerful that they can override people's own personal experiences in relation to how they view mental illness

Media Representation of Individuals with MI

A Study of Prime Television Programming Showed:

- People depicted with mental illness were 10 times more likely to be shown as a violent criminal than non-mentally disordered television characters
- Dangerousness-- the most common theme of newspaper stories related to mental illness
- Mental health issues are depicted as public safety issue

Biased and Inaccurate Reporting

- Result-- stigmatization of people with mental illnesses
- Stigma in relation to people with mental illness is often a combination of (a) lack of relevant knowledge (ignorance), attitudes (prejudice), and behavior (discrimination).

Research Shows...

- Individuals with mental illness (specifically those with 2 distinct kinds of psychosis) are *only slightly more likely* to commit a violent crime than people who don't have a mental illness.
- People with a mental illness are 2.5 times more likely to be the *victims* of a violent crime rather than/opposed to *committing* one.

More on Media Representation...

- People with mental illness are--portrayed as unemployed, homeless, without family or friends, roots, or respectable social history.
- Representing people with mental illness this way-- supports a depiction of people with mental illness as subhuman /unworthy.

Ways We Learn about Mental Illness through the Media

T.V. News 51%

T.V. Talk Shows 31%

T.V. News Magazine Shows 70%

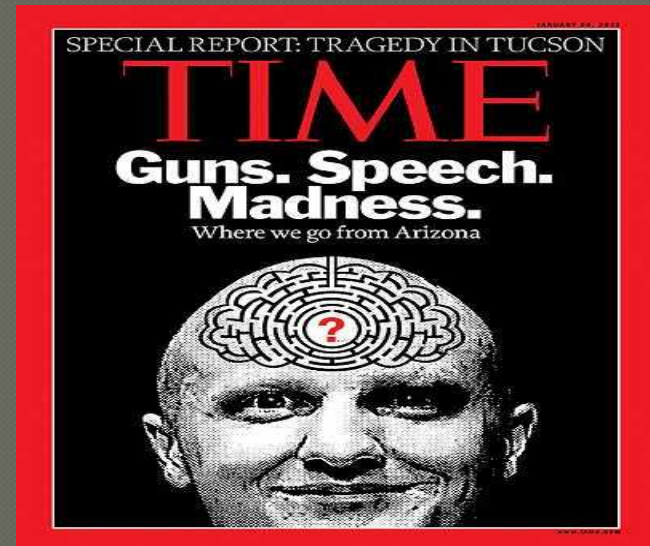
“Stigma Matters: Assessing the Media’s Impact on Public Perceptions of Mental Illness” [National Mental Health Association, 1997]

The Effects ...

- Overall intolerance/oppression
- Influences civic action/voter decisions
- Legislative POVs
- Stigma within the healthcare system
- Delay/s in treatment
- Difficulties obtaining adequate employment and housing

Overemphasis in Reporting

- Mental health conditions— often “headlined” and overemphasized
- Ghastly / fear provoking images are often used



Rhetoric used in print and visual reporting often uses language that encourages negative stereotyping of people with mental illness.



DAILY NEWS

**GET THE
VIOLENT
CRAZIES
OFF OUR
STREETS**

**TEXAS
CAMPUS
TRAGEDY
KILLS 11**

**GREAT
NEW YORK
EATS THAT
FIT
THE BILL**

A Well Respected Reporter Propagates Stigma...



Where Brian Williams Went Wrong..

- *Use of sensationalism*-- defining the perpetrator as “the face of mental illness.” Associated the man’s crime as one expected from an individual diagnosed with (a) mental illness...
- *Unfair association*--describing the individual as “the face of mental illness” encourages the close association of the state of having a mental illness with (that of) being “a monster.”
- *Use of shocking language* --“the man described as a monster.” Williams neglected to delineate *who* may have described the individual as “a monster.” (...a reputable source/a non-reputable source.../*who* exactly?)

A Direct Link with Crime and Incarceration: Portrayal as a Public Danger



Where these Reporters Went Wrong

- *Association with global assumption (of) “dangerousness”*
→ “They could be your neighbors”
- *Direct association to potential for violence* → citizens’ opposition to gun control / freedom to bear arms
- *Prorogating fear*– individuals with mental illness(es) are: → designated as “the sorts of people” the public must protect themselves *from* and *against*

Conclusion

The media should be held responsible for consistently engaging in fair reporting practices

The *AP Stylebook on Media Law* provides standards for responsible reporting on stories

New additions to the *AP Stylebook on Media Law* in 2013:

- Do not report using hearsay
- Verify facts
- Do not associate the specific situation with mental health/illness without verifiable cause