

## 5. Best Practices

It is estimated that 13 to 14 million adults over 18 suffer from one major depressive episode each year. This figure represents almost 7% of all adults living in the United States. Among those who suffer from a major depressive disorder, the risk of suicide is greater. As one study recently reported, of all completed suicides, one half to two-thirds are by people who have suffered from mood disorders. [1]

Lin is a 25 year old who just landed her first journalism job working for a local TV news organization in Detroit. She knows something about major depression. Her favorite cousin Deshi suffered for years. She watched his personal battle with it. Deshi died by suicide a few years ago.

So when Lin was asked to do a follow-up story summarizing everything that was known about the death of actor and comedian Robin Williams, she was unsure what to do. She had read and seen the media coverage after the news of his death. She knew that much of it did not follow the best practices reporting guidelines for covering suicide. These guidelines had been developed by the leading worldwide institutions knowledgeable about the issue of suicide.

Among the recommendations of what to avoid are: (1) sensational headlines and stories; (2) explicit descriptions of the suicide method; (3) speculations on the reasons for the suicide, including those which made it sound as if it was caused by one event in a person's life.

Lin wrote her story following these guidelines. At the same time, she focused on the fact that suicides are a public health issue, and further emphasized that suicides almost always have complex and multiple causes. Lin believed her story could be used to educate others; in addition to outlining current local and national resources for treatment options, she included a list of warning signs of suicide along with a list of emergency lifeline numbers.

She looked forward to talking with her boss about getting possible interviews with psychiatrists and mental health experts working on major depression. She was also interested in talking with experts whose work on copycat suicides, had shown that the publication of celebrity suicide methods resulted in more suicides. [2]

When they met, however, her boss told her that her story would “bore the viewers to death”—and that no one watching local news would be interested in either the copycat

suicide statistics or the public health aspects of the Robin Williams story. Before she ended the meeting, her boss said, “There are best practices. And there are real practices. The earlier you learn that what is said about local news is actually true — ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ — the more stories you will get produced.”

[1] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12813115>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25559346>

[2] <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165032712006015>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24355649>

### **Study Questions:**

1. Do journalists have a duty to ensure that the information they provide to their readership will conduce to the public good? Or do they have a duty merely to give the public whatever kind of story they want?
2. Are journalists morally permitted to lie to the public for the sake of a good story? Are they permitted to present the truth in a misleading way for the sake of an exciting story?
3. Should Lin change her story in response to her boss’s comments? If so, in what ways?