



Presentation of psychiatric illnesses in mass media: a review

Dr. Iftikar Hussain¹, Dr. Sujata Borkakoty²

^{1,2} 3rd Year PGT, Department of Psychiatry, LGB Regional Institute of Mental Health, Tezpur, Assam, India

Abstract

The term media is an extensive term comprising of various means of mass communication including newspapers, radio, television, internet and other modalities which convey information to the masses. Over the years, the role of media in our lives has grown by leaps and bounds and it is now a part and parcel of our everyday living. Penetrating to almost every strata of society, media is influential in shaping our opinions and constructing concepts around critical themes like mental illness. While media acts like a two edged sword with regards to mental health, often contorting information and misrepresenting facts, it can serve as the platform via which people can be made aware of the various myths encompassing this issue and help break the age old stigma surrounding psychiatric disorders. If only media reporting is done in an unambiguous manner, providing accurate information to public without sensationalising the cases, it can make a huge difference in the lives of people and have them seek help from mental health professionals readily.

Keywords: media, mental illness, stigma

Introduction

“The first casualty when war comes is truth”- this quote by U.S Senator Hiram Warren has relevance to mental health issues and to psychiatry as a profession. Mental illnesses, their managements and those who deliver them are all exposed to massive criticisms and false representations in the print and electronic media. We have a tendency to understand reality in terms of our own expertise that's influenced and altered by primary teams (Family and Friends); secondary teams (School, non-secular establishments, and government), and mass media. Media offers helpful general data and resources, that can't be denied however it additionally can't be unmarked that constant media is prime in shaping our opinions on important issues like mental illnesses. Often the distorting image of psychiatry sketched close to the general public with a read to sensationalise the matter results in far reaching negative consequences. It creates a perturbing image within the minds of individuals which regularly refrains them from seeking help. The cardinal distinction between the media and psychiatric profession lies within the stress of kind instead of the content.

Media and society

The term media is an umbrella term embodying the main means of mass communication which may be within the variety of net, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, newsletters and numerous kinds of medium. The first aim of the media is communication, with the goal of training, informing and amusing the audience. Media acts like a mirror to the society influencing the perception and behaviour of individuals. Society these days values media as an integral part of reality and a major tool for obtaining knowledge. The impact of mass media is widening because it is currently a pervasive and permanent fixture of our lives. The massive role of media in breaking down

misconceptions and myths about homosexuality, leprosy, and HIV/AIDS is commendable. It is hoped that it can do the same for psychiatric disorders and facilitate society break free from the shackles of stigma.

Stigma and mental illness

Stigma is an in depth term that embraces the negative and stereotyped thoughts that people hold, carrying attitudes and feelings based on the traits of someone, which may embody gender, colour, sexual orientation, faith and mental disease. Stigma is often used as a negative ticket to identify people with mental health problems. A subtle sign is believing the many ravaging myths about mental illness, such as the idea that people with mental illness are violent or dangerous. Such opinions are perpetuated to the masses through the negative portrayals in media and it solely cements their stigma and makes this subject a taboo to discuss.

Media and stigma of mental illness

The media contributes to mental illness stigma through the magnified, imprecise, and comical images they use to depict persons with psychiatric disorders as well as providing incorrect information about mental illness. In the absence of real experience with people with mental illness, individuals rely on the media for their knowledge and perceptions of those who have mental illnesses. Unfortunately, the media has time and again characterised persons with mental illness as violent, murderous, unpredictable which are gross exaggerations and concealment of reality. National Mental Health Association in the United States published a study titled “Stigma Matters: Assessing the Media’s Impact on Public Perceptions of Mental Illness which found that television and news magazine contributes around 70% of

information gathered by general public. This is followed by newspaper and TV news, both contributing independently around 50% to the information which the people assemble about mental health.

Media portrayal of mental illness

Media is a two edged sword when it comes to bringing information to public. While it can tamper with facts and contort the reality, it can quite be a blessing processing information the right way and facilitating awareness. How mental illness is projected to the masses is debatable and many questions have cropped up in this regard. But more often than not there has been distortion of concepts which has been summarised under four broad headings Biased images and contorted reporting News reports often are sensationalized together with dramatic descriptions of violent attacks and murders committed on purpose by persons with psychiatric disorders.

Gender discrimination

Men are overrepresented as having serious psychopathy like psychoses, personality disorders, and childhood issues. In distinction, ladies are over-represented with issues and models of sexual pathology and dysfunction.

Misrepresentation of mental health facilities

As portrayed in the movies, mental health establishments are neither creepy places nor the professionals who deal with them are weird people. Often the patients are shown as violent harmful individuals and that is the only knowledge that most people harbour about psychosis in general.

False insight into origins and treatments of mental illness

People still hold the belief that mental illnesses are due to external agencies such as black magic. This myth is so deeply rooted in our culture; it is not surprising that faith healers are often the first contact in majority of the cases. Mental professionals are approached as a rescue resort when nothing heals the patient. This idea is time and again reinforced via the television shows and news channels igniting these misconceptions and fuelling the stigma. Treatment modalities like electroconvulsive therapy are usually misrepresented as an inhumane procedure bombarded on the patients, while in reality the scene is very different

How media can play with the child's mind

Detrimental effects of Media on child's mind are attributable to factors such as immaturity (concrete thinking) and inability of the child to differentiate fantasy from reality, significantly when programs are related to "real life" situations. The violence depicted in the shows leave a deep impact on the child mind and many try to act them out unaware of the consequences that lie ahead. At times, television absorbs children to a far greater extent leading to social isolation; hindering the personality development and the learning process.

Can media affect suicide rates

There is proof to suggest that exact mode of reportage and portrayal of suicide within the mass media might end in enlarged rates of suicide in vulnerable individuals. The impact of media on suicidal behaviour seems most likely when a method of suicide is

specified, particularly once given very well in details, once the story is depicted dramatically and conspicuously (such as showing pictures of the deceased or massive headlines) and once suicides of celebrities are reported. Great sensitivity is called for when the survivors of the deceased are interviewed as they are already in a shattered state. Publishing photographs of the deceased or the surviving relatives should be desisted as it could greatly hurt them.

With suitable alterations in the reporting and portrayal of suicide, the media can bring down rates of suicide and aid in suicide prevention as was demonstrated by the Vienna experiment where modifications in media reporting resulted in an exceedingly greater than 80% reduction in the number of subway suicides and suicide-attempts. This protective media effect are termed the Papageno effect, as against the harmful Werther effect.

Based on analysis expertise, variety of guidelines on media reporting is developed. While reporting suicide, media has to avoid drawing conclusions supported by very little evidence and catchy, captivating but imprecise expressions like "epidemic of farmer suicide" or "suicide capital of the world" are not to be used. In medium, the news shouldn't appear on the front page with massive font headline and not mention suicide. The tactic too shouldn't be introduced within the headline like "suicide by hanging".

Celebrity suicide

While reporting celebrity suicides it has to be borne in mind to not glorify or sensationalise the news as it greatly affects the people who follow them. The reporting should be cautious and factual with history of relevant information clearly stated if present, like a history of psychiatric disorder or substance abuse

1. WHO guidelines on reporting a suicide are as follows-
 1. Statistics should be interpreted carefully and correctly;
 2. Authentic and reliable sources should be used;
 3. Impromptu comments should be handled carefully in spite of time pressures;
 4. Generalizations based on small figures require particular attention, and expressions such as "suicide epidemic" or "the place with the highest suicide rate in the world" should be avoided;
 5. Reporting suicidal behaviour as an understandable response to social or cultural changes or degradation should be resisted.

Media Influences on Substance Use

Media can play a key role in the initiation and accentuation of substance use. Analysis has disclosed that advertising is also liable for up to 30% of adolescent tobacco and alcohol use. Exposure to tobacco marketing and advertising increases the smoking initiation rates in teenagers by more than two-fold. Advertisements and promotion of cigarettes are increasing in developing countries like India due to a sharp decline in sales in Western countries, and pose as a significant concern.

Responsible media and unbiased reporting

Responsible media reports about mental illness are fact-based, unambiguous and balanced. They help the community in understanding the experience of mental illness better by including the perspective of people with mental illness, carers, and mental

health workers and encourage help-seeking behaviour. It has the potential to refine the concepts surrounding mental illness and offers hope to individuals who are suffering from the same. Giving accurate information about psychiatric disorders also encourages people to seek help from professionals and realize that there is nothing wrong in suffering from a mental illness or going to see a mental health professional.

Conventional Media

Media has been the cornerstone of the previous action within the field of mental health awareness. Celebrity endorsements, just like the recent one by actress Deepika Padukone who shared her experience of depression, together with compact tag-lines of advertisements and content-rich narrations and documentaries; are the mainstay of media drives up to now

Newspapers-Many people browse local newspapers. It offers an opportunity for regular communication and brings people in contact with the external world

Majority of the health stories comprise of the following 4 categories:

- Scare story (e.g. Flesh-eating bug discovered),
- Cure story (such as, 'magic drug to cure AIDS'),
- Money story (such as 'Aarogyashree being withdrawn') and finally
- The human-interest story (such as 'my life with HIV infection')

Local radio-Psychiatrists can express their ideas and opinions on radio and if used effectively, this platform with its tremendous reach can guide people towards the direction of appropriate treatment and also provide significant room for meaningful psycho-education.

Movies-There are movies which do not discriminate, which actually humanises mental illness but often it creates confusion and weakens the clarity regarding the fine line separating psychological state from psychopathy. Modern film makers and show technicians typically glorify the material and fail to instil the facts, camouflaging the reality of mental illness. As one of the foremost and potent, substantial form of mass communication, film exercises an awfully vital influence upon the perceptions and opinions of the audience, particularly in reference to mental illness.

Television- Popular television dramas have the scope to make it to many more people than any other form of media. As television shows are held in high regards by the masses and it is so critical in influencing people, this modality has immense potential to expand the context within which mental illness could be understood.

Internet- The internet helps a mental health professional and their patients in following ways:

- i) As a supply of knowledge on unwellness,
- ii) Helps realize support and find self-help groups,
- iii) For recommendations, diagnosis, and counselling

How internet can revolutionise thinking and make people familiar with the various dimensions of mental health is limitless and

inestimable. Making evidence-based mental health information easily available through trusted and reliable sources like Indian Psychiatry Society, research organizations, medical colleges, etc., through their websites is an important step towards mental health awareness. Social media is another platform which can be used in the propagation of knowledge and information concerning mental health. Targeting the youth in particular, social media can upgrade their thoughts on mental issues and also help steer clear of the misconceptions.

Conclusion

Mass media has the distinctive ability to alter perceptions and sway opinions of enormous range of individuals. With such monumental impact on the people and penetration to every stratum of society, the media is fundamental in forming our concepts and understanding of various sensitive issues and events. The frequently negative and inaccurate depictions of mental health issues in general and persons with psychiatric disorders in particular, strengthen the stigma and fuel the many myths concerning mental illness.

Media has the potential to break the stigmas which people carry about mental health; if only it reaches out to the masses and addresses these concerns in the right unbiased manner. Responsible reporting has to be emphasised on and rather than glorifying the news, attempts should be made to convey the right messages to the people and not discriminate persons with mental illness.

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