

# The coverage of psychiatry in the Irish print media

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The frequency and content of articles of psychiatric interest in the Irish print media were investigated. Issues of psychiatric interest were commonly featured. Contrary to popular opinion most articles are either supportive or neutral in tone. Where negative imagery occurred it was more frequently associated with articles in the tabloid papers. Mental health professionals, in particular psychiatrists, contributed very little towards articles of psychiatric interest (especially in the tabloid press) and need to become more actively involved in shaping the portrayal of mental illness in the print media. Their involvement is associated with a more positive portrayal of psychiatry.

The portrayal of psychiatry and psychiatric illness in the media has become an issue of increasing concern in the last decade. The first concentrated study conducted by Nunally in 1961 indicated an essentially negative portrayal of the mentally ill in the media. More recent studies (Matas *et al*, 1986; Day & Page, 1986) indicate that little has changed in the ensuing period and if anything suggest that the media image of psychiatry may have deteriorated. The reflection of psychiatry in the print media is a source of particular interest since there is evidence that media information correlates with public opinion (Gardner & Radel, 1978; Wahl & Roth, 1982) and that the print media is a greater source of health-related information than its broadcast counterpart (McCall & Stocking, 1982). As such it seems likely that media portrayal contributes to the stigmatisation of the mentally ill and may have implications for resource allocation. Perhaps most disturbing of all is the recent observation that media influences can negatively alter the opinions of members of the public who have had positive first-hand experience of the mentally ill (Philo, 1994). Concern regarding the negative portrayal of mental illness has provoked the circulation of a petition on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists calling for a major debate to address the widespread use of persistently

inaccurate images of psychiatric illness in the media.

## The study

We examined the Irish daily tabloid and broadsheet and Sunday tabloid and broadsheet newspapers of highest circulation between July and December 1993. All articles which contained a reference to issues of psychiatric interest were identified. Each article was then assessed with regard to its page profile, article type, author, top covered and predominant tone. Predominant tone was assessed in a similar manner to that described by Day & Page (1986), by coding statements as positive, negative or neutral. Negative statements were further coded as judgemental, critical or sensational by a consensus agreement.

## Findings

Three hundred and eighty articles containing references to psychiatric issues were identified. This represented an average of 1.04 articles per newspaper per day. Articles were more frequently identified in the broadsheet (59.4%) than in the tabloid newspapers (40.6%). Only 6% ( $n=23$ ) of the articles were featured on the front page, of which a significantly greater number were from the tabloid newspaper ( $P<0.01$ ). Front page articles frequently focused on forensic psychiatric issues (69.5%). Articles in the tabloid press were significantly more likely to be newsworthy ( $P<0.01$ ) whereas the broadsheets contained a significantly greater number of informative pieces ( $P<0.01$ ).

Mental health professionals (psychiatrists  $n=6$ , psychologists  $n=13$ , psychiatric nurses  $n=2$ ) were the authors of only 5.5% of all the articles, of which a significantly greater number were featured in the broadsheet newspapers ( $P<0.05$ ). The opinion of a

mental health professional was sought in 26.8% ( $n=102$ ) of all articles, and was more frequently sought in the broadsheet paper ( $P<0.05$ ).

The predominant tone of the articles is illustrated in Table 1. Most articles were neutral or supportive in tone (68.9%,  $n=262$ ). Tabloid articles were significantly more likely to be sensational in tone ( $P<0.01$ ). Articles where a psychiatric opinion was sought were significantly less likely to be sensational ( $P<0.05$ ) and more likely to be supportive in tone ( $P<0.01$ ). The topics featured in the articles are illustrated in Table 2. Forensic issues featured frequently (36.8%,  $n=138$ ). There were no other significant patterns in relation to the topics covered or with regard to those where a psychiatric opinion was sought.

### Comment

The studies of Nunally (1961; 1973) indicated that psychiatric issues were infrequently presented in the print media. Our study, along with a recent similar study of the British print media (Scott, 1994) suggest that this is no longer the case, both indicating that articles featuring issues related to mental health are featured in the print media at an average of approximately one article per day. If

presented in a negative, pejorative light, this increased attention, rather than improving the accuracy of the public's perception of mental health issues, can further promote ignorance, fear and stigmatisation. Recent studies suggest that this in fact is the case (Philo *et al.*, 1993). Indeed a recent straw poll of attenders at an accident and emergency service revealed that none knew the difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist, only 50% thought that psychiatrists were medically trained and perhaps most worrying was the finding that 85% thought that Paul McKenna, the stage hypnotist, was a psychiatrist (McKenzie, 1994).

Our findings concur with those of Scott (1994) in the finding that articles of psychiatric interest rarely receive front page coverage, except when they involve forensic issues. Perhaps not surprisingly other studies (Day & Page, 1986) have found that front page articles are especially likely to be sensational in tone and to include a greater number of negative statements. The finding that newspiece articles are more frequently featured in the tabloid newspapers and that informative articles are more frequently featured in broadsheet newspapers has been noted previously (Barnes & Earnshaw, 1993; Scott, 1994) and is almost certainly related to the relative frequency with which mental health professionals contribute either as authors or as expert opinions to these papers.

The majority of articles in our study portrayed issues of psychiatric concern in a neutral or supportive tone. This finding conflicts with numerous studies from other countries which have indicated that reporting on psychiatric issues is persistently inaccurate and predominantly negative. When it occurred, sensational tone was significantly more common in the tabloid papers; a finding similar to that of a recent British study (Barnes & Earnshaw, 1993) which found that portrayal in tabloid papers was "almost exclusively negative with no positive images at all".

Mental health professionals contributed very few articles of which almost none were featured in the tabloid papers. This reluctance to become involved with the tabloid press has previously been commented on (Casey, 1994) and may be related to the relatively superficial nature of comment in this area of the press. The finding that sensationalistic and negative portrayal of mental health issues is particularly widespread in these papers indicates that this is an area which warrants special efforts by mental health professionals if the prevailing attitudes towards

Table 1. The predominant tone of articles

	Tabloid ( $n=154$ )	Broadsheet ( $n=226$ )
Supportive	25%	20%
Factual	34%	56%
Sensational	37%	10%
Judgemental	4%	14%

Table 2. Psychiatric issues featured

	Tabloid ( $n=154$ )	Broadsheet ( $n=226$ )
Suicide/parasuicide	23%	27%
Violence/dangerousness	26%	24%
Substance/alcohol abuse	6%	4%
Schizophrenia/psychoses	13%	22%
Affective disorder	12%	8%
Anxiety/stress related	1%	6%
Eating disorders	6%	4%
OCD	0.5%	2%
Personality disorder	10%	3%
Other	3%	0.5%

OCD=obsessive-compulsive disorder

mental health within society are to change for the better. Contributing only to the relatively safe areas of the print media can be likened to preaching to the converted.

The opinion of a mental health professional was sought in almost a third of cases and was associated with a more positive portrayal overall. While this may reflect the fact that mental health professionals may be asked to contribute their opinions to articles which are more positive, it does nevertheless emphasize the value of their involvement. The tendency for these opinions to emanate from persons other than psychiatrists has been noted (Scott, 1994) and suggests that if psychiatrists do not make themselves available for comment, other often less qualified individuals (as diverse as hypnotists and chiropractors) will offer their 'expert' opinions.

The findings of this and other studies clearly indicate that mental health professionals, especially psychiatrists, need to become more involved with the media. Studies indicate that media reporters are no more negative in attitude than other groups such as medical out-patients or psychiatric patients themselves (Matas *et al.*, 1985). Clearly there is room for greater liaison between psychiatrists and reporters. Such associations have been useful, for example, in limiting the contagion effect of publicity surrounding suicides (Pell & Watters, 1982). One simple method of improving the accuracy of the content of articles of psychiatric interest is for psychiatrists to give reporters access to written material (Scott, 1994). In addition, psychiatrists can increase their confidence in dealing with the media by improving their media skills at workshops such as that recently described by Shooter & Williams (1994). In conclusion, psychiatrists have in the recent past, in order to serve the needs of our patients, become increasingly involved in administrative areas. Similarly we as a profession also need to take a more active role in shaping the way our speciality is portrayed in the media.

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