

Case study 8

ACA and the unfortunate suicide

After receiving a complaint about a Sydney electrical repair shop, Nine's *A Current Affair* decided to test the claim by sending its own equipment to the shop. It had an expert damage two CD players, an amplifier, and a video recorder. After they were returned from the repair shop, they were checked again by the expert and *ACA* said it had been overcharged on each item. Reporter Jane Hansen confronted the owner of the shop, Benny Mendoza, accusing him of overcharging and in one case of not doing any work at all on the item. The story alleging overcharging went to air on Monday 18 August 1997. On Thursday 21 August, Mr Mendoza, a father of two, hanged himself in his garage. *A Current Affair* host Ray Martin read a prepared statement at the end of the following night's program in which he extended deepest sympathies to the family. That weekend's edition of the *Sun Herald* filled its front page with the story of 'TV Reporter's Pain over Suicide' (Hannan & Crittle 1997). The main page one headline read 'Sorry Will Not Bring Him Back' (Dasey 1997). Hansen was reported as saying she wished she'd never done the story, but stopped short of saying she was sorry. Mr Mendoza's relatives were quoted as demanding to know what right *A Current Affair* had to be 'judge, jury and executioner'. The reporter said the repairman gave no hint he was suicidal during her dealings with him. *ACA* executive producer at the time, David Hurley, was quoted as saying: 'In the end, when all is said and done, no story is worth a death.'

Issues and questions raised by case study 8

- 1 Petty crooks are popular fare on TV current affairs programs. If they 'diddle' the public, don't they deserve to be exposed on national television?
- 2 The repairman in question may have not done all the repairs he charged for, but did he deserve to be 'outed' on a high-rating national program seen around the country?
- 3 As the family asked, who voted *ACA* judge, jury, and executioner?

4 How could the reporter (and the program's producers) possibly know that the story would have such an affect on Mr Mendoza that he would take his life?

5 Mr Mendoza had come to Australia from the Philippines 13 years before. Should the reporter have made enquiries about his cultural heritage?

6 The reporter probably knew that her story would ruin his business. Should she have thought through the ramifications more?

7 Do you think the average current affairs reporter (or news reporter for that matter) thinks about the ramifications of their stories *before* they air them?

8 What do you know about the cultures of other countries in relation to matters of public esteem and shame?

Bibliography:

Dasey, Daniel. 1997. 'Sorry Will Not Bring Him Back.' *The Sun-Herald*, 24 August, 1.

Hannan, Liz & Simon Crittle. 1997. 'Why Did Angel Die?' *The Sun-Herald*, 24 August, 3.