

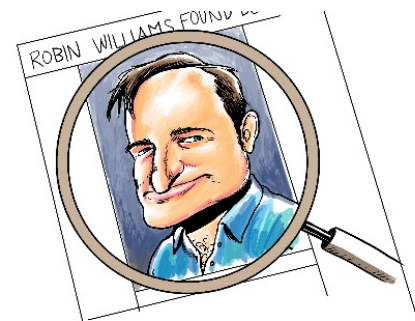
## ***Reporting on Robin Williams***

When actor Robin Williams took his life in August of 2014, major news organizations covered the story in great detail. Most major news outlets reported on Marin County Sheriff's Lt. Keith Boyd's press conference, which revealed graphic details from the coroner's report about the methods Williams used. While there was great interest on the part of the public in finding out what happened, many argued that reporting too much detail about the suicide violated the family's privacy.

Indeed, many of Robin Williams's fans posted on Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks to express their objections to the media treatment of the suicide, urging reporters to respect the family's right to grieve in peace. Several members of the mental health community also took issue with the detailed reports. Paul Farmer, chief executive of the mental health charity [Mind](#), wrote to CNN that "When a media report describes clear details of unusual methods of suicide and essentially gives a "how to" guide—the danger is it can make suicide seem like a more accessible action to take." Some journalists expressed similar viewpoints, criticizing the reports as a clear violation of media ethics. According to the Press Complaints Commission, "When reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used."

Yet other journalists argued that the primary responsibility of the media was to report the story truthfully and factually. In an op-ed in the *LA Times*, Andrew Klavan wrote, "The manner of Williams' death is public information. Journalists should report it as long as it remains of interest to the public. It is not a journalist's job to protect us from the ugly facts." Klavan argued that the journalist's duty is not to do good or be wise, but to report the whole story, which may in fact be a part of a larger story unfolding elsewhere. Sheriff Boyd similarly defended his own actions by stating that he had a duty to report the details as part of the public record.

In an interview with *Today*, Williams's daughter Zelda discussed how her father never sought to hide his problems, mentioning his openness about struggling with alcoholism. She stated, "I think that one of the things that is changing, that is wonderful, is that people are finally starting to approach talking about illnesses that people can't immediately see...He didn't like people feeling like the things that were hard for them they should go through alone."



**Discussion Questions:**

1. According to the video, systematic moral analysis (SMA) first requires identifying the problems in a situation. In this case, who was harmed and how? You may reference the list of moral rules in the transcript of the narration below.
2. The second step of SMA requires asking who is responsible. Is Sheriff Boyd responsible? The journalists? Anyone else? How do their role-related responsibilities relate to the harm caused?
3. Third in the process of SMA is to consider whether or not the action can be justified. Do you think the role-related responsibilities of Sheriff Boyd or the journalists justified their actions? Why or why not? What alternative ways of reporting Robin Williams's suicide would have caused less harm?
4. Finally, if you had been in the position of Sheriff Boyd or the journalists, what do you think would have been the ethically ideal action to take?
5. Would the journalists have harmed the public by *not* reporting the "whole truth?" In other words, were they ethically required to report the details, as argued by Klavan? Explain your reasoning.
6. Do the media have a responsibility to report suicide differently from other kinds of news? Why or why not? What if it leads to more suicide? What if reporting these details would lead to more awareness for mental illness?
7. When someone becomes a celebrity, do they no longer have the same right to privacy? Why or why not? Are the moral rules different for someone who makes a career in the public eye? Explain.

**Resources:**

What media got wrong on Robin Williams' suicide

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/14/opinion/robin-williams-suicide-media/>

Newspapers got it wrong in their reporting of Robin Williams' death

<http://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2014/08/13/newspapers-got-it-wrong-their-reporting-robin-williams-death>

The truth -- the whole truth -- on Robin Williams' death

<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-robin-williams-details-of-death-20140819-story.html>

Robin Williams' daughter Zelda on life with dad, continuing his charity

<http://www.today.com/popculture/robin-williams-daughter-zelda-life-without-dad-continuing-his-charity-t5421>

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