

**The impact of news reporting
on victims and survivors of traumatic incidents**

K.E. (Trina) McLellan

Bachelor of Business (Communication)

A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements for the award of

Master of Arts (Research)

Journalism discipline, Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology

March 2003

Principal Supervisor: Dr Angela Romano

Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text. Further, I hereby declare that the material has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for a degree at this or any other University.

K.E. McLellan

March, 2003

Abstract

Nothing mobilises news media faster than a traumatic incident. Reporting teams and camera crews are dispatched from every imaginable news outlet while other personnel hit the telephones to get background information. Every journalist on the assignment is primed to get the best angle, the best story, the best images and to get them as quickly as possible into the production stream to be prepared and presented to an audience that craves to be informed. Seconds can be precious. Deadlines even more important. You might feel somewhat embarrassed to admit it, but it is almost a thrill to be a part of the action. That is, unless you happen to be a victim, survivor, witness or their family or community. Then the throng of media demanding your attention and co-operation can be confronting, disrespectful, overwhelming and, at times, harmful.

That is what Australian victims and survivors have disclosed in research done for this thesis and it reflects findings in other countries where the impact of trauma is being documented to help journalists understand the potential harm they may do to themselves and to others as they battle to cover the latest major crime, disaster scene or high-profile traumatic incident. Through nine Australian case studies this thesis draws out the core areas for concern and explores ways journalists can still do their work without causing victims and survivors to suffer more than they already have. It examines the toll of unthinking journalists, both in the field and the newsroom, and it exposes the price of thoughtless publication of stories, images and sounds.

In holding up a mirror to current media practice in Australia and comparing victim experiences to expectations painted by the industry's ethical and practice codes, this thesis aims to give journalists and newsroom managers some difficult things to think about – and plan for – before they next cover a traumatic incident.

Acknowledgments

Apart from those who graciously – and, in some cases, at a personal cost – participated in this research, there are many people who have provided invaluable assistance and inspiration to me throughout my studies. At the outset, it was Cratis Hippocrates and Dr Gary Embelton, both formerly of the Queensland University of Technology, the Salvation Army's Lt. Col. Don Woodland, and Dr Frank Ochberg from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. They pointed the way down the path that I have since explored. That path has been shared by fellow Master of Arts researcher and journalism lecturer Philip Castle, who has been a willing sounding board and tireless questioner, all while he completed his own research into the impact of reporting trauma on journalists.

The real motivation for this work, however, has come from close family and friends, namely my late father, distinguished WWII veteran William James Holdsworth McLellan, my cherished sister, Erin Falvey, longtime friends Yvonne and David Badham, Brendan Grimley, Mike and Kirsty Martin, Glenys Haalebos, Dr Jane Maxwell as well as retired journalism educators Val French and Dr Len Granato. Each of these people has consistently demonstrated to me what can be achieved with patience, passion, fortitude and an open, inquiring mind. They have inspired me to continue shining a light in some dark corners and from them I have learned to better understand what it is like to live with the impact of trauma and still embrace life. To those who are no longer here to witness completion of this thesis – my late brother-in-law John Patrick Falvey Snr, my late cousin Heather McLellan and my late friend Sue Martin – and, in fact, to every person surveyed during this study I owe an enormous debt of gratitude for sharing such personal and sometimes painful experiences, for not hiding your fears and for always expressing your hopes for a better future for others. I dedicate this work especially to you.

To my husband, news photographer Peter Bull, and my daughter Nicola Bull, thank you for persisting with me throughout my journey. To my niece Kate Peereboom and her family for providing endless backup and support, always without question, my heartfelt appreciation. My former work colleagues at QUT – especially Corporate Communication Department Director Peter Hinton – also deserve recognition for their encouragement.

Finally, thanks must go to two fine contemporary journalism educators, QUT's Dr Angela Romano, who patiently guided this thesis to completion, and Murdoch University's Suellen Tapsall, who gave moral support whenever it was needed. Thank you both for providing such timely and insightful advice or feedback about process and content.

In reality, while a thesis is assessed as the work of one person, it is never truly a solo endeavour. My thanks go to all those who have willingly helped along the way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

Acknowledgments

| | | |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 1.0 | Introduction | 1 |
| 2.0 | Literature Review | 14 |
| 2.1 | Overview | 14 |
| 2.2 | Definitions | 17 |
| 2.3 | Psychological consequences of trauma for individuals and communities | 32 |
| 2.4 | Journalistic practice issues | 56 |
| 2.5 | Communication issues around traumatic incidents | 79 |
| 3.0 | Methodology | 82 |
| 3.1 | Methodological framework | 85 |
| 3.2 | Sample demographics | 96 |
| 4.0 | Multiple-victim traumatic event – 1996 Port Arthur massacre | 105 |
| 4.1 | Case Study 1: The volunteers | 114 |
| 4.2 | Case Study 2: The ferry operator | 123 |
| 4.3 | Case Study 3: The toll-booth operator | 139 |
| 4.4 | Case Study 4: The security manager | 151 |

| | | |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 5.0 | Single-victim traumatic events – deaths in industrial settings | 169 |
| 5.1 | Case Study 5: The new boy | 176 |
| 5.2 | Case Study 6: The experienced engine driver | 184 |
| 5.3 | Case Study 7: The granite worker | 192 |
| 5.4 | Case Study 8: The supervisor | 197 |
| | | |
| 6.0 | Traumatic event without loss of life – what happens to survivors and families | 202 |
| 6.1 | Case Study 9: The trauma survivor | 205 |
| | | |
| 7.0 | Summary of victim experiences | 224 |
| 7.1 | Summary of experiences and concerns they raise | 224 |
| 7.1.1 | Issues relating to the behaviour of journalists | 224 |
| 7.1.2 | Issues relating to the content or presentation of news coverage | 234 |
| 7.1.3 | Key conclusions about victim feedback | 244 |
| 7.2 | What is unacceptable practice in times of trauma | 247 |
| 7.3 | What media coverage activity remains valuable | 254 |
| 7.4 | Adequacy of complaints mechanisms | 257 |
| 7.5 | When the media make victims/survivors ‘celebrities’ | 262 |
| 7.6 | Managing the media onslaught | 265 |
| 7.7 | What media personnel need to understand beforehand | 270 |
| 7.8 | The risk of re-traumatisation | 281 |

| | | | |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| 8.0 | A balancing act | 284 | |
| 8.1 | Pressure to publish and the public's interest | | 285 |
| 8.2 | When victims or their loved ones become advocates | | 290 |
| 8.3 | Journalists as scapegoats | | 292 |
| 8.4 | The content conundrum | | 295 |
| 8.5 | What Australian journalists can do to minimise further harm | | 299 |
| 8.6 | Epilogue | 303 | |
| | | | |
| 9.0 | Conclusions | | 304 |
| 9.1 | Observations and conclusions | | 309 |
| 9.2 | In closing | | 312 |

Appendices

1. **MEAA Codes of Ethics for Australian Journalists (1984 and 1997 versions)**
2. **Relevant sections of industry codes of practice for Australian broadcast news media**
 - A. Commercial Television Code of Practice (April 1999)
 - B. Commercial Radio Code of Practice (October 1999)
 - C. ABC Code of Practice (current)
 - D. SBS Code of Practice (July, 1999)
 - E. Pay TV Code of Practice (current)
3. **Australian Press Council Statement of Principles (October 1996)**
4. **DMV IV: Diagnostic Criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**
5. **Copy of fieldwork questionnaire for this research**
6. **Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (US)**
7. **Various US guidelines for victims' rights when dealing with the media**
 - A. Crime victims' rights in the news media (National Centre for Victims of Crime)
 - B. Crime victims and the media (State of Wisconsin Department of Justice)
 - C. Victim's rights and the media (New Hampshire Department of Justice)
8. **US talkshow guidelines for victims**
9. **What it's like to face the media: A victim's perspective**
10. **Controversy around promoting victims' rights**
11. **From the inside: When a journalist is the victim**
12. **Cohort #1 demographics**
13. **Cohort #2 demographics**

14. ***The Age* on the consequences of misbehaviour by Nine Network**
15. **Practical suggestions for journalists covering traumatic events**
16. **Ethical processes for this research**

Bibliography

List of tables

| TableTitle | Page |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| 2.4.1 Issues relating to journalistic sensitivity | 58 |
| 2.4.2 Issues relating to pressure on journalists | 59 |
| 2.4.3 Issues relating to ethics and self-regulation versus journalistic practice | 61 |
| 2.4.4 Issues relating to privacy versus intrusion | 64 |
| 2.4.5 Issues relating to Australia's news media complaints mechanisms | 68 |
| 2.4.6 Issues relating to preparation of media for covering traumatic events | 71 |
| 2.5.1 Issues relating to role of media management in times of trauma | 79 |
| 3.2.1a Age and gender of participants at time of their traumatic event | 96 |
| 3.2.1b Age and gender of participants when interviewed | 96 |
| 3.2.2 Family status before/after event | 97 |
| 3.2.3 Disruption to place of residence | 98 |
| 3.2.4 Impact on occupation | 98 |
| 3.2.5 Survey participants' place of birth | 99 |
| 3.2.6 Participants' connectivity to their traumatic event | 100 |
| 3.2.7 General physical health before/after event | 101 |
| 3.2.8 General mental health before/after event | 102 |
| 3.2.9 Participant symptomology | 103 |