

Chapter 1 Introduction

I have watched my son die 100 times, every time I see the videotape of the towers falling ... when I watch, and I always do, I lean towards the TV and I scream, 'Carl, run, run'. I look at the faces of the people coming out. But his face is never there.

*Joan Molinaro*¹

Those who collect and report the news occupy a prominent and powerful position in society. These journalists probe, photograph, record, package and publish accounts of what happens on behalf of their audiences. But their power and influence is only as strong as their appeal to those audiences at any point in time and, in an age of progressively more media options, that appeal is further challenged by increasingly fierce competition.

Many journalists do a fine job reporting traumatic events as they unfold, and in the weeks and months afterwards. They are generally courteous and do not set out to be intrusive. They demonstrate compassion and sensitivity. They are careful with fact- and/or image-collecting and presentation, reflecting the spirit of their profession's Code of Ethics², their industry's codes of practice³ or their employers' codes of conduct⁴. They genuinely seek to not make matters worse for victims and survivors, their families and communities when completing these difficult assignments.

¹ Victim statement reported in *The Courier-Mail*, February 1, 2003, by the mother of New York firefighter Carl Molinaro who was killed when the north tower of the World Trade Centre collapsed – at the German court hearing for Mounir el-Motassadeq, the first such trial in relation to the September 11 bombings.

² The Media, Arts and Entertainment Alliance – through its Australian Journalists Association subsection – publishes a Code of Ethics for Australian journalists, which applies to all members (however, not all news media employees are members). This code was first developed in 1944, revised in 1984 and again reviewed in the 1990s over several years before its current version was finalized in 1997. Copies of the current and 1984 versions are included in Appendix One as they would have been in action during the period relevant to the various case studies examined in this thesis.

³ Sections of the codes of practice that apply to Australia's broadcast news services – that are issued by the Australian Broadcasting Authority, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Special Broadcasting Service – are contained in Appendix Two of this thesis.

⁴ Most television news organisations have developed recommended guidelines for their journalists and it is encouraging to see more Australian newspaper groups issue quite detailed codes of conduct, especially in relation to covering traumatic incidents and dealing with bereaved interviewees. The first newspaper group to do so was the Melbourne-based Herald and Weekly Times, under the guidance of Eric Beecher, during the 1990s and, last year, News Limited employees across the nation received their copies of the organisation's code of conduct. It is not possible to reproduce each of these codes in this thesis.

However, a significant number of news personnel deliberately or unconsciously breach best practice when covering ‘a big story’. They are tactless at best, intrusive and even cruel at worst, when they deal with vulnerable, traumatised people or when they select images or reports to publish. In so doing, they bring the industry, their employers and themselves into disrepute and cause considerable harm to others (and, perhaps, themselves) in the process.

After researching the way the media covers trauma, United States journalism educators William Coté and Roger Simpson say that they know interviews, stories and photographs all have ‘the potential either to add to the injury or to help in the recovery’.⁵ Coté and Simpson (2000) acknowledge people are affected not only by an event, but also by the presence and actions of media.

...people you are likely to encounter at the scene are responding both physically and emotionally to a startling event ... If you asked questions moments after an event, you might find some details reported with crystal clarity while others were greatly distorted. As time passes, both victims and rescue workers begin to adapt to the prolonged anxiety they must endure. They become accustomed to the increased flow of adrenaline and think more critically about what they heretofore grasped automatically ... Such conditions are often present in tumultuous situations that have come to be called media feeding frenzies. Reporters drive for every fact, face, and facet of the scene, unaware that they manifest some of the same psychological signs as those they are trying to photograph or interview. As the numbers of reporters and cameras multiply, a common occurrence at violent events, the frenzy grows – those in it feed off the emotional highs of others. Each reporter wants a unique piece of the story.⁶

Coté and Simpson (2000) single out television news programs where the emphasis is on crimes and events rather than punishment or other outcomes. They note that the accused ends up dominating the attention until the justice process is exhausted while victims ‘fade from view or remain marginal figures for both the justice system and the media’. Easy explanations and simplistic ironies are used to quickly summarize violent acts, they add, and journalism ‘often lacks the patience to wait for a fairer explanation or the humility to say none is obvious’.⁷

⁵ Coté, W. & Simpson, R. (2000). *Covering violence: A guide to ethical reporting about victims and trauma*. New York: Columbia University Press. P5.

⁶ Ibid, Pp66-67.

⁷ Ibid, P7.

Major incident coverage

Sometimes the sheer number of media interested in major incidents is overwhelming for those at the epicentre of traumatic events. Depending on the ‘size’ of the incident and the amount of international media attention it attracts, this interest can continue around the clock for a week or more. Participants in this survey who were connected to the 1996 Port Arthur massacre described the frequency of media calls as ‘up to two dozen a day’ for at least two weeks. Some participants were still being approached by the media several months, even years, after the event. This level of interest can also prove challenging for those trying to help victims and survivors as well as those with responsibility for steering communities through the incident and towards resolution and/or recovery.

Yet the interview with a person in the midst of a traumatic event, say Coté and Simpson (2000), is the staple of news ‘because it puts us in touch with the voice, face, and emotions of a person who is suffering’.

We learn about the risks in our lives from hearing about the misfortunes of others. In some cases we are curious in a healthy way about that victim – perhaps we have had a similar experience and can appreciate and understand what the other person is enduring. Our curiosity may come from a life sheltered from such grief or shock. In that case, we hope to learn something about human experience. We want to know how likely we are to face personal threats, when and where they are most likely to occur, and what we should do if we are threatened. Our reasons for reading and watching are diverse and not so simple as a desire to be entertained by another person’s misery...

Perhaps some of us fear that we are being voyeurs, inappropriately fascinated by witnessing another person in pain. Others worry that watching the pain of a person we do not know excuses us from any obligation or responsibility.

We are at the center of a planet full of human beings, but usually only those closest to us make moral claims on us – family, friends, coworkers, and lovers. The suffering of those who are not in that inner circle reminds us that other moral obligations exist, yet those duties may not lead us to truly care about what we see on the evening news ...

The moral relationship of the victim and the reporter is quite different. They are connected by intimate communication – intimate because the reporter enters the victim’s life at a moment of extraordinary stress. The reporter’s duty to the public may well coincide with the needs of the victim, but the reporter cannot use that duty to excuse exploitation of victims for other reasons, such as better ratings or awards ...⁸

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Op. cit., Pp85-86.

The reality for victims and survivors is that relentless calls, requests for interviews and even intrusions into private domains often continue for some time after a traumatic incident. Combined, these imposts begin to reflect poorly on all news media. As traumatic incidents unfold, it is not uncommon – particularly in regional and remote areas – for communities to become frustrated, disheartened or even angry with large numbers of news media descending on their district, especially those non-local media – the so-called ‘parachute journalists’ – who tend to ‘fly in, fly out’, with little connection or commitment to the local population.

This was the case in the small New South Wales ski community at Thredbo Village after two lodges were swept away by a late night landslide on July 30, 1997, burying 19 people beneath tonnes of concrete and rubble. It was almost 65 hours after the landslide before the sole survivor, Stuart Diver, was plucked from a small crevice after an intense, full-day rescue operation that was broadcast, without interruption, on three out of the nation’s four television networks.

Within hours of the disaster happening, news media had flocked to Thredbo from all around the country and beyond to cover the accident scene as well as the complex and protracted rescue and recovery efforts. Logistically, the large contingent of print, radio and television media had to be corralled on the Alpine Way, a narrow road on the opposite face of the hillside from the scene of the landslide. This enabled news personnel to overlook the collapsed lodges from a safe distance, do their work and not get in the way of rescuers. Police, state emergency service, ambulance, welfare agencies, concerned family members and other spokespeople would periodically hold informal news conferences or participate in interviews at points along the roadway.

However, as Stuart Diver notes in the book he wrote with Nine Network reporter Simon Bouda, this was the only road into and out of the village itself, where most locals lived and worked.⁹ It connected the village and various centres that locals needed to access, such as health centres and places of worship. Locals – many of whom were related to, or had lived and/or worked with, those trapped by the landslide – had to constantly negotiate their way past this horde of news reporters, photographers and television news crews, and their equipment. Perhaps understandably, they became increasingly intolerant of the media’s presence.

Then Seven Network news reporter Chris Reason told how, after several days, news media found they were being refused service in the village – one petrol station carried a prominent sign stating ‘media won’t be served’ – and had to travel to other centres such as Jindabyne, some 40km away, for basic supplies¹⁰. Reason said there had even been a report of police being called to a Thredbo tavern after a fist fight broke out between angry locals and news media personnel.

What can go wrong

People at the centre of a traumatic incident become particularly annoyed if they have to endure questionable behaviour by individual news personnel or media organisations. Hurst and White (1994) describe such a reaction from the townsfolk of the Central Queensland mining town of Moura, a community that had two major mine accidents in less than 10 years¹¹.

⁹ Diver, S. and Bouda, S., (1999). *Survival: The inspirational story of the Thredbo disaster’s sole survivor*. Sydney: Macmillan. P104.

¹⁰ This information was related to fellow QUT researcher Philip Castle by Seven Network reporter Chris Reason who worked on the Thredbo landslide story.

¹¹ Hurst, J., & White, S.A., (1994), *Ethics and the Australian news media*, South Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia. P114.

After the first tragedy, where 12 mine workers were entombed by an explosion in July 1986, eager reporters arrived in town late and decided to doorknock the families of the missing miners. One young male Sydney reporter drew the wrath of the local community for knocking at the door of a pregnant woman at 1.30am while she was anxiously awaiting news of her missing spouse. The community closed ranks and all media were subsequently affected in their ability to get co-operation from locals. When a similar mine accident occurred nearly 10 years later, the community's memory of that reporter's behaviour was not dimmed. Many media dispatched to cover the second incident reported a hostile reception when they travelled to Moura. Only local media outlets were given any degree of co-operation after the second explosion.

Despite the general condemnation of the media by the mining company, the unions, the police, the Church and the townspeople, John Harrison, the communications co-ordinator for the Uniting Church, argued that the conflict was inevitable immediately the mine blew up because 'anger is an integral and normal part of the grief process'. The media came to grief, he says, because they were 'the scapegoat of a town's wrath'. They were not primarily responsible for that wrath. However, the journalists there were probably professionally ill-prepared to do a death-knock story in a town where everyone knew at least one of the men killed.

'They and their city-based editors probably assumed they were dealing with 12 grieving families rather than 3,000 grieving people. Moreover, the competitive nature of the media made it difficult for them as a group to take any substantive steps to restore the confidence of the townspeople in journalists once the conflict exploded. If there is any lesson to be learned from Moura's explosion of anger against journalists, it is that the profession needs to take more seriously the task of training journalists in dealing with death and grief.'¹²

In such a competitive and delicate climate, doing anything to undermine professional standards – and, hence, credibility – is short-sighted, even potentially career-terminating. Perhaps because of the immense social impact of news reports and the relentless pursuit of a 'competitive edge', media outlets and individual journalists easily become complacent about ethical and practice guidelines. Once they are 'in the zone', to use a popular sports psychology term, journalists are so focused on chasing the details of big, breaking stories, often under tight deadlines, that little seems to deter some of them from relying on the most base instincts to pursue every possible angle.

¹²

Op. cit., P115.

This thesis seeks to demonstrate how that well-honed mode of response – and resultant saturation news coverage – can be counter-productive in the aftermath of traumatic events. It will show how ‘hypercoverage’ of traumatic events can be harmful for victims, survivors, their families and their communities, not because painful truths are exposed but because of the way stories and images are gathered, presented and often rehashed *ad finitum*.

This thesis includes nine first-person accounts of recent traumatic incidents in Australia, including:

- people affected by a multiple-victim massacre;
- the families of people killed in the workplace, mostly single-victim traumatic incidents; and
- the high-profile rescue of a lost trekker, a traumatic incident with no loss of life.

It contrasts these Australian case studies with documented experiences elsewhere and concludes that news media everywhere need to (a) better understand the fallout of traumatic incidents, (b) continuously examine and review the way such events are covered and (c) take responsibility for reducing further harm. Finally, this thesis also offers journalists and newsrooms some feedback from victims and survivors as well as best practice examples to consider as they become more aware of the impact of their behaviour on victims and survivors as well as their broader audiences.

Choices faced by journalists and newsroom managers

Concern for the traumatized person should sometimes lead the news organization to find an alternative approach to the assignment. In other words, if the journalist's actions are likely to harm the traumatized person, the reporter should back off.¹³

Exercising the power to probe and publish, to deliver the news to a nation, journalists who find themselves confronting victims and survivors of major crimes and natural or man-made disasters are in fact faced with two alternatives: (1) behave respectfully and responsibly, seeking to do no further harm, or (2) manipulate the situation to one's own advantage. Those back in the newsroom similarly face two choices: (1) to play the story straight, i.e., respectfully, or (2) go for the well-worn news formula of 'gore, guts and grief' and, in the process, beat up an already serious story.

This thesis will show that the latter options are taken surprisingly frequently by journalists and newsroom managers in Australia, sometimes with devastating consequences. While the international journalism community, led by the United States, has begun to seriously debate the potential impact of trauma on victims and news personnel – and to review the appropriateness of deploying traditional news responses when covering traumatic events – there are few outward signs that Australian newsrooms have embraced such discourses.

Risks associated with maintaining the status quo

In increasingly litigious times, the wisdom of allowing ignorance, insensitivity or callous disregard of best practice to continue unchecked is questionable. According to *The Independent's* website, British families who watched their relatives die during live television coverage of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center may receive compensation for the trauma they suffered thanks to 'unprecedented' action by the UK's Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority.¹⁴

¹³ Côté & Simpson (2000), P10.

¹⁴ 'British families of New York victims may be compensated for trauma' appeared at <http://www.independent.co.uk/story.jsp?story=105630>

During the 1990s, following the telecasting of images of a high-speed car chase on a Los Angeles freeway where the cornered driver eventually committed suicide live, on air, a US television news service was subsequently sued by a traumatised viewer.

In Australia, a Senate Select Committee investigated self-regulation in the information and communication industries¹⁵. In hearings held around the nation during 1998, that committee heard not only a spirited defence of journalistic practice by seasoned news personnel but also a variety of accounts that criticised the ways news organisations reported on victims and survivors of traumatic incidents.

The likelihood of legislative intervention or increased regulation on our shores is no longer beyond the realm of possibility. No matter how strong the counter arguments for freedom of the press or free speech, the act of deliberately exposing people to harm is rapidly becoming a liability that sensible community leaders – and risk managers within the media – will be keen to limit.

It is victims and survivors, and those around them, who know what it is like to be inundated with media attention when they were perhaps at their most vulnerable. Accounts of their experiences with news media are rarely published and even less often acknowledged or debated in newsrooms. Feedback mechanisms to individual news organisations or journalists are almost non-existent and official complaints mechanisms are onerous at best.

This thesis will show that survivors are often too overwhelmed by their predicament to complain to or pursue justice within the usual timeframe. The responsibility for employing best practice, then, falls squarely on the shoulders of newsroom managers and frontline journalists where traumatic incidents are concerned.

¹⁵

Commonwealth of Australia Senate Official Committee Hansard (1998, various dates), *Self-regulation in the information and communications industries*.

A framework for better understanding

For journalists, news managers, industry bodies, journalism educators, students and other stakeholders to comprehend how news reporting can impact on victims, survivors and others, it is important for them to understand the variety and extent of reactions to trauma in the first place. Chapter Two, the literature review of this thesis, seeks to provide three things: (1) definitions of key terms used throughout the rest of this document; (2) an understanding of human responses to trauma; and (3) some already documented best practice issues for journalists to consider when covering traumatic incidents.

Chapter Three details the methodology employed for the fieldwork phase of the research that underpins this thesis, including the ethical considerations of such research, and examines the demographic composition of those sampled for this study. Chapters Four, Five and Six contain nine case studies that document the experiences of those connected to a high-profile traumatic event in Australia's recent past.

The initial four case studies in Chapter Four relate to victims and survivors of the April 1996 massacre at Port Arthur by lone gunman Martin Bryant. Coming barely a month after the elementary school massacre at Dunblane in Scotland, this *multiple-victim traumatic event* touched the lives of many thousands of Australians and overseas visitors and attracted media attention from around the world. Chapter Five also has four case studies, each relating to the experiences of people who have lost a child, parent or partner in a workplace death over periods spanning one to 13 years prior to interview. Focusing on issues for a *single-victim traumatic event*, these case studies highlight common and divergent concerns with those outlined in the previous chapter. Chapter Six's sole case study examines the issues for a family dealing with a missing trekker and his high-profile rescue: that of James Scott, a Brisbane medical student who was lost in the Himalayas for 43 days from late December, 1991. While ultimately not losing a loved one, this final case study of a *traumatic event without loss of life* examines how his family endured considerable trauma not only in relation to his whereabouts and welfare, but also at the hands of a voracious and sometimes vindictive news media.

Some readers may find these case studies difficult or painful reading. It was a challenge to collect and recount these people's sometimes harrowing experiences. But, unless Australian journalists and newsroom decision-makers take the time to discover what it is like to be in the shoes of the victims, survivors or people who love those who died or were injured, they will have little chance of understanding the potential impacts of their own actions, the actions of their peers or the actual publication of news and current affairs reports. Without that understanding, they are unlikely to address the challenge of purposeful, constructive change that is required in this area of journalistic practice.

A summary of victim experiences is therefore presented in Chapter Seven, along with feedback for news decision-makers and individual journalists. An examination of media perspectives follows in Chapter Eight. These precede the conclusion of this thesis, with emerging hypotheses, in Chapter Nine.

The impact of recent events

As the writing of this thesis was drawing to a close, the world became a much smaller place. Most people were deeply shocked by the horror of terrorist attacks in New York, Washington and Pittsburgh on September 11, 2001, and by the senseless Bali bombings of October 12, 2002. The world has also been coming to terms with acts of biological and psychological terrorism as well as the prospect of an ongoing war. Media outlets around the world have been simultaneously praised and criticised for delivering wall-to-wall, intimate coverage of these terrorist attacks and their aftermath.

What journalists and newsroom decision-makers in this country also need to understand is that – apart from those Australians who lost loved ones in collapsed or bombed buildings, in aircraft or in Afghanistan – these stories have been particularly difficult for many who had previously endured much pain and trauma in their own lives. It is likely to have reopened deep psychological wounds and brought back feelings and reactions they had worked hard to keep under control.

Traumatic incidents – especially ones that take the life of a loved one or threaten to take one’s own life – are not something a person just ‘gets over’. As individuals, people are changed by these events: sometimes they are especially sensitive to events of similar or greater magnitude and often they are easily harmed. For this reason, as United States’ Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma website notes, journalists need to take particular care when reporting on traumatic incidents that happen here and abroad:

Journalists who cover traumatic events such as violent crimes, horrific accidents, natural disasters and other situations in which they witness human pain and suffering are often required to approach and interview victims of trauma or their family members. Unfortunately the skills needed to interact with people under such stressful and unpredictable conditions do not usually come naturally. Without knowledge about traumatic stress and proper training in how to interact with potentially traumatized people, journalists may find their interviews to be awkward, uncomfortable and, in extreme cases, even re-traumatizing to their interviewees ...¹⁶

The way forward

While there is no shortage of academic works and published research relating to traumatic events and how they impact on individuals and communities, there is also a rich and growing body of published news stories relating to personal accounts of trauma and its impacts. Reflecting on such information and responding to its challenges may not be easy, but Australian journalists and newsroom managers need to be encouraged to tap into these resources and to discover the best way forward. Experienced practitioners and journalism educators are best placed to help them begin this process.

Yet, as Coté and Simpson (2000) point out, for those journalists inexperienced with trauma, there is an important fact to remember. Journalists are not physicians or therapists, they don’t know the science that goes along with it, and they are not trained to see or draw out the symptoms of trauma.¹⁷

¹⁶ Dr Frank Ochberg, in the Dart Center’s trauma awareness training module for journalists which can be accessed online at http://www.dartcenter.org/Curriculum/module1/content_main_intro.html

¹⁷ Coté & Simpson (2000), P10.

However, they conclude, journalists can incorporate information about trauma in their work ‘without invading the specialist’s domain of diagnosis and treatment’. They give a simple analogy to illustrate their assertion that the reporter, the victim and the public will benefit from knowing more about trauma.

No reporter would try to cover a World Series game without knowing baseball or try to explain a stock market rally without first studying finance and economics...

Every beat in journalism demands special knowledge from the reporter. A crime reporter must be familiar with police, blotters, snitches, arraignments, and plea bargaining. A government and politics reporter learns about caucuses, tax assessments, soft money, and polling. Sports broadcasters know about batting averages, first downs, dunk shots, hat tricks, and aces. Firefighters, police, and military personnel are not physicians, yet the application of trauma knowledge has transformed those vocations in recent years.¹⁸

Contemporary American leadership author Steven R. Covey – in his acclaimed 1989 book on restoring the character ethic *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*¹⁹ – offers some sage advice with his list of ‘first principles’. One principle, in particular, applies to journalists: *Seek first to understand, then to be understood*. It is hoped that this thesis will expand the understanding of Australian journalists so that they may employ this principle when responding to traumatic incidents.

¹⁸ Loc. cit.

¹⁹ Covey, S.R., *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, The Business Library, Melbourne, 1989.