

## Chapter 6      **Traumatic event without loss of life**

### – **what happens to survivors and their families**

Some crises are reflexively covered in the media. The media, print and broadcast alike, enthusiastically report on natural disasters, for example. These once-a-year or even once-in-a-lifetime events are in the 'Wow! What a story!' category ... Crises are the stuff of myth and movies; they send a journalist's heart racing – and they also send everyone to the TV or newspaper to find out what's happening.

But much of journalism is repetitious – or at least seems that way. Turn on the new and you see crime stories, scandals, budget reports and even full-blown crises that all sound alike. Ironically, even though the uncertain outcome of a catastrophe is what makes it so compelling – both to report on and to consume as news – once the parameters of a news story have been established, the coverage lapses into formula. Mythic elements – the fearless doctor, the unwitting victim – will be emphasized, but they will fall into a pattern. Myths, after all, are stories. Some are heroic, some are tragic, most are predictable.

Formulaic coverage of similar types of crises makes us feel that we really *have* seen this story before. We've seen the same pictures, heard about the same victims, heroes and villains, read the same morality play. Even the chronology of events is repeated ...<sup>249</sup>

The most perceptive and valuable accounts of media behaviour, or misbehaviour, in the aftermath of a traumatic event can come from survivors and their families. Perhaps the fact that these people eventually experience relief and maybe even some elation, as well as some form of positive closure, they are better equipped emotionally to articulate their experiences with the media both during and after the trauma as well as their reactions to what happened to them.

Ski instructor Stuart Diver was the only person to be pulled from underneath the wreckage of two lodges that were flattened by a late night landslide in the New South Wales winter resort village of Thredbo on Thursday, July 30, 1997. He was rescued three days after the incident, on August 1. His wife, Sally, who was in bed with him when the landslide hit, had died minutes after the accident when water flooded through their crushed bedroom.

The media coverage of the incident escalated from a few early reports just after the landslide to more regular updates throughout the protracted search for survivors. It peaked with blanket coverage of Stuart's eventual rescue late on the Saturday afternoon. In the book he wrote with Nine Network journalist Simon Bouda, Stuart Diver described what effect the media's growing presence had on the small village.

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Moeller (1999), P13.

Across the valley from the site a large media contingent had grown to a small army. Footage of the rescue efforts was being beamed live around the world from trucks carrying satellite equipment. News broadcasts and current affairs shows were being presented live from Thredbo. Many locals felt their privacy was being invaded. A number of reporters and photographers tried to sneak through the police cordons, only to be turned back. There were reports some had even disguised themselves in SES uniforms. The Divers and the Donalds [parents of Stuart and Sally Diver] made a conscious decision to avoid watching the media. They had enough to deal with without adding to the stress by watching how the media was handling it...

The stress was not only starting to show on the rescuers. The residents of Thredbo were angry. Angry that they had lost friends and loved ones, angry that the rescue operation was taking so long, angry that their mountain paradise had been invaded by not only terror but the glare of the media's – and the world's – attention.<sup>250</sup>

With rescues, it is possible to detect a pattern of media reactions as coverage crystallises into a reasonably regular form, according to Australian media critic Stuart Littlemore. On April 30, 2001, Littlemore reviewed a number of high-profile rescues covered by the media on his 15-minute self-titled program on the ABC, including:

- the rescues by the Australian Navy of French around-the-world solo yachswoman Isabelle Autissier (December-January 1994/95) and then English solo yachtsman Tony Bullimore (February 1997) both off the southern Australian coastline;
- the traumatic extraction of sole survivor Stuart Diver from a massive landslide at Thredbo on August 1, 1997, after nearly three days of fruitless searching (in New South Wales);
- the discovery of lost US trekker Robert Boguki in remote Western Australia (August 1999) and then lost hiker Ben Maloney who walked out of Tasmania's harsh wilderness after 35 days (April, 2001); as well as
- the much earlier rescue of medical student James Scott who had survived 43 days in difficult, snow-covered terrain near Kathmandu (February 1992).<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Diver, S. & Bouda, S. (1999) *Survival: The inspirational story of the Thredbo disaster's sole survivor*. Sydney: Macmillan. Pp104-108.

<sup>251</sup> Littlemore, S. "The involuntary public figure: fair game?", *Littlemore*, ABC TV, April 30, 2001.

Littlemore identified a pattern of news coverage that had emerged over the past decade or so with high-stakes, internationally significant rescue stories. He notes that a struggle or search phase is traditionally followed by the triumphant stage following the discovery, rescue or recovery, then almost immediately by a 'boys own' hero-worshipping of the survivor that, inevitably, further fuels the media frenzy. Survivors become unable to handle the hypercoverage and, typically, they or their families seek help in handling the media, usually in the form of a media agent who ties up exclusive access to the survivor. At this point, Littlemore points out, unsuccessful bidders for the story tend to turn on the survivor with 'spoiler' stories that question the survivor's motives, integrity and even preparedness. Littlemore says that, regardless of the financial payments involved or the degree to which they have contributed to their plight, the survivors are inevitably vilified and end up the losers when the media goes into overdrive.

Despite a Code of Ethics that is supposed to underpin the Australian media's self-regulation – and similar codes supposedly guiding most international media sent to cover such events – clear and repeated ethical breaches are commonplace, especially when competition is fierce and the stakes are high. This thesis aims to show readers how victims, survivors and their families of traumatic incidents feel about relentless media attention, clichéd or inaccurate coverage of events, the sometimes tedious focus on insignificant issues, the invasions of privacy, the meanderings of less-than-well-informed 'experts', the speculation of a potential hoax and, invariably, the sacrifice of their good names and questioning of their integrity?

This chapter examines the experiences of Joanne Robertson, who travelled to Nepal to oversee the search for her lost brother, James Scott, who became lost in the Himalayas in late 1991 and was subsequently rescued 43 days later.

## 6.1 The trauma survivor

### *Background to the traumatic incident*

For the Scott family of Brisbane, Queensland, life took an unexpected turn just after Christmas, 1991, when they received a facsimile advising that their medical student son James, then in his early 20s, had gone missing during a trek in the Himalayas a week earlier. James had been intending to spend several weeks doing some practical work for his medical degree at the Bir hospital in Kathmandu, Nepal, with a fellow medical student, but they had opted to go trekking first. A blizzard set in and the trekkers were separated. James was fit and knew a good deal about how to prevent frostbite and other medical complications arising from extended exposure to low temperatures.

What followed James' disappearance was more than five complicated and exhausting weeks of searching, co-ordinated by James' sister Joanne, a veterinarian, who flew to Kathmandu in early January with one of her brother's closest friends. Five weeks later, when almost all hope had been lost, James was seen alive from a helicopter and then located by a ground party on February 2, 1992. He was airlifted, suspended below a helicopter, early the next day. After surviving a record 43 days in freezing conditions – where no other human had lasted more than 10 days – James' health was perilous and highly unstable according to Joanne. He was brought to the Patan mission hospital where he would remain for a fortnight before he was well enough to be escorted home to Brisbane by Joanne and a medical evacuation team. He remained in hospital in Brisbane for a further two weeks before being discharged with serious and ongoing damage to his sight.

### *Immediate media coverage*

An abridged account of the experiences of James Scott and his family appear in the February 1993 *Reader's Digest* article 'Miracle in the Himalayas'<sup>252</sup>, and are more fully explained in *Lost in the Himalayas*<sup>253</sup>, a book published the same year written by James and Joanne. The book contains accounts from both siblings of the media's relentless efforts to report James' story. In the book, Joanne sets the scene in the days immediately after James was found.

We were under strict instructions from James' doctors that he not be allowed many visitors or a lot of outside intrusion. A stream of people kept wanting to see him, ranging from people who had helped in the search to other Australian tourists who had heard he had been rescued and was in hospital.

On 18 January, James's disappearance had made headlines across Australia and my parents had been touched by the concern people had shown. In addition to the support of friends and relatives, there had been letters of sympathy coming in from all over the world. We wanted all these people to know as soon as possible that James had been found alive.

Mum and Dad decided that the best thing to do was to notify ABC radio and the local Brisbane paper, *The Courier-Mail*. It certainly worked. Within less than an hour, the televised broadcast of an international cricket match had been interrupted to say that James had been found. We had no inkling of the storm that would quickly follow.<sup>254</sup>

The following account of what happened both in Brisbane and in Nepal once the media got hold of news of James' rescue mirrors some of the experiences of disregard and/or disruption reported by people interviewed for this research after the Port Arthur massacre.<sup>255</sup>

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252 Scott, J. and Bailey, E., "Miracle in the Himalayas", *Reader's Digest*, February 1993. Pp31-38.

253 Scott, J. and Robertson, J., *Lost in the Himalayas*, 1993, Melbourne, Lothian. *Note*: all quotes from this book are footnoted, whereas quotes from the interview with Joanne Robertson are not.

254 Op. cit., P183.

255 See Chapter 4 of this thesis.

On the afternoon of February 3, 1992, though the University of Queensland switchboard was jammed with calls from media and others in their efforts to contact James Scott's father, who had earlier spoken to *The Courier-Mail* and ABC Radio News when news of his son's rescue came through. When James' parents eventually got home that evening, their house was full of visitors, including several news crews eager to report on the family's celebrations. One reporter tried to drag Joanne's father away from the telephone while he was talking to her in Nepal. It was almost midnight before camera crews and photographers left. Joanne said the first of many more media calls to her family back in Brisbane the next morning was at 4am and, by 8am, two TV stations had news crews banging on the front door again:

At Dad's work, the stairwells were filled with media people wanting interviews. The journalists barged into the lab, unplugging scientific equipment at random, so they could use their electronic gear. All work in the laboratory ground to a halt.

In Nepal the phone calls from journalists started at 5.00a.m. on the morning of 4 February. I had not slept for 48 hours at that point. The nurses on the ward could not speak English well enough to decipher any more than that the call was from Australia. Thinking it must be my parents, I went to the phone. It was a journalist from the ABC. He got fairly short change because of the time before I answered several questions. All this went on tape without my being aware of it. From that point on the phone barely stopped.

... One station wanted me to drop everything at the hospital and do a satellite link-up. I told them that after all we had been through, I was damned if the first time I saw my parents was going to be in front of thousands of people. Dr Garlick arrived and said he had been getting calls [from the media] since 4.00a.m. Tom and Maria [where Joanne had been staying in Kathmandu] were also inundated.

The situation worsened over the next few days as journalists and camera crews from all over the world descended on Patan hospital. James was in no fit state to be interviewed and neither was I. We could understand why there was so much attention and I repeatedly told journalists that we would be more than happy to tell the story eventually. The most important thing, at that time, was James's health and getting him back safely to Australia.

The question of money being paid for a story 'raised its head quite early in the piece', with a national TV current affairs program calling Joanne at the Patan Hospital in Nepal and offering her \$50,000. She declined, saying no amount of money would enable the program to interview James before he was well enough. Their parents, who were being inundated by requests to sign exclusive rights contracts back in Brisbane, told the media to discuss it with their children once they were safely home. Even before anyone received payment for any interviews, Joanne said, the family had begun to realise the story would be worth at least the \$50,000 they had been offered, money which could go towards paying back considerable search costs. Yet the lengths journalists went to astounded Joanne who noted in her book her family previously had little to do with the media.

The lengths to which journalists went to try to get a story astounded me. Someone tried to steal James's medical records. Photographers tried to get in through the windows of his room. Reporters masqueraded as James's travel insurers. I refused to talk to any of them.

In typical style, it took the Nepali press several days to cotton on to the fact that there was a story. They barged into James's hospital room. I had to force them out bodily. The poorly written article that appeared in the *Rising Nepal* the next day was highly sceptical about James's ordeal and claimed I refused to talk to them as I 'was not in a mood'.

When reporters tried using the expenses involved in getting [t]here to persuade me to give an interview, I pointed out that I had never invited them over! It also seemed bizarre that I had struggled to keep people interested in James for weeks and now everyone was interested to the point of endangering James's life! I was sure they would not have been interested at all if we'd only found James's body.

I felt very resentful that I was being subject to so much extra stress and I could not understand why my parents could not get them to stop. I phoned [her husband] Calum and my father in a very distressed, exhausted state, almost on the verge of emotional collapse. I pleaded with them to do something about the press.

That night, Wednesday the 5th, my father appeared live on a national current affairs show [Stan Grant's *Real Life* on the Seven Network] and made a public appeal for the media to back off. He explained how I was being plagued by the press day and night and that I just wanted to concentrate on getting James home. This appeal was ignored.

The same evening, my parents went to bed at midnight, having had an emotional day of interviews and phone calls. The phone rang shortly afterwards. It was a reporter wanting to know how he [her father] felt to hear that his son had just gone into renal failure. For some reason, the reporter wanted a reaction to this question. James had not gone into renal failure at all.<sup>256</sup>

In an interview conducted on May 30, 2000, Joanne described how – in the first days after James was found – her thoughts were entirely about her brother. 'He was deteriorating very quickly at that point because of the glucose he had taken in [just after he was rescued] and his, at that stage, undiagnosed thiamin deficiency.' The onset of symptoms was swift, says Joanne. James was going blind. Doctors initially thought it was a stroke and moved him to a ward where he shared a room with a patient with active tuberculosis. 'Of course, all the family come to nurse the Nepalese when they are sick, so the room was just full of all these people and they were really put out at being put in with a westerner too.'

Joanne recalled how at one point – when she was talking to her father on the phone, updating him on James' condition – a reporter was 'physically trying to drag him off the phone and into the car to go up to Mt Coot-tha' [where the television stations are located] to do a live link-up. At that stage, the Scotts were talking freely to the media because they were elated, Joanne explained:

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Scott & Robertson (1993). Pp184-185. Material in parenthesis was disclosed during an interview with Joanne Robertson on May 30, 2000.

After a few days, I was getting more and more pissed off because I thought 'It's all right them back there in Australia celebrating and having a really great time.' I hadn't really told them how sick James was. I'd had vomiting and diarrhoea for four or five weeks myself and ... I started to get a little bit annoyed that everybody there was having a great time and I was sort of stuck with all this anxiety ...

There were only two phone lines into Patan Hospital, Joanne said, so the whole hospital was affected by the incoming media calls. That caused Joanne more stress 'because there were so many people needing help'. It took journalists a few days to arrive in Kathmandu from Brisbane, where the news first leaked out, or from other destinations:

We had *Courier-Mail* people, a number of other newspapers, we certainly had *A Current Affair*, *60 Minutes*, David Hardacre was over there ... plus a lot of international media were there. The Nepali press finally cottoned on to things a fair bit after everybody else and they were very put out that they couldn't get their two cents' worth.

Tired and frightened, Joanne admitted she was 'never very nice to members of the press' when she was in Nepal:

I didn't want them ringing me and I didn't see why I should be nice to them but I guess I probably off-sided a few of them. My only priority at that point was getting James home safely. We were getting offers for things like: 'Do you want to do a satellite link-up, we'll let you have X seconds before we go on air to talk to your parents and that way you can all be together.'

Had she agreed to that request, it would have been the first time that James saw his parents. One of his overriding concerns at the time was the way that he looked, Joanne said. He did not want his parents to see him in the emaciated state he was in:

The other thing was that he was too upset to even speak to my parents or to his fiancée for probably three or four days post-rescue. I mean, he just couldn't cope with it. And these people wanted to talk to him before he spoke with my parents and there was no way I was going to allow that to happen either ... I guess we got into a bit of a vicious circle whereby the more I refused, the more anxious [the media] became and we sort of weren't going anywhere in a hurry.

Nursing staff, in keeping with Nepalese ways, would not nurse the dangerously ill James; his family had to take care of this. So Joanne nursed James and his extremely painful feet around the clock and had her hands full. She slept on the floor and left the hospital once a day for a shower and to get fresh clothes for herself and James, fresh food and water. If he needed a blood test, Joanne had to organise for the samples to go to an outside laboratory because there was no facility at the hospital.

Also, because he was not Hindu, as most of the hospital staff were, bed-panning and other personal attention was up to an exhausted Joanne who was lucky to have a little support from people she had met when she came to Nepal. Anyone who had any association with James was plagued by media representatives, Joanne recalled. In Nepal this included Dr Frank Garlick, the Patan hospital chief, and Joanne's hosts, Tom and Maria Crees, at whose home she would shower:

... some of them minded and some of them didn't. It got to the point when Frank Garlick said to me: 'Joanne, you're going to have to give them something.' So, some photos were taken and it was arranged that we would release the photos and I would talk to the press.

So a time was made for that and, prior to that I was sitting having a quiet cup of tea with a nursing sister (who was also a nun) in one room. And, unbeknownst to us when we were talking, a team of journalists were interviewing Frank Garlick (in the next room) and the next thing there was this bang, bang, bang on the wall (in between the rooms) and someone called out 'shut the fuck up in there, we're trying to tape'. I just looked at the nursing sister and said 'Sister Jun, if they're going to talk like that, no dice, they not going to get any photos from me' and no-one got the photos. I thought, 'who the hell do they think they are to talk to people like that?' and so I ended up sort of reading out this pretty dumb thing to this group of entirely underwhelmed journalists with no questions, so they weren't happy about that.

Joanne said the most distressing thing about the media's intense interest in James was that it might jeopardise his recovery: 'I have no doubt in my mind that both my welfare and James' welfare were completely secondary to [the media's] attempts to get the story. They didn't care. They didn't care.' Of the 20 to 30 media in Nepal, about 10 were from Australia, according to Joanne. The hardened, seasoned reporters who harassed the Scott siblings in Nepal 'were arseholes', according to Joanne. She singled out only one positive encounter with a media representative while she was in Nepal, a 'nice fellow' from an Australian current affairs program named David Hardacre.

It is interesting to note that, as with previous case studies, Joanne's comments reflect the fact that the story-first-people-last approach is counter-productive when it comes to victims and survivors of traumatic events and to their families. Too much of the former approach and families inevitably reach out for help. With Joanne battling exhaustion and an increasingly fractious media in Nepal, her parents, too, were finally realising the constant media attention had begun to spiral out of control. In their book she wrote:

It was probably 6 February when my parents realised things were out of hand. The offers they were getting for exclusive rights to the story were becoming more and more impressive. I was obviously having difficulty coping. The whole family was being plagued day and night.

Patan hospital was being affected. Some reporters were just wandering from room to room in the hope of finding James, intruding on critically ill people. The doctors treating James believed his health was at risk. He was still in a very delicate emotional state and extremely susceptible to infection. His vision was very limited and he was on four-hourly pethidine shots to try to control the pain in his feet. We needed help.<sup>257</sup>

Back home, their father had been advised by two different sources that publicity agent Harry M. Miller was experienced in such matters. When he called Miller he was told Miller had been waiting to hear from the family and would be willing to act as its agent. According to Joanne, Miller was not concerned about having anything formal in writing regarding their agreement, 'his only stipulation was that he would do all the talking to the press'. It was agreed Miller's role would be twofold: 'first to get the press to give us some peace at least until James was safely home and, secondly, to try to help us recoup the costs of the search'. Joanne said her parents did not issue any further updates to the media. 'They would have preferred to keep everyone informed, but the invasive nature of the media meant that it was impossible to achieve this on an informal, low-key basis.'<sup>258</sup> The media did not like the intervention of Harry M. Miller, Joanne noted in her book, 'probably because he makes their job more difficult'.

As soon as [Miller] became involved, everything quietened dramatically for us. If the media phoned, we just told them to ring Miller. To my relief, I was able to get some rest. The hospital was able to return to normal and my parents were left alone. With their access restricted, some journalists fabricated or invented stories of their own.<sup>259</sup>

One day, when Joanne had stepped out of James' hospital room briefly, her brother saw a cartoon that depicted him in a hospital bed with Dr Garlick saying to reporters: 'I'm sorry. He's not well enough to talk to anybody for under \$100,000.' This, wrote Joanne, left James distraught and made her realise how right she had been to shelter him from the media.<sup>260</sup>

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257 Scott & Robertson (1993), P185.

258 Op. cit., P186.

259 Op. cit., P187.

260 Ibid.

As Joanne noted in their book, the question of whether James's story had been a hoax gained even more momentum after the Scotts asked Miller for help.

A number of newspaper articles and current affairs shows had spoken with so-called mountaineering experts ... (who) seemed to concentrate on the fact that James was not as well prepared for the trek as he might have been and that, because the story was so amazing, it could not be true ... the *Rising Nepal* published an article entitled 'Scott the Stoic or James the Joker?' in which they suggested James had been cared for by 'a svelte, sexy, she-Yeti' who 'stumbled on the lost wanderer and promptly fell in love. The cupid's victim played nurse to this medical graduate and kept him alive with yak meat and snug embrace'.<sup>261</sup>

When Miller arrived in Nepal, he told Joanne the best way to ensure a 'hassle-free trip home' was to sign a contract as soon as possible. As she notes in their 1993 book, a number of contracts were in the offing, but James was not well enough to sign let alone consider any contracts. Joanne had to take on responsibility of signing for him, only too aware that he had a better head for business than she had. She was unsure whether she would make the best decision, but Miller explained the proposals and gave her time to think about them. A day later the deal with *60 Minutes* had been signed, but not on the basis of money. The Scott family had been made a higher offer from another program, but *60 Minutes* was prepared to hold off until James was well enough. This deal also included a follow-up interview with James, scheduled to include a trip back to Nepal with Joanne and his fiancée Gaye. This would give them the chance to say thank you to those people in Nepal who helped find and rescue James and support Joanne. As their book explains, a second deal was signed with London's *Daily Telegraph* and, through it, Australia's Fairfax Newspapers.

Of course, the deal in any such contract is for exclusivity. That means, once you sign, you are not at liberty to speak to any other press or to be photographed by anyone except those with whom you have the agreement. That suited us down to the ground.

The money from these contracts was enough to return every cent that had been donated towards the search and rescue. In the case of donors who did not wish to have their money refunded, the equivalent sum was given to Patan hospital.

One newspaper claimed that James had been offered \$2 million to name the brand of chocolate he had [Joanne denies any such deal was ever offered to the Scotts].

The interest in the type of chocolate stunned us. It had all been eaten by the second day he was lost and had no bearing on his survival yet reports came out saying how James had survived on snow and chocolate. Why did people not ask what type of sleeping bag he had or the brand of the anorak? These items helped him to live.<sup>262</sup>

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261 Op. cit., Pp187-189.

262 Op. cit., P189.

Once Miller finalised a contract, relations with the media soured further, according to Joanne: ‘You know, it was almost like they felt like they had a right to access our family, James particularly. They wanted to speak to James and he was pretty sick, so anyone else would do.’ When it came time to return home, Joanne recalled in their book, their trip was complicated by actions of the media.

One would think that people would respect the privacy of an invalid travelling behind curtains. To my amazement, several people took it upon themselves to peer through and see what the curtains were shielding ... Even at Bangkok [the first airport where their Thai Air plane landed after leaving Kathmandu] there were intrusions.

Once the plane was clear of passengers, we took down the curtains. It was too hot to leave them in place. Suddenly, two men came racing down the aisle, saying they knew our family and wanted to talk to us. They were journalists from *The Courier-Mail*. They had hidden in the toilets of the plane in the hope of getting a photograph and interview. James told them that he’d ‘had a pretty shitty six weeks’ and just wanted to be left alone. They were quickly despatched.

Our stopover in Singapore was amazing. The reception from the press brought the ambulance to a standstill. Reporters swarmed the hospital to the point where we had to smuggle James out in the morning through the morgue.<sup>263</sup>

Upon arrival in Brisbane, a Federal Airports Authority officer entered the plane and said that, given the large media contingent on the tarmac, he had arranged for pooled coverage and would restrict the number of media entering the plane. This was something neither Joanne or James had asked for, nor wanted, given James’s state of health and the legal contracts arranged by Miller. James asked for, and got, a curtain around his hospital bed as it was unloaded into an awaiting ambulance. This was just a taste of things to come, as Joanne described in their book:

The headlines for 14 February centred around a supposed security row over James’s transportation to the Royal Brisbane Hospital. It seemed the ambulances had raced with sirens blaring, even going on the wrong side of the road to get round a traffic light, with a large police escort.

On arrival at the RBH, cameramen had been ‘jostled’ by hospital security staff. Miller was blamed for all of this. An official investigation later revealed he had nothing to do with it. Apparently a number of police had headed to the scene of their own volition. The hospital had every right to keep the media off its premises and protect a patient’s request for privacy.

The media made a bigger fuss about the events involved in James’s transportation to hospital than was really warranted. Their noses were probably out of joint at not being permitted to intrude on a very private occasion.<sup>264</sup>

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263 Op. cit., P190.

264 Op. cit., Pp190-191.

*Ongoing media coverage*

Far from being a 'seven-day-wonder', the swirl of media attention around James Scott, his rescue and his repatriation continued for almost a month, Joanne recalled. She said the intense interest lasted until the contracted interviews were published. The *60 Minutes* and the *London Daily Telegraph* stories came out about the same time and there was a resurgence of interest around James' and Gaye's wedding, in June, 1992, and again then when their book was published, in September 1993. Joanne estimated members of the family had done a further dozen interviews (since the initial contracted ones) over the decade since her brother's rescue. 'James tends to refuse interviews now.'

If Joanne and James thought the media's interest in his story would wane after their book was published, they were to find out otherwise. Four years ago they declined an offer to make a film of their ordeal and as the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordeal approached at the end of 2001, one Brisbane journalist began calling around outsiders who had been in Nepal during the search and rescue period. James, too, was contacted and, when he declined to be interviewed, the female reporter told him the story would go ahead with or without him. The reporter later made an unannounced visit to his home, telling his wife Gaye she had some photographs they might like. Under these 'false pretenses', Joanne said, the reporter was invited in and then asked James again for an interview. Again he declined. Joanne said the reporter then 'intimated that he would be making life very hard for himself if he did not co-operate'.

The Scott family remains anxious that any rehash of James' story will perpetuate numerous errors and myths that emerged in the early 1990s and further compromise their privacy. It also put James and his family in a no-win situation, according to Joanne. If the family does not want to be interviewed, they face having their story told for them. If they agree to one interview, they can expect many more media requests. If they re-engage Harry M. Miller to act on their behalf, they may again be branded as 'in it for the money', which she said they were not.

That option also presented other risks, too, Joanne said. ‘In the likely self-righteous indignation that [the media] may feel in response to Miller intervening, any issues of ethical breaches will become dulled.’ Then, she said, the most likely perception would be that employing Miller was unfair and the ‘gloves would be off’. Nevertheless, she said, she was ‘surprised at how stressful I am finding the prospect of an article ... even 10 years down the track, reporting of the events still causes us all concern and distress’.

As this thesis was being finalised, ‘Man who came in from the cold’ was *The Sunday Mail*’s ‘big story’ for January 6, 2002 (Pp44-45). Unable to gain sufficient access to James Scott or Joanne Robertson, the paper ran its feature largely based on the pair’s 1993 book, *Lost in the Himalayas*. The family remains anxious about further unwanted media interest.

Back in 1992, even the contracted interviews had their problems, according to Joanne, who rankles at the recollection of the initial program put together by [Nine Network’s] *60 Minutes* just a week after James returned to Brisbane, even before he was discharged from hospital:

... Richard Carleton [the reporter] made it clear that – I don’t know whether he believed the story or not – but he doesn’t believe anyone should ever be paid, so because we were paid, or that was the way the contract went, he was off-side from day one and he was very antagonistic and very, very aggressive to James. In fact we walked out of the interview with him and refused to have anything more to do with him ... It put James in a very dangerous situation...

Carleton had a bug up his arse about the money and about the chocolate bar. They were very, very underhanded. James came out of hospital and it was always like ‘just another question, just another question’. We’d done the bloody barbeque at Mt Cotton bit, you know how they always have to have a bloody barbeque on *60 Minutes*. You had to have some family meal on a *60 Minutes* program. You know we’d entertained them, we’d done this, we’d done that, I spent a lot of time with them, they had James in hospital, they had James at the farm, they had James here, James there over several days and anyway, they let James out of hospital, and it was ‘we just need a few more questions James’ and it went on and on and on and on.

And, at that point, remember, [James] couldn’t see. He couldn’t see in front of him and he also had a lot of autonomic changes, that meant his blood pressure and heart rate and stuff were all over the shop and they didn’t know why that was happening. And he’d been allowed out (to do the *60 Minutes* taping) on the condition that it was very calm, that it wasn’t for very long.

So we were at my parents’ house at St Lucia (for the taping), and James got to the point where he said ‘look, I’m tired, I want to stop now’. The producer, Alan Hogan, and Carleton went off for a bit ... and came back and said ‘just a few more questions James’. Carleton ... (had) already asked James prior to that: ‘What was the brand of chocolate bar?’ and James said: ‘I don’t want to answer that question’ and Carleton said: ‘Why not?’ and James said: ‘because it didn’t mean anything the brand of chocolate bar, you know I ate it in the first few days ... why don’t you ask me about the sleeping bag I used or the shoes that I wore?’

They came back in after James said he was tired and Carleton leads off with 'Do you feel any contrition for what you have done?' and James said 'I don't know what contrition means' and Carleton said 'do you feel guilty for all the grief you've caused?' And I was watching and I thought, 'now, you're being a bit of a pig here' because James had said he was tired and it's not a very fair question to lead onto when someone is sick.

Anyway, James said 'yes, of course I feel guilt for what I have put everybody through' and Carleton just went on and on, through a number of like, five or six questions just repeating the same thing and then he asked James about his marriage and you could almost feel, like, the look of relief on James' face and he said, 'yes, yes, we're going to get married' and Carleton said 'And what was the brand of chocolate bar?' and James said 'I don't want to answer that question.' And Carleton said 'Why not?' and James said 'because I don't think that it's relevant' and Carleton asked four or five times and James seemed to be getting more and more upset and James – he never loses his temper – he completely ...

Carleton said it again, and James said 'because I don't think it adds to the s.u.d. you so and so' and the only thing, James just jumped up and I jumped in at that point and I said 'Stop this now. We are stopping this (interview) right now' and I took James' pulse and it was so high that I couldn't even measure it. And I thought, 'Fuck, he's going to have a heart attack on us'. He was tachycardic and really red in the face, he couldn't see and he said 'I'm going to kill him, I'm going to kill him' and, like, remember what this guy's just been through, what James has been through.

But *60 Minutes* wasn't about to lose its contracted star performer, so all stops were pulled out to get the arrangement back on track: 'They had the audacity to ring us again and say "You know, what we've got was good, but we just need, like, a farewell scene from the hospital"' and I said "You can take your scene and shove it up your arse, you're not getting a thing out of us". At their behest, Miller stepped in and spoke to then *60 Minutes* executive producer John Westacott. Joanne was flown to Sydney, first-class, to preview the program they were proposing to air. She found half a dozen factual errors in what was going to be broadcast and these were corrected.

Joanne also gave Westacott a serve:

I said, 'You know, it's all right for you people, you might have hides like rhinoceroses but we don't. We're new to this and how dare you treat us like that?' Carleton, to this day, if anyone ever does any interview with Carleton, the James Scott story is brought up in a negative light for him. So, I think he got his wrist slapped quite firmly for the way he handled the whole thing because ... they could have had such a great story.

When [Carleton] was not on camera ... he just sat by himself. The only time he interacted with people was to do magic tricks ... He's really a very, very odd person. You know, you put him in a barbeque, for them to film it, you wouldn't think it would kill the guy to have a little bit of intercourse ... anyway, he was very odd. The day he met James, he actually started crying, too ... A very odd fellow.

Ten months later, James and Joanne – accompanied by his fiancée Gaye – went back to Nepal with *60 Minutes* to fulfil their contractual commitment. After their earlier difficulties with *60 Minutes*, John Westacott then took James and Joanne sailing on his yacht in Sydney and then proposed James make a trip back to Nepal with *60 Minutes* because a part of the original deal with the program had also been for a documentary for the Nine Network and footage was needed for that. The pair said that, if Carleton and his producer Alan Hogan were to have anything to do with the return trip, James would not ‘have a bar of it’. They were told another reporter, Charles Woolley, and his producer, David Hardacre, would be available. Joanne immediately felt more comfortable with the proposal:

[Nine] hadn't been to the rock at all, no one had been to the rock at that point, except for James and the rescue party. I was to be excluded from all of that and then, about two weeks before they were going, they rang and said 'Well, look, we've reconsidered. Do you want to come along?' Now, you've got to remember James left Nepal in a sick, sick state. I had so many people I should have thanked because so many people did so much for me and that is why I agreed to go back.

I could see this would be a great opportunity to go back with James re-meet those people and properly thank them. And, also I wanted to have a look at the rock ... Although you could say 'Well, here you are getting on your high horse about what a pack of sods *60 Minutes* are but you certainly didn't look twice about going back with them' and, okay, I didn't, but I had my own motives for doing it and I mean I don't think Kerry Packer was going to miss the cost anyway.

So, we went back and it was okay, it was interesting to see the rock and stuff like that and it was interesting Gaye came back too. So, we did that, and Charles Woolley brought up the chocolate bars in a jovial sense, sort of 'burying the hatchet' type stuff.

Yet engaging Miller after James was rescued was the smartest move they had made, according to Joanne. ‘The only thing I would do differently now would be to get him involved earlier’. Miller did intervene on the Scott's behalf when one of the rescuers took – and refused to return – negatives of photographs (taken by and of James under his rock and being airlifted to Kathmandu) and tried to peddle them to French magazine *Paris Match* for ‘a substantial sum of money’. The deal came unstuck when the *Daily Telegraph* in London got wind of the impending publication and took action to stop it. Subsequently, the story was syndicated to *Paris Match* and the negatives returned to Miller in Sydney.

True to the model sketched by Littlemore, the Scotts also experienced the ‘spoiler’ articles. Joanne recalled how the newspapers and television programmes that had not bought the exclusive rights produced articles that cast James in a bad light or tried to divert their readers’ attention elsewhere. Some distractions, she noted, were quite ‘clever’.

The day our story came out in the newspaper, the rival paper ran a headline about ‘Our Real Iceman’. It was about someone who had crossed Antarctica. On the same day a number of opposition papers ran long articles which claimed to tell James’s story of how he survived, even going to the extent of writing what they felt he was thinking and saying to himself. Readers not knowing any better would have believed it all.<sup>265</sup>

Others were purely fictitious and Joanne said it was ‘amazing’ what the media managed to produce when neither she nor James had said a word to them: ‘In an attempt to get a story, one reporter even went to the extent of phoning James’s medical student friends in the hope of “digging up some dirt” on James.’

#### *Positives of media coverage*

Not all of the media’s actions were negative, according to Joanne, who said in her book it was ‘easy to concentrate on the negatives rather than the positives’.

We also had some very encouraging letters sent to newspapers and some wonderful editorials written. A lot of the articles were quite positive. As James’s health improves and he talks freely with people, reports have continued to be favourable. Letters bearing good wishes from all over the world arrived. Some, merely addressed to ‘James Scott, Himalayan Survivor, Australia’, have found their way to my parents’ house.

By the end of April, we had paid back every cent that went into the search, something that we would never have been able to do without the media interest. We had a thanksgiving party at the farm and invited everyone who had supported us throughout those traumatic months.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Scott & Robertson (1993), P191.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

In her interview she said she didn't want to 'tar all of [the media] with the same brush' and felt she could partly empathise with their position:

... what would I do in that situation? I don't know. Your job's on the line, your report is expensive. This is what they said, the reporters said 'We've spent thousands of dollars to come over here to talk to you, Joanne,' and I said, 'I never bloody asked you to come. You want something to do with your money, there's an American fellow missing, whose family couldn't get a search going and they couldn't afford it'. I said 'put some of your bloody money into trying to find him and make your own damn story and leave us alone'. You know, you know, it's too simple, they want the ready made story there.

After the initial maelstrom of attention subsided and James and Joanne prepared to launch their book, the reception from the media was far more sedate. 'It was a completely different type of reporting, there was no press skepticism, no difficult questions, it was all 'what a wonderful story' and [so on].'

#### *Negatives of media coverage*

Joanne identified three key concerns with media coverage of her family:

- the way in which the media manipulated public perception and vilified innocent people;
- the media simply making up stories and passing off their own fictions as fact; and
- the invasions of privacy.

Looking back on the whole episode, Joanne freely admits she did ‘off-side’ many in the media at the time. But the fact she got James home safely ‘vindicates anything I might have done’. What was particularly upsetting, according to Joanne, ‘was the way that we were vilified and the way that the press was able to manipulate the public’s perception of our family and what we had done’:

...what had happened here was that we had had someone we loved, James, go missing. So, we pulled out all stops, went over there and he was found alive. Now that is a huge feat in itself. Because westerners go missing in Nepal and over a third of cases nothing is ever found, dead or alive ... I had to get him back home to his fiancée and his parents alive.

That’s what I was trying to do and all my actions were aimed towards that, to try to protect him and I felt that it was very, very unfair the way we were then vilified, I’d use that word again, you know, ‘why aren’t we talking?’, ‘who do the Scotts...’. One letter to the editor said ‘how dare the Scotts manipulate the media?’ ‘How dare the *Scotts* manipulate the *media*?’

To come back [from Nepal] and have my word doubted: ‘Was it a hoax?’ Why the hell would anyone do a hoax like that? And the things that the press looked at, the bloody chocolate bars.

The day James arrived back, I don’t know if you can remember at all, but there was two ambulances that [travelled back to the RBH from the airport] with their bloody sirens. Oh, God, that was beaten up as bloody one of the worst sins since I don’t know what. You know, you just couldn’t win.

You felt that you had no right of reply and that we had just been completely misrepresented ... yes, that frightened me. It shocked me. I had no idea of the power of the press and I think that it’s imperative that the press become more accountable for the things they write and the things they do ... [Almost a decade later] I’m still very angry about it.

Joanne said that, while only one or two people had told her to her face that they did not believe the Scotts’ story, her family felt its integrity was repeatedly questioned: ‘To say: “Did that really happen?” is like saying you’re a liar.’ She said she held the media responsible for these sentiments because there was never any need for such questioning. Nonetheless, Joanne conceded, someone could say ‘Well, if you had been more forthcoming with information, they wouldn’t have had to go there’.

Then there were the ‘inventions’ by media outlets. One women’s magazine suggested James had to go and live in a warm climate. That, said Joanne, ‘was actually complete junk’:

Publishing an article like that was complete bullshit. [It] was invented, that whole story. [No interview had taken place.] And it was not the only ‘created’ piece. I can show you an article from one of the papers which has lifted the image straight off the television. There was actually something just the other day. In an article on Harry M. Miller, there was a picture of James and a Nepali kid with a Mars bar. I mean, the Mars bar is an imprint. There’s no way that photo was ever given to whatever paper that was ... [In these matters] we feel very disempowered.

Asked whether media from other countries were any better behaved, Joanne recalled how (London) *Daily Telegraph* reporter Eric Bailey had said – when he returned to Brisbane about the same time as James was being transferred to the Royal Brisbane Hospital – that he'd never seen anything in Fleet Street as bad, 'he said they'd make Fleet Street look good'. Privacy, or lack of it, remained a critical issue for the Scott family, who felt severely harassed, according to Joanne:

We're a very private family and I think you'll find that people like us and other people who you talk to don't go looking for this sort of thing to happen. And it's a huge invasion of privacy, I mean, would you want to be photographed when you're really sick? Would you want to have your stuff broadcast to the world before you had spoken to your parents? Would you want your first reunion with your fiancée being shown on national television? Nobody would, very few people would. And they have to respect that. They have no right to come in and demand...if people are happy to see them and agree to see them, then good. And, if they reflect 'no', then they should take that as 'no'. They don't have a right, the public doesn't necessarily have a right to probe into everybody's life.

Joanne's opinions of the media have changed irrevocably because of what she has experienced. Prior to this incident, she said, she would have rated the media rather highly and 'believed what I read, unfortunately'. Since the incident, she said, her impression of the media as a whole was 'rather poor': 'It was only after what we'd been through that I thought Lindy Chamberlain never had a hope.' Despite Australia's reputation for lopping 'tall poppies', Joanne says she believes things have changed somewhat over the past few decades:

I think there's been a huge change in society from the World War II times to now and why has that happened? Is it because people are becoming more cynical and nasty or is it because pressures and influences such as the media are creating a more cynical society and it comes back, it's like a *Catch 22* situation. Do people – like Princess Diana's death, there's a lot of flagellation there – are the media obligated to print horrible stuff that the public want to hear or do the public only want to hear the what the media print. They don't have to print it.

What John Westacott said to us was 'We only print (sic) what the public want to hear' but, given that that's what they print, the public don't have any choice than to hear it. I don't think it's as cut and dried as people becoming more cynical, I think it has to do with the stuff they're fed as well. I think [the public is] becoming more discerning. I think around the time of 10 years ago, I don't think they were, but I think some stuff has happened to make them more aware of the way that the media can behave.

I think that [ABC TV's current affairs parody] the *Frontline* show, [and] a number of debates – like the one on *60 Minutes* [known as the] 'Has the media gone too far?' crisis forum – [have contributed to the change]. I remain very jaded, the actual way [the forum] came across at the end of the day wasn't too bad at all. I didn't look nearly as ... to me the process was horrifying and awful, but they edited it and cut out bits, so I came across not looking quite as persecuted as I actually was. You don't want to have a victim persecuted in a debate: that means you have gone too far, it doesn't do anybody any good.<sup>267</sup>

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ABC TV's *Frontline* had an episode, *Desert Angels*, which, Joanne says, was a spoof on her family's experience with a voracious media.

*Feedback for the media from the participant*

Joanne said newsroom managers and individual journalists needed to ask themselves how they would feel if they were the subject of all the media attention after a traumatic incident: 'If you were in my shoes, how would you have handled it? The people who would want to demand photos, demand interviews. I mean, would Jana Wendt – if she was in that situation – want to be filmed sick in hospital bed and, you know, (she) wouldn't.'

While Joanne herself clearly took most of the brunt when it came to the media, James' experiences reflect hers, and he was 'still astonished' by the media reception he received. He summed up his impressions about media behaviour in the epilogue of their book.

The initial articles which aimed to discredit my story generated a lot of scepticism and hostility. Views voiced by ill-informed individuals were soul-destroying. My only desire was to be left in peace with Gaye and my family and friends.

As my health improved, I was prepared to be interviewed and talk to journalists, who would subsequently publish more accurate articles. The influence the media had over the public and the power they possessed shocked all of those who were close to the family.<sup>268</sup>

In May, 2000, Joanne revealed that, in retrospect, the trauma created by the media's behaviour in the first instance was in many ways greater than the intense pressure and worry surrounding the search, rescue, evacuation and recovery process.

I probably was very naive, but we're not an under-educated family. I didn't see myself (a vet) as under-educated at all or under-informed. But we didn't have a clue. So, my father's a professor of biochemistry and my mother's a PhD. James is a doctor and I'm a vet. What do people do who are too fazed or are unable to respond? It must be awful for them.

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Scott &amp; Robertson (1993), Pp193-195.

### *Conclusion*

In contrast to the speculation, half-truths and occasional inventions that characterised much of the media coverage surrounding James Scott's rescue, recovery and repatriation, experienced Himalayan mountain-climber Tim Macartney-Snape used rational analysis and reflection to write a very different summation of what happened to James during his time in his snow cave. In the prologue of James' and Joanne's book, Macartney-Snape – working through simple, logical processes – endorses the position of the Scott family vis-à-vis the media:

The first I every heard of James Scott was via a barrage of phone calls from newspaper and radio stations eager to add an experienced mountaineer's opinion to what had the aura of a media frenzy. I was well aware of the media's weakness for beating up a story and getting the facts wrong.

I'd been out of touch with current news at the time but they told me that the young Brisbane man had been found alive after having spent 43 days trapped in an ice cave with nothing to eat but two chocolate bars. I tried to explain that, if he had been trapped for 43 days, mention of the chocolate was as irrelevant as saying he'd had chocolate for dessert at his last meal.

When told that the altitude he'd been found at was around 3500 metres, I tried to explain that it was unlikely to have been an ice cave he was trapped in: a rock overhang was more likely.

Nevertheless, if it was true that he had been holed up for 43 days, it was a most remarkable story of courage and determination ... It was a couple of weeks before I began to make sense of some classically bad journalism that had left many people sceptical about the truth of James's story.

Only when I'd been given a reliable indication of where he had been trapped, did I begin to understand how a strong, fit and obviously sensible person could get himself into such a seemingly unlikely position. In retrospect, it is all too easy to be critical, especially when not all the facts are known.

Having read James's full story, I can see that he did nothing to deserve the criticism he's had. Everyone makes simple mistakes and we can learn as much from our own mistakes and those of our fellows as we can from our successes.<sup>269</sup>