

## Chapter 7      **Summary of victim experiences**

The first section of this chapter summarises specific incidents, allegations and criticisms raised by participants in this research and then lists the ethical and practice concerns – as well as any breaches or deficiencies – those matters highlight. Responses from victims and communities are incorporated, along with observations by the author of this thesis, an experienced police rounds reporter and publicist. The remaining sections deal with the broader issues of journalistic practice, the adequacy of Australia’s media complaints mechanisms, the issue of media transforming victims into ‘celebrities’, managing the media onslaught, and what the media needs to understand before coverage begins.

### **7.1      Summary of experiences and concerns they raise**

#### **7.1.1      *Issues relating to the behaviour of journalists***

##### *A deluge of media attention*

For the victims of Port Arthur, the Scott family and others, intense media attention was not only stressful and added to their worries, but also was ongoing. Key observations were:

- Overwhelming attention from news media was ‘all pervasive’ after the Port Arthur massacre in April, 1996 and some participants reported that victims, survivors, witnesses, community leaders and neighbours were pestered by the world’s media, day and night, for up to a fortnight after the massacre;
- More than 200 journalists were dispatched to cover the massacre in Port Arthur and Hobart alone, many hundreds more were covering the story from newsrooms around the world;
- The volume and timing of media enquiries compromised the Port Arthur Historic Site’s ability to respond and communicate on day of shootings and put considerable strain on Site resources for months afterwards;
- Large numbers of media corralled for safety or other reasons in one spot after the Thredbo landslide of July 1997 placed further stress on – and sometimes distress – authorities, communities and concerned individuals;
- Residents of Thredbo village reported the presence of the large numbers of media after the landslide had ‘invaded’ their privacy;

- The University of Queensland's switchboard was jammed by calls and one of its key science laboratories 'brought to a halt' by eager media when word got out that James Scott, the son of a UQ professor, had been found alive after being lost in the Himalayas for 43 days;
- At home in Brisbane, the Scott family was exhausted by constant media attention in the days following their son's rescue;
- At the same time in the Patan hospital in Nepal, James' sister Joanne and medical staff found they were constantly answering media calls and fending off sneaky attempts by media to obtain access to her gravely ill brother; and
- The only two telephone lines into the Patan hospital were clogged with media calls.

The main shortfall in these situations is that the MEAA/AJA Code of Ethics, and virtually all other Australian media codes of practice, tend to obligate journalists as individuals rather than as an industry or even as group of individual journalists. For instance, issues raised by the *mass response of media* during or after a traumatic incident were neither anticipated nor addressed in the 1984 version of the AJA's Code of Ethics. While the terms 'accountability' and 'respect for the rights of others' were added to the revised Code of Ethics in 1997, the consequences of actions by (individual or larger numbers of) news personnel on victims were neither raised nor addressed. By comparison, an important tranche of the Code of Ethics for US journalists is the section which bids them to minimise harm: 'Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.'

### *The need for sensitivity*

Victims from two different cohorts, the Port Arthur massacre (a multiple-death traumatic event) and the industrial deaths cohort (several single-death events) agreed the media needed to be more sensitive to their situations and to their losses.

- News media lacked sensitivity in the way journalists operated and presented news. Ratings and/or commercial interests were all-important;
- News media covering the Port Arthur massacre were disrespectful of victims, they were intrusive and the 'very process of being interviewed stressed the already shocked and distraught local community';
- It was never a 'win-win' for victims; there was an unfeeling attitude towards victims [Site staff in particular];
- Non-local news media tend to be more intrusive;
- Intrusiveness continued to be a problem at Port Arthur, particularly during initial and anniversary ceremonies ('angling to get close-ups of people crying');

- Participants from Port Arthur said news media – particularly television – tended to dominate such public events rather than remaining at a respectful distance;
- Some reporters covering the massacre tended to demand information or co-operation rather than request them: ‘they just wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer’; and
- One television reporter covering industrial workplace deaths in Victoria was accused of pushing interviewees until she could ‘get something [she wanted]’.

While the (US) SPJ Code of Ethics urges journalists to show compassion and sensitivity to those affected by tragedy or grief, especially children and the inexperienced, the Australian Code of Ethics for journalists does not include such a requirement, although the relevant section of the SBS Code of Practice begins to capture the spirit of such important considerations. During the lengthy revision process for the latest version of the MEAA’s Code of Ethics, a 20-clause version of the Code was put up for discussion. It was later whittled to 12 clauses. One of the clauses dropped from the final list was: ‘At times of grief or trauma, always act with sensitivity and discretion. Never exploit a person’s vulnerability or ignorance of media practice. Interview only with informed consent.’ Nevertheless, respect for private grief and personal privacy should be key considerations in such instances. It is important for Australian news media, particularly non-local media, to be more sensitive and less intrusive when covering traumatic events. As for allowing ratings and commercial interests to affect the tone and professionalism of coverage, the past two iterations of the MEAA Code of Ethics have urged journalists to ‘not allow advertising or other commercial considerations to undermine accuracy, fairness or independence’. Nevertheless, a guidance clause at the end of the current MEAA Code of Ethics provides an escape route. It states: ‘Only substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people allows any standard to be overridden.’

### *Pressuring victims to co-operate*

Participants said news media used a variety of tactics to persuade, coerce or pressure sources into giving them what they wanted – the person’s time, their accounts of what had happened or other information to add to their stories.

- Victims, survivors, witnesses and families from all cohorts said they had sometimes been 'railroaded' into stories and photographs in the initial days and weeks after their traumatic event. Where this happened, they subsequently reported discomfort, dissatisfaction and displeasure at being co-erced into such a position. Some said they felt exploited and remained critical about the distorted light in which they were presented in images or stories;
- Similarly, deal-making with victims, survivors, witnesses and their families after traumatic incidents – appeals for exclusive coverage, offers of payment for stories, information or images – causes distress, especially to those inexperienced in the ways of the media. Months after the Port Arthur massacre, a freelance reporter for a national women's magazine doing a 'coping story' suggested a witness to the deaths of the Mikac family be photographed in front of tree where the two children were shot. The witness, wary of the reporter's motives, declined. Reporter then insisted on story being kept 'an exclusive'. When witness' workplace agreed to do a story with *60 Minutes* and involved the witness, the interviewee said the freelance magazine reporter 'turned very nasty', making repeated calls to abuse the witness and her family and threaten legal action. The interviewee said a *60 Minutes* producer negotiated a truce with the magazine and the *60 Minutes* story went to air as planned. Both media outlets are owned by the same organisation. Witness said the episode 'put me off ever dealing with [the media] again...';
- News media fail to understand – or allow for the fact – that most victims, survivors, witnesses and their families are novices when it comes to dealing with the media. This sees them exploited and, often, has repercussions for these novices that they would not have envisaged;
- Every industrial death participant singled out one female reporter from the Seven Network in Melbourne who regularly covered workplace news. They said she was disliked because she was always 'pushy' and tended to 'put words' in the mouths of those inexperienced with the ways of the media;
- One family who lost their son in a workplace explosion said it felt its privacy was being 'invaded' by television news and subsequently declined several interviews; and
- In Australia and in Nepal, quite soon after James Scott's rescue, journalists offered large sums of money to do an exclusive story about his ordeal. When media were asked to wait until James was well enough and had returned home to Australia, the pressure to co-operate simply mounted. Some journalists tried to use the fact that their organisations had spent so much money on getting them there as a reason for a perilously ill James and his exhausted family to agree to an interview. '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.' The contract eventually negotiated by Harry M. Miller was not the largest offered but one that would allow James some recovery time before any interview took place.

Interviewees should not be bullied in certain directions or to give particular responses, says one participant, nor have 'words put in their mouths' because it suits what a journalist is looking for. Crying, distressed interviewees often do not register what is happening to them in interview situations. Journalists should not provoke or exacerbate a victim's distress. This sort of feedback is consistent with several provisions in the MEAA's current Code of Ethics, beginning with respect for the rights of others, but also incorporating respect for private grief and personal privacy (the latter featuring in the current and previous codes).

Throughout the time spanned by all case studies in this thesis, journalists have had the ‘right to resist compulsion to intrude’ on people experiencing grief or wanting privacy in the aftermath of a traumatic event. Yet, in practice, participant feedback suggests that this right is not widely exercised. On the other hand, the moral and ethical dilemmas presented by chequebook journalism are never in sharper focus than after a traumatic incident. With people barely functioning, participants in this research describe how Australian media organisations are attempting to barter themselves into a front-seat position to ensure healthier ratings, regardless of the impact such behaviour might have on victims, survivors, witnesses or their families and communities. Apart from stretching the interpretation of the MEAA’s Code of Ethics, this is an area requiring urgent attention by all forms of Australian media if they want a self-regulation framework to continue. If not addressed, the untimely and unwanted pressure to negotiate on those who are largely inexperienced in the ways of the media is likely to spur action by governments and regulators.

### *Swarming of victims, survivors and others*

Just like Port Arthur pharmacist Walter Mikac and Thredbo survivor Stuart Diver, many participants from all three cohorts featured in this research cited significant problems with large groups of media.

- Victims, survivors, witnesses and the broader community reported being pestered constantly, day and night, by news media for up to a fortnight after the massacre;
- A ‘media pack’ descended on staff attending a counselling session at the Port Arthur site;
- Another pack harassed families and friends as they came to visit those hospitalized in Hobart;
- News media working in packs at public events such as IDSA commemorative marches frighten and distress the families of those who lost their lives in the workplace;
- One woman noted that eager media had overwhelmed her after she was ejected from a Royal Commission, ignoring her need for a moment’s privacy to compose herself before she spoke to them; and
- Another woman described feeling like ‘a frightened rabbit’ when confronted by a news media pack when she agreed to help publicise a workplace safety initiative.

People who have experienced this ‘pack’ first-hand said it was inappropriate, frightening and stressful. One said it would be easier if news crews approached individually those people already distressed by a traumatic event. News media need to be more respectful of the personal space and privacy wishes of victims, survivors and witnesses of traumatic events. They need to extend the same courtesy to the families and communities of these people as well. The tendency to swarm victims, their families or their representatives has become an increasingly common phenomenon that is not only evident in news broadcasts and from participant feedback but is also featured in modern films that depict journalists at work. Retired Melbourne newspaper photographer Dennis Bull (personal communication, March 2000) observed during this research, ‘we used to be referred to as “the gentlemen of the press” – until television reporters came along’.

The feedback about media swarms in this research – particularly from those who have attended court or coronial hearings following deaths in the workplace – tallied with observations by Spungen (1998).

When co-victims [attending court] get within sight of the camera crews, a collective shout goes up from the press, ‘There they are!’ and the entire media group runs forward like a pack of wolves going in for the kill. The camera lights bob and weave as the camera crews race toward their prey. Anyone in their path is unceremoniously bumped, shoved, jostled, or knocked out of the way. Co-victims are left shaking, frightened, and often in tears at this display of the freedom of the press at its worst. Even if co-victims’ relationships with the media are well established and amicable, co-victims are usually so intimidated by this exhibition that any thoughts of speaking to the media are quickly forgotten as they lower their heads in a defensive posture.

Not much can be done to influence the media to behave in a different way in such a highly competitive setting.<sup>270</sup>

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Spungen (1998), Pp226-227.

### *Deception and dishonesty*

Port Arthur participants, the Scott family and others have spoken about the deception practised by journalists in order to gain access to information, images or sources.

- Journalists used deceptive means to obtain – or try to obtain – information or images. The nation's national daily newspaper, *The Australian*, manipulated the eyes of Port Arthur gunman Martin Bryant when it ran his photograph on Page One. This image was obtained by deception when staff from another News Limited newspaper, *The Mercury*, distracted a police officer and entered Bryant's house to gain access to the image. 'There was no need to show his photo, let alone show it in full colour on the front page of the paper with his eyes doctored';
- In Nepal, journalists masqueraded as James Scott's travel insurers, they prowled around the hospital intruding on critically ill people, including James, some attempted to steal his medical records, photographers attempted to climb through his hospital window to gain access to the gravely ill trekker;
- Two *Courier-Mail* journalists hid in the toilets of the plane carrying James Scott home to Brisbane when it landed at Bangkok and, after other passengers had disembarked, approached his portable hospital bed for a photograph and interview during the stopover;
- Calling James Scott's father after midnight, one journalist asked how he felt to hear that his son had just gone into renal failure when no such development had happened; and
- A decade later, a reporter who had been told James would not participate in a story marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his rescue turned up unannounced at his home saying she had some photographs that he did not already have in order to gain entry and ask again for an interview. When he declined, the reporter said 'he would make life hard for himself if he did not co-operate'.

The image of Martin Bryant, its treatment and the way it was obtained have deservedly been the subject of much discussion, criticism and controversy within the news media itself and in the broader community. Its use caused additional pain to those directly affected by his actions. Given the circumstances and extent of this massacre, the number of people affected was not small. Deceptive means of obtaining news, pictures, films, tapes and documents were specifically outlawed in the MEAA's 1984 Code of Ethics. This is the version that would have been in force during the Port Arthur massacre (and when James Scott's story rose to prominence). Clearly the issue needed reinforcing, because the 1997 revision lists honesty as its first principle and urges journalists to 'use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material', reminding them they should identify themselves and their employers 'before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast'.

Journalists determined to beat the competition to stories – or fresh angles on existing stories – still need to behave within the confines of professional and ethical practice. Under MEAA guidelines, deceitful and devious practices that endanger the welfare of victims, survivors, witnesses or their families should not be condoned unless there is ‘a risk of substantial harm to people’. In James Scott’s case, no such risk was acknowledged.

#### *Access to victims and survivors*

One Port Arthur participant said the media had to rethink its approach to assuming access to victims and survivors. In times of trauma, one Port Arthur participant said, news media do not have an automatic right to access/interview victims/survivors and their families, ‘ordinary’ people (i.e., people without experience in dealing with the media). This feedback goes beyond the spirit of the MEAA’s current Code of Ethics which tells journalists: ‘never exploit a person’s vulnerability or ignorance of media practice’, a requirement not contained in the 1984 version of this code which would have been current in 1996.

#### *Gross lack of consideration of victims, survivors and communities*

In Port Arthur, the actions of one television star drew heavy criticism from several participants in this research and had direct consequences for other media.

- The then *A Current Affair* host Ray Martin landed in his helicopter on the school grounds at Nubeena to allow his crew swift access to interviewee Walter Mikac, who lived and worked nearby. The school community was already traumatised and had endured the comings and goings of helicopters throughout the previous days. One of Walter’s children who was killed by Bryant had attended the school. Many children and staff at the school had relatives and friends who were hurt or killed during Bryant’s massacre.

This episode demonstrated a gross lack of consideration by ACA that impacted negatively not only on the community but also on all media. Police responded by declaring an air-exclusion zone over the Tasman Peninsula that remained in force for almost a week. The school's council met and immediately declared the school community off-limits to media. The Education Minister promptly approved expenditure for security guards to protect school community from media for several weeks. Several months later, the school principal was approached by ABC TV to do a 'recovery' story and was heavily rebuked by his council for his participation. Council approached ABC TV and protested about the damage a story about the school community could do. ABC TV took note of these concerns and did not run the offending interview in its report. (This information confirmed by both then chair of the school council Peter Rigozzi and the ABC TV reporter who was preparing the story, Judy Tierney).

#### *Preconceived story angles*

One Port Arthur participant, a number from the industrial deaths cohort and Joanne Robertson all spoke of journalists who came to cover stories with either personal pre-conceptions of what they would find and report or a pre-determined direction for their stories imposed by newsrooms. All said this was unhelpful, even distressing for those grappling with grief, trauma and other issues.

- News crews should not be sent out to cover traumatic incidents with 'pre-conceived' notions of how a story will end up;
- One participant said journalists should remember they are reporting what happened and not making up the news; and
- Another said looking for pre-determined angles – or 'getting things out of people that could turn on them' later – could scar interviewees and destroy their trust in all news media.

This feedback may strike a chord with journalists in the field, who are known to complain that their newsroom has 'preconceived' notions of how a story should pan out, sometimes even at the expense of what they discover when they attend the scene or conduct interviews. Participant and practitioner feedback about this behaviour demonstrates that those who perpetuate it do nothing to protect the MEAA's fundamental (previously 'overriding') principal of 'respect for truth'.

### *Returning to the scene of the crime*

Whenever the media wants to return to the scene of a major crime such as a massacre in a public place, the consequences for those who live and work nearby are often overlooked according to two key Port Arthur participants.

- People who continue to work and/or live at the site of a traumatic incident find it difficult to deal with ongoing requests from media – and others – to visit/photograph the site of that event. One witness said he would have escorted more than 24 such individual media visits in a three-month period after the Port Arthur massacre.

Again, this criticism goes to the heart of mass media response to traumatic events and, while it may highlight the deficiencies of the industry's codes of ethics and codes of practice, it is a fact of life for people in similar positions elsewhere. This is an area where journalists need to consider carefully such requests and try to find less harmful means of 'returning to the scene of the crime'.

### *Sloppy, lazy journalists*

Those participants who were more aware of what the media were doing – two of the Port Arthur case study participants, one of the industrial death cohort and Joanne Robertson – were critical of journalists who were unprepared when they made contact.

- Some journalists want to be spoon-fed. According to one woman experienced in dealing with the media after traumatic events, sloppy, lazy or no research by journalists before they approach interviewees is unacceptable.

By any professional standards, incomplete journalism is undesirable. Employers need to keep reinforcing this message.

### 7.1.2 *Issues relating to the content or presentation of news coverage*

#### *Rerunning disturbing stories and images*

Participants from all three cohorts singled out re-runs of stories and images – or even the prospect of them – as causing unwanted, additional stress that retraumatised victims, survivors and witnesses.

- Participants report that they, their families and their communities are distressed when traumatic events are rehashed by the media to mark anniversaries, when similar events happen or at other times (such as end-of-year or end-of-century retrospectives of big news events). Most times this new coverage of a traumatic event will appear without any warning that disturbing images or stories will be reused. One or two participants said news media should use more warnings before airing stories about traumatic incidents and show some empathy towards people who might be affected by such reports.

This is feedback worth close consideration by Australian newsrooms because it is consistent with findings by other researchers in the fields of psychology and journalism. More detailed, empathetic and frequent warnings would be one tangible way of giving victims, survivors, their families and the public the chance to reduce potential exposure – or re-exposure – to disturbing or distressing images or reports of traumatic incidents. Investigation of a better system of advance or prior warnings – especially one sensitive to the needs and emotions of victims, survivors and their families – would seem to be in order.

#### *Harmful inaccuracies*

Again, all three cohorts reported problems with the accuracy of details in news reports, particularly in the early stages after a traumatic incident.

- Several Port Arthur participants described ‘annoying’ inaccuracies in details about how the events unfolded or people’s names. Only some inaccurate reports were subsequently corrected;
- One industrial death family that requested no media attend the funeral of their son (who died three weeks after a workplace explosion) were not only annoyed to see a photographer from a local paper but also angered by an incorrect caption which was published under a photograph taken at the funeral and published a week later; and
- The Scott family pinpointed numerous errors and even the occasional fabrication after James was rescued in Nepal.

Only 'harmful inaccuracies' were addressed in the MEAA's 1984 Code of Ethics (journalists were urged to do their utmost to correct them). Greater attention to accuracy was paid in the 1997 revision of this code. Avoidable inaccuracies should not be condoned. *The Charlotte Observer*, a Knight Ridder newspaper based in the US city of Raleigh, North Carolina, obliges its journalists to report, on paper, any errors which appear in its publications, indicating how the error occurred, what could have/should have been done to avoid the error and what, if any, remedial action was warranted (including a printed correction). Such an accountability mechanism warrants consideration in Australian newsrooms.

#### *Use of distressing images and sounds*

Again, all three cohorts reported incidences where images and/or sounds used to illustrate stories had distressed victims, survivors, witnesses and their families and communities. Mostly this was in relation to their own traumatic situations, but sometimes the sensitivity was also to the plight of others experiencing traumatic situations.

- A graphic aerial photograph run prominently in the local daily newspaper, *The Mercury*, on the morning after the Port Arthur massacre began showed uncovered bodies of deceased;
- Images and sounds used by television current affairs programs were distressing to victims/survivors after the Port Arthur massacre, especially that of a sequence of gunshots recorded in the background of amateur video shot by a tourist. This footage has been replayed many times since to illustrate subsequent news and current affairs reports;
- A confronting news image of futile rescue attempts to free Justin O'Connor, a Melbourne man submerged after a trench collapsed, was singled out by one participant who had lost her father in an industrial fatality because she thought it would have been the O'Connor family's last photograph of Justin before he died;
- 'Massive pools of cherry red blood' visible in news photographs of two policemen gunned down in Melbourne were also described by this participant as 'in the worst possible taste'; and
- An horrific photograph of stunned men burned and naked from the force of a workplace explosion still haunts and distresses the family of one participant 13 years after it was published by *The Age* and elsewhere. *The Age* endeavoured to disguise his genitalia. *The Canberra Times* did not.

While selecting graphic images or footage to run is in many respects a matter of taste, sensitivity and what newsrooms think their audiences will tolerate, Australian news media are failing to comprehend the special impacts those images can have and that, potentially, they pose the greatest threat of further harm to victims, survivors, witnesses, families and their communities. During this research, people in all of these groups reported being disturbed, horrified, distressed and even haunted by images or vivid descriptions of death scenes, the injured and/or dead bodies, covered or uncovered. The lasting impact of such images and descriptions not only prompts reaction by authorities but also provides stark, incontrovertible visual ‘evidence’ that is incorporated into the minds and memories of people already struggling to cope with the consequences of the traumatic event in question.

Almost universally these people said they wished newsroom decision-makers would ask themselves whether they would publish such images or descriptions if they had been of someone they loved. All participants doubted these news people would do so.

Publishing a photograph of a naked, burned man and in the process showing his genitals is not only tasteless, it would seem to be a clear breach of the MEAA Code of Ethics which urges journalists to respect private grief and personal privacy. Perhaps the US Code of Ethics is more eloquent and precise on this point: ‘Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.’ It suggests journalists ‘show good taste’ and not pander to ‘lurid curiosity’.

Yet some 15 years after this, the weekend after the Bali bombings on October 12, 2002, *The Australian* splashed a full-page, highly controversial photograph of victims stretched out in a makeshift morgue being watched over by people with their noses covered to avoid the stench of decomposing bodies as well as a parade of passers-by peering at them over a sheet. With their clothes placed over their bodies or body bags, identification of individual victims by loved ones might have been possible.<sup>271</sup>

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*The Weekend Australian*, October 19-20, 2002, P19 (front page of Weekend Inquirer section).

Moeller (1999) says the media, in publishing stark and disturbing images, enjoys a privileged and powerful position that must not only be better understood by itself and its consumers but, more importantly, constantly put under critical scrutiny.

It was only after college, while working as a graphic designer and then later as a photographer, that I began to realize I was not the only one who organized the world according to images. I began to appreciate the power of images and the near-absolute power of the right image. But it wasn't until I returned to graduate school and then began to teach in universities that I began to systematically investigate the media's ability, and even authority, to categorize the world by images...Typically we, as media consumers, are so fixated on what the media are telling us that we don't stop to inquire how and why they are saying what they say and showing what they show. The method and manner of the media's coverage are effectively invisible. The meaning of the media's coverage of crises is rarely examined, but its import is incalculable – hence the imperativeness of studying and scrutinizing it.<sup>272</sup>

### *Sensational coverage of traumatic incidents*

Several participants from the Port Athur cohort and James Scott's sister Joanne Robertson pointed out that certain news media outlets tended to sensationalise or 'beat up' coverage of traumatic incidents or the responses to those events – e.g., rescue efforts, conflicts between key players, etc.

- Sensational coverage is unnecessary for traumatic events, especially because it potentially satisfies or rewards the 'criminal element';
- While it would appear unnecessary for journalists to 'beat up' an already large news story, it happens. In rescued trekker's James Scott's case, a magazine story about him having to go and live in a warm climate after he left hospital in Brisbane was a total invention; and
- Another reporter telephoned a number of James' medical student friends in the hope of 'digging up some dirt'.

No ethical or practice code condones invention of stories or quotes. 'Digging up dirt' can be viewed as insensitive and unnecessary or prudent and essential. Journalists would probably argue the latter and claim that the public's interest (or taxpayer money) demands that they at least verify the integrity of newsworthy subjects such as rescue victims. Perhaps the large expenditure of media organisations on a potential story also spurs on such 'investigations'.

### *Exploitative coverage*

Port Arthur participants, in particular, have universally condemned exploitative coverage of their predicament. In particular, each one spoke of a story broadcast in October, 1999, known as ‘The Bryant Tapes’.

- A *Current Affair* exploited Port Arthur victims/survivors, Tasmania Police and the wider community by promoting and airing the ‘Bryant Tapes’ in October, 1999. Another television news media outlet (ABC TV) had tapes well before and chose not to use them on-air. Participant attributed ratings and competition as motives for airing this program; and
- Participants said journalists need to understand and minimise the effect they could have on those directly involved and they should not exploit their grief to make stories more newsworthy. One or two called for a better balance between what was newsworthy and what was humane.

While *ACA* took advantage of a relationship struck up with police negotiators to gain access to footage of earlier negotiations with Bryant, its sensationalised promotion and presentation of these tapes was sudden, disruptive and insensitive to victims, survivors, witnesses, their families and the community in and around Port Arthur. Participants said that airing the tapes had potentially destructive consequences and retraumatised many of those people previously affected by the massacre. It also raised considerable public anger, especially in Tasmania. Many participants said less emphasis on grieving moments would also be constructive.

### *Premature coverage*

Several participants in the industrial deaths cohort reported instances of where they or their families had heard news reports of their loved one’s death well before official notification. While their loved ones were not named, reporting about circumstances surrounding their deaths often caused them various degrees of unease.

- Families of victims say that when news coverage of sudden, violent deaths precedes official notification of next of kin, they sometimes realise that it has been their loved one who was killed;
- Some reported additional distress caused by this early coverage, others pointed to the potential for further harm to be caused; and
- One woman reported seeing footage of the site where her father had been killed more than eight hours before her family was notified.

This is practice bears more consideration by media and police. By utilising scanners, journalists are instantly privy to the conversations of police and emergency services personnel who respond to traumatic events. This often provides the bones of a story, but can be a risky basis for information, which may initially be sketchy and potentially inaccurate and may remain unconfirmed for hours. Rolling deadlines see journalists report ‘what they know’ to stay ahead of their competitors. Where names are not given until police release them, the mere reporting of details about an incident may be sufficient to identify a victim or unnecessarily worry families of victim’s workmates. At this early stage, sketchy reports of traumatic incidents are also likely to cause concerned relatives to telephone workplaces to confirm the welfare of their loved ones.

#### *Dysfunctional coverage of rescues*

Some elements of the dysfunctional coverage of James Scott’s 1992 rescue were repeated in Thredbo survivor Stuart Diver’s 1999 book and then eloquently identified and described as ‘formulaic’ by Australian media critic Stuart Littlemore in 2001. Littlemore suggests Australian media have begun to repond to significant rescue/recovery stories with an identifiable pattern that does little justice to the truth and uniqueness of these situations.

- Littlemore’s identified phases in formulaic coverage – the struggle/search phase, the triumphant discovery, rescue or recovery phase, the ‘boys’ own’ hero-worshipping phase which begins a period of overloaded media attention and *hypercoverage* of the event – feature in both coverage of James Scott and of Stuart Diver. Typically – as James’ sister Joanne points out – survivors and families then need to seek help to handle the media and a media agent negotiates restricted access, sometimes this involves the payment of money by media outlets. The Scotts confirm Littlemore’s assertion that non-contracted media often responds by running spoiler stories that question the survivor’s motives, integrity and preparedness for the incident, leaving survivors vilified and their reputations compromised: ‘You felt that you had no right of reply and that we had just been completely misrepresented.’

Evidence from James Scott and Joanne Robertson most clearly supports Littlemore’s observations. Stuart Diver’s experiences also partly tally with this assessment. If Australia’s media is tending to follow such a pattern, it is doing so in contravention of several aspects of the MEAA’s Code of Ethics and in complete disregard of the truth or respect for the rights of others.

Again, this sort of response shows up the deficiencies of codes of ethics and codes of practice which do not take into account the en masse impact of news media when covering traumatic events like rescues. Media organisations that penalise victims, survivors, witnesses or their families for engaging an intermediary – particularly an experienced one with a business background – behave unethically and do not appear to uphold truth as the fundamental principal of journalism on behalf their audiences. An additional ethics clause requiring an absence of malice could also be helpful.

*Painting victims as ‘celebrities’, ‘heroes’ or ‘villains’*

This concern was directly aired by several Port Arthur participants and the Scott family as well as being perceived by at least two participants from the industrial deaths cohort as indirectly being a reason for coverage of the death of their children.

- Individuals were made into ‘folk heroes’, with considerable negative consequences for themselves, other victims/survivors and the broader community. These people become, willingly or not, ‘unofficial spokespeople’ for the community, the face of the trauma. This does not reflect the range of impacts, emotions or responses felt within that community; and
- The Scott family felt James was often depicted as a ‘villain’, both by non-contracted media (a case of sour grapes) and a ‘disrespectful’ and ‘disbelieving’ *60 Minutes* interviewer Richard Carleton who repeatedly questioned his honesty and hounded him with speculation about the brand of chocolate bar he had been carrying.

Walter Mikac – who was elevated into the public spotlight by *A Current Affair*’s Ray Martin after his wife and two young daughters were killed at Port Arthur – notes in his book *To have and to hold* that intense media attention and public scrutiny of his life since the massacre has been difficult to accept and has come at a personal price. He also noted that he was drawn into what became a national debate on gun laws at his most vulnerable moment during the Ray Martin interview and, as a result, became a standard-bearer whether he liked it or not.

### *Simplified, clichéd approaches to stories*

Participants from all three cohorts in this research recounted incidents where short, formulaic reports – often in magazines – ‘shortchanged’ those being covered and distorted people’s experiences and responses.

- Simplified, clichéd approaches employed by journalists – particularly those working for magazines – are disrespectful, distort the truth and take ‘liberties with people’s stories to make them fit the style and audience of their publication’. Such formulaic stories, one victim noted, do not properly describe the uniqueness of a family’s experiences.

Conciseness, a highly valued attribute – especially when space is at a premium – can erode individuality but, unless it misleads an audience, it could not be said to breach current ethical code provisions. Yet it can leave the public ‘underinformed’ in certain instances.

### *Bias and subjectivity*

Participants from all three cohorts in this research said they felt news media had, at times, not been objective or fair in its coverage of their traumatic event and the traumatic events of others.

- One Port Arthur participant felt that some television programs, particularly on commercial television, were not objective enough, but felt that ABC TV’s news and current affairs were more so;
- One industrial death participant said she had had several experiences where journalists covering traumatic incidents (or their effect on others) had not covered the news objectively or fairly; and
- Joanne Robertson recalled several instances where objectivity and/or fairness were absent from news reports about her brother James Scott.

Such accusations, if proven, would contravene both the 1984 and 1997 versions of the MEAA’s Code of Ethics. However, without more specific evidence – *and* a willing complainant prepared to weather the relevant complaints process – such accusations are hard to substantiate.

### *Fixations with minor details*

The Scott family's experiences show best how media can also become fixated with minor details.

- The media became fixated the brand of the chocolate bar James Scott had been carrying, when in fact that was irrelevant, his sister said, given he had eaten all he had with him within 48 hours of becoming lost;
- News media speculated not only the brand, but also the amount of money James Scott was offered to name the exact brand. He was made no such offer;
- Even *60 Minutes* interviewer Richard Carleton badgered James over the chocolate in an aggressive segment of his contracted interview; and
- Almost a decade later, a digitally manipulated image of James and a Nepali child from a local village – taken in 1992 when he returned to Nepal to thank those who had helped in his search and rescue – appeared with a Mars brand clearly visible. The Scott family was unaware of the altered image until it was published. In any case, it was not the brand of chocolate James had with him when he was lost.

The news media has an obligation to assiduously avoid such shallow fixations. That these fixations persist represents at least an absence of analysis or clear thinking. This may be because fixations like this are at the heart of delicious but idle speculation or controversy, an essential ingredient in formulaic coverage according to Littlemore. Australia's news media needs to move beyond such trite distractions lest it be rightly accused of malicious intent.

### *Paucity of coverage*

Interestingly, while the majority of participants in this research were concerned with too much attention from the media, for other participants the problem was too little coverage. This was especially evident with industrial deaths, where families felt that light coverage initially often preceded little follow-up when the cause of the fatality was eventually determined. This, they felt, not only diminished their chances of effecting useful change if matters of negligence or impropriety were central to the death of their loved ones but also had other negative consequences.

- Paucity of news coverage can be as distressing for families and friends of victims as saturation coverage. Research elsewhere has shown that this can happen after workplace deaths, road deaths and even single murders (especially those of a domestic nature). Stress can also be experienced when the media's focus is concentrated more on any perpetrator/s than on the victim/s; one family member noted her son's death in the workplace was probably only newsworthy because 'it was his first day on the job and he was young'.

This phenomenon has been also been acknowledged and documented by other writers, including Deborah Spungen (in *Homicide: The hidden victims*). Participants in this research who lost a loved one in a workplace fatality asked why Australia's media is so readily supportive of campaigns to drive down road fatalities when more people each year die in (or because of) their workplaces. They suggest Australia's media is reticent to cover issues surrounding workplace deaths, especially if there is not a 'spectacular' angle that sets an individual incident apart.

Understated coverage of the impact of workplace deaths, say participants, means many families and survivors struggle without assistance from employers, colleagues of the dead person, authorities and even their immediate communities. It would seem that there is scope for news media to keep a closer watching brief on investigations or inquiries into workplace deaths and to ensure the costs to families of such sudden and violent deaths is understood by the rest of the community.

#### *Inability to comprehend the impact of traumatic events*

What happened at Port Arthur – a small community like that of the UK town of Dunblane where a class of six-year-olds were killed by a lone gunman who then killed himself just a month before – underscores the fact that the media needs to have a better understanding of the impact of traumatic events on individuals and communities.

- News media failed to focus on the fact that justice was pursued and achieved in the case of Port Arthur;
- News media was too focused on the massacre and, for some time, was unable to deal with issues apart from that event because it tends to 'walk on eggshells'. This led to incomplete or distorted news coverage of other issues in the Port Arthur community. Policies and decision-making were not adequately scrutinised. 'The media didn't want to know about issues other than the massacre and its aftermath';
- Good news about the recovering community got little coverage;
- Journalists need to better understand the impact of major events and subsequent news coverage on smaller, close-knit communities like Port Arthur or Dunblane, where the potential connectivity to traumatic incident and/or its victims/survivors is likely to be high; and
- Showing traumatic footage is likely to affect larger proportions of such communities. Television, in particular, needs to be more introspective about publishing such imagery.

These are fair criticisms that need to be considered by newsrooms everywhere and go back in some ways to issues of sensitivity, taste and respect for victims, survivors, witnesses and their families and communities. The issues at the heart of these criticisms are generally reflected in families and in the wider community, which can tend to cosset or protect the wounded.

However, in the case of the media, such a reaction to a community dealing with a traumatic event fails to uphold the twin Code of Ethics tenets of respect for truth and the public's right to information. If the community and society as a whole is to depend on information presented by journalists when forming opinions and making decisions, so that information should be truthful and collected and presented sensitively without fear or favour. Positive recovery stories have as much a right to be covered as negative ones. Indeed, without positive coverage, news media would be guilty of presenting a biased view of the world. US newsrooms have grappled with this aspect after the events of September 11, 2001. Particularly when it comes to local issues, many news organisations – like the *New York Times* – have responded to the challenge with a more balanced and serious approach to reporting the good and the bad flowing from the terrorist attacks.

### **7.1.3 Key conclusions about victim feedback**

#### *Media pressure outweighing the initial trauma*

Unless you had experienced what the Scott family did, Joanne Robertson said, you would not have believed that the pressures and worries imposed by the media could outweigh even the horror, worry and day-to-day pressures of the search, rescue, recovery and repatriation of someone from a traumatic incident such as her brother's. Yet, she concedes, their family was lucky to have a positive outcome. She noted, with concern, the plight of others rescued in recent years and the pressures placed on them and their families.

- The additional trauma created by the media's behaviour was, in many ways, worse for the Scott family than the intense pressure and worry surrounding the search, rescue, recovery and repatriation process endured to save James and return him home safely.

Australian journalists and media organisations need to listen and heed feedback like this. This goes to the heart of the magnitude of the impost the media has on victims, survivors, witnesses and their families and communities. By ensuring adherence to current ethical and practice codes – and including the US proviso of minimising further harm – Australian journalists could readily improve the experiences of those most affected by traumatic incidents that attracts media attention.

*Behaviour and coverage can make victims and survivors feel ‘powerless’*

A common theme aired by participants from all three cohorts was that they had – for at least some of the time and, in some cases, most of the time – felt they, their families or someone they knew had lost control of what was going on around them when it came to dealing with the media and the consequences of that news coverage. This often had negative and unforeseen consequences. They said this occurred with people who were novices when it came to working with the media as well as with those who were more experienced.

- For victims, survivors and witnesses, the actions of news media can erode their sense of control, set back or complicate their recovery and leave them feeling powerless; and
- Like the family of Thredbo survivor Stuart Diver, the Scott family was forced to appoint an intermediary to represent them. Even then, the Scott family was subjected to speculation and spoiler stories that set out to question not only the veracity of contracted stories but also the validity of James’ story and his account of what happened to him. The family’s name and its reputation, according to James’ sister Joanne, were severely compromised.

A loss of control reported by Australian participants in this research is consistent with finding by US researchers Coté and Simpson (2000) who have written extensively about the challenges and consequences of reporting about victims and trauma.

*Victims and survivors rarely complain*

Participants in the Port Arthur and industrial deaths cohorts painted the reality for victims, survivors and witnesses to carnage.

- Victims, survivors and witnesses to carnage 'didn't have enough energy' to complain about insensitive photograph or their treatment by news media, nor were some confident such a complaint would make a difference in future; and
- Complaints to news media outlets were 'tolerated'. Complainants are 'humoured' but no changes are made. Consequently, the likelihood of ongoing participation with unresponsive news media is low.

The media complaints process, in Australia, is complicated, onerous and restrictive. Methods of complaint, timelines and agencies receiving complaints vary, depending on which medium is involved. In the case of the MEAA's ethics tribunal, its processes are perceived to be neither transparent nor unbiased, as its findings are not publicised and, at every level, only journalists sit in judgment of their peers.

## 7.2 What is unacceptable practice in times of trauma

The findings presented in earlier sections of this chapter show that, in Australia – as is probably the case elsewhere – there are three main journalistic practices that are unnecessary and unacceptable after traumatic incidents: media feeding frenzies; stark, distressing and insensitive coverage or images; and, most critically, reckless endangerment of lives. Australia's journalists and newsroom managers need to constantly examine their actions and take steps to eliminate practices that bring disrepute on the industry.

Coté and Simpson (2000) described media feeding frenzies as the times when 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 numbers of journalists grow, so too does the frenzy, say Coté and Simpson, with those in it searching for their unique piece of the story and feeding off 'the emotional highs of others'. Their spotlight on the shootings by Mitchell Johnson, 13, and Daniel Golden, 11, at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, on March 24, 1998 – which claimed the lives of four children and a teacher and injured more than 10 others – is an example of how news media can be too intrusive, especially in the initial hours after a traumatic event.

Consider what children and parents encountered at the school the evening of the day of the shootings in Jonesboro. Satellite vans for the television reporters lined nearby streets. 'When a child and a family would get out of the car to come to the gymnasium (for counseling), there'd be cameramen and people ... shoving [microphones] in their faces,' a social worker told the *Freedom Forum* (1998:35). Helicopters hired by television stations from Memphis and Little Rock were circling the school grounds. While some television reporters refrained from sticking a camera in the faces of children, others did not. Parents and children approached reporters, ready to tell their version of events.

At 10p.m. on the day of the shooting, a counselor leaving the school noticed that the press had separated parents from children and one reporter was plying a little boy with questions, 'I understand that that's their job, and he [the reporter] was doing what he needed to, but he wasn't taking into account that this child had no parents there. The little boy was very scared and didn't know what was going on. They were asking him his phone number and where he lived' (*Freedom Forum* 1998:8). At a nearby candlelight prayer vigil for the victims, television camera operators stood in the middle of the prayer circle photographing the faces of those present, including children. Whether such zeal reflects competitive tenacity, an emotional rush, or insensitivity to others is not clear. In any case the action intrudes on those who are attempting to recover from the event.<sup>273</sup>

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Coté &amp; Simpson (2000), P67.

As the case studies in this research show, such zealous coverage is not uncommon in Australia after traumatic events and it often results in the publication of images and stories that cause more anguish and harm. In an industry where self-regulation is expected by the public to police the boundaries of good taste, Hurst and White (1994) highlight the apparent timidity of a peak body such as the Australian Press Council. It chooses the relatively passive option of reminding journalists from time to time of the need to show more consideration of those affected by traumatic incidents.

Blown-up photographs or extended television clips of the maimed or the dead cause not only anguish among relatives and friends of the victims but also more general public outrage. However, the (Australian) Press Council rarely seems to utter more than a mild 'tut, tut' over the complaints in this category that come its way.<sup>274</sup>

During the past two decades, the council has been criticised for its 'muted response' to serious complaints of offensive publication. One instance involved the front-page publication by the former tabloid newspaper *Daily Sun* of a large photograph of a the body of a murder victim slumped in the front yard of his Brisbane home. While criticisms were aired in Parliament and by readers, the newspaper said the photograph 'served the public interest by bringing home more forcefully than words the brutality and finality of murder'. While the council seemed to recognise the story would have caused distress to his family and recommended restraint in the reporting of violence, it dismissed the complaint and said it 'did not amount to a gross lapse of taste'. Similarly, it was quite contained in its judgment of an article by *The Herald-Sun* in Melbourne about the discovery of a body thought to be that of a six-year-old child abducted three months previously. It agreed the story's reference to the possible mauling of the girl by animals was 'unnecessary' but simply noted the public interest could have been equally well served by 'less explicit reporting'.

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Hurst & White (1994), P141.

Putting lives at risk – their own and others involved in a traumatic event – for the sake of competition is a ridiculous situation some journalists engineer deliberately or through stupidity when covering a traumatic incident. Tasmania Police’s Geoff Easton recalled one such incident after the Port Arthur massacre.

There was only really one incident where a photographer spoke to some of the locals and found out that he could possibly trek into the Port Arthur site. The topography of the peninsula really allowed us that isolation and containment role, but he decided to trek in through the bush. This was absolutely stupid and foolhardy. We had a gunman with several hundred rounds of ammunition, high-powered weapons, and nobody knew exactly where he had these weapons placed. Not only was he putting himself at risk, but he would have put police at risk in trying to get him out of that situation. As it turned out, he got lost in the bush and stumbled out a few hours later. I think, in hindsight, we should have let him stumble a few more hours.<sup>275</sup>

Easton’s colleague, Peter Hazelwood – who was working in the Premier’s office at the time of the Port Arthur massacre – recalled another. On the afternoon of the shootings when Bryant was still at large, ABC reporter Alison Smith began to ring around various establishments in the district. Hazelwood said that, in her eagerness to find out something, Smith dialled the number for the Seascope Cottages and got Bryant, who told her his name was ‘Jamie’. ‘She quickly hung up and was quite shaken by the experience,’ Hazelwood recalled. Police reports noted that Bryant had killed the owners of the cottages, Mr and Mrs Martin, at Seascope. He may have also killed the abducted driver of the car he stole outside the toll booth earlier that afternoon.

At the time of the Port Arthur massacre, endangering the lives of those caught at the epicentre of a traumatic incident was not without precedent in Australia. Three years earlier, on March 30, 1993, several journalists managed to place calls to an isolated farmhouse in Cangai, near Grafton in northern New South Wales, where gunman Leonard Leabetter and two companions – who had already murdered five people in Queensland and New South Wales and had kidnapped four children – were holed up with two of the children, an 11-year-old boy and his nine-year-old sister.

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From Hansard of evidence given by Tasmania Police’s Manager, Public Affairs, Geoff Easton, to the Senate Select Committee investigating self-regulation in the information and communication industries, in February, 1998.

According to Hurst and White (1994), several interviews were given and Sydney afternoon newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, to its credit, agreed with police not to publish its scoop because it might endanger the lives of the children.<sup>276</sup> That night, however, *A Current Affair* host Mike Willesee made his now famous on-air telephone call to the farmhouse where he interviewed Leabetter and his companions, extracting detailed confessions of murder from two of the men. After talking to Leabetter, who insisted that he and one of his companions would end the siege by committing suicide, Willesee asked to speak to the children. His interviews were broadcast live and, presumably, Leabetter was able to watch the program from the farmhouse as Willesee interviewed his 11-year-old hostage, 'Trevor':

**Willesee:** Trevor, I'm Mike Willesee. Do you know who I am?

**Trevor:** No.

**Willesee:** OK, I work on television, and I want to know how you are.

**Trevor:** We're safe.

**Willesee:** Are you sure you are safe?

**Trevor:** Yes.

**Willesee:** Has Leonard told you he will let you go?

**Trevor:** Yes.

**Willesee:** Do you believe him?

**Trevor:** Yes.

**Willesee:** Have you seen him do bad things?

**Trevor:** No.

**Willesee:** Have you been frightened or...?

**Trevor:** No.<sup>277</sup>

Outside, where police had cordoned off the property and prevented media from entering the precinct, another *A Current Affair* journalist, Mike Munro, had hovered overhead in a helicopter before landing the aircraft alongside the farmhouse. Police quickly sent Munro packing.

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<sup>276</sup> Hurst & White (1994), P86.

<sup>277</sup> Conversation reported by satirical magazine *Strewth* on its website, headlined 'Great Moments in Live Television' at [http://www.strewth.org.au/v1n1/live\\_television.htm](http://www.strewth.org.au/v1n1/live_television.htm)

Following the release of the two children and the surrender of Leabetter's two companions, the siege ended late the next morning, after Leabetter fatally shot himself. Police later accused *A Current Affair* of recklessly endangering the children's lives and, according to Hurst and White (1994), the police commissioners of all Australian states then issued a media release asking journalists 'to examine their coverage of the incident and to recognise the need(s) for self-restraint and responsibility during such events'.

The commissioners listed seven specific grounds for concern. They were:

- the glorification of the offenders' actions by giving them such an extensive platform;
- the danger of inspiring 'copy cats';
- the probability of prejudicing police negotiations by extensive interviews with offenders;
- interviewing the child victims involved;
- repeatedly divulging the location, number and equipment of police trying to resolve the incident;
- unnecessary trauma to victims' relatives;
- prejudice to subsequent court cases.<sup>278</sup>

Hurst and White said police then called on the media 'to consider adopting guidelines for reporting sieges, which had been canvassed several years earlier by the Standing Advisory Committee for Commonwealth/State Co-operation for Protection Against Violence (SAC-PAV)'.

The guidelines suggested that media representatives should

- not take any independent or unauthorised action which could further endanger the lives of hostages;
- ensure they did not become part of the story and so add to the complexity of the situation and endanger their lives and those of hostages;
- avoid giving terrorists or hostage-takers an unedited propaganda platform by broadcasting live television or radio interviews;
- not make direct contact with hostage-takers or terrorists as the action might prejudice the work of trained negotiators; and
- ensure reports of demands should be free of rhetoric and propaganda by, ideally, paraphrasing such demands.<sup>279</sup>

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278 Ibid, Pp 85-87. Hurst & White quote a media release issued jointly by the six State police commissioners on March 31, 1993.

279 Ibid.

They also noted that it was ‘not only the police commissioners who were disquieted by the media coverage at Cangai’.

Child psychologists, media analysts and politicians questioned several aspects of the media’s behaviour, especially Willesee’s interview with the children<sup>(a)</sup>. Journalists discussed the implications among themselves and Melbourne’s Herald Sun wrote an editorial critical of Willesee’s conduct<sup>(b)</sup>. The Australian Broadcasting Authority received 50 complaints<sup>(c)</sup>; but, paradoxically, the Willesee interview took A Current Affair to a ratings peak of 30, which made it the equal top -ranking program for the week.<sup>(d)</sup> Queensland senator Margaret Reynolds pointed out that the most contentious area, interviewing the children, lay outside existing broadcast codes of practice because ‘the codes ... would not have contemplated the use of children in those circumstances’<sup>(e)</sup>, while Jock Rankin, [then] head of news for the ABC in Victoria, noted that the journalists’ code of ethics did not address itself to the problems of sieges.<sup>(f)</sup> 280

So those Australian reporters who responded to the Port Arthur massacre and siege should have had an ethical compass to help direct them. Instead some chose to ignore – or, in some cases, were perhaps too junior to be aware of – the very public outcomes of earlier traumatic incidents. It is clear from examples quoted here that there is considerable potential for reporters to become enmeshed in a deadly situation, or to worsen it. While a major incident is in progress, journalists have no moral or other right to be in the middle of the action if their presence endangers lives.

In 1997, the Australian Journalists’ Association section of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance released the report of its Ethics Review Committee, *Ethics in Journalism*. It proposed a revised, 20-point code that included a specific clause in response to the concerns raised by the Cangai siege. Recommended Clause 16 stipulated ‘Never knowingly endanger the life or safety of a person without informed consent’. The committee noted that it believed the recommended clause ‘is necessary to ensure that journalists are more conscious of the potential of their activities to endanger life or safety’.

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Ibid, in this particular passage, Hurst & White quoted from (a) Graham Reilly, ‘Guns and Words’, *The Age*, April 3, 1993; (b) *Herald-Sun*, April 2, 1993; (c) personal communication with the Australian Broadcasting Authority; (d) ‘Ratings report’, *The Age Green Guide*, April 7, 1993; (e) Senator Reynolds in the Reilly article and (f) Rankin quoted in ‘Head to Head’, *Herald-Sun*, April 2, 1993. The 50 complaints proved to be the lion’s share of that year’s 168 complaints to the ABA relating to news and current affairs, according to a media release on the ABA’s website at [http://www.aba.gov.au/abanews/news\\_releases/1994/13nr1994.htm](http://www.aba.gov.au/abanews/news_releases/1994/13nr1994.htm)

It also urged employers and the MEAA to institute appropriate and continuing training. ‘The price of failure in this context may be tragically high.’<sup>281</sup> This recommended clause did not survive the whittling down process to the final version that is current today.

Indeed, the reckless endangerment of lives continues, as has been evidenced by the ‘re-creation’ of the August 23, 1999 discovery of lost desert trekker Robert Bogucki in remote Western Australia by the Nine Network’s *A Current Affair*. After he had been wandering around in the wilderness for 42 days, the ACA team persuaded a disoriented and distressed Bogucki to wander around a bit more, sip dirty water and appear to be rescued by them before he was transported to hospital for medical attention. Doctors were later critical that the ACA team fed the starving, malnourished Bogucki a banana. The ACA crew then filmed Bogucki vomiting the banana back up again. (See Appendix 14 for more complete details).

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MEAA/AJA Ethics Committee, *Ethics in Journalism*, Pp53-54.

### 7.3 What media coverage activity remains valuable

Media coverage of traumatic events often helps highlight the needs of victims, survivors and their communities. This, in turn, can lead to mobilisation of important resources. Media coverage can help identify and locate perpetrators. It can draw attention to safety, legislative and other shortfalls and, as a consequence, be a factor in important changes that help protect others in future. Most importantly to those near the epicentre of a traumatic incident, media coverage can not only help others understand what they are enduring but it also draws words of comfort from those who have already endured a similar loss.

Thousands of other people all over the world also tried to demonstrate compassion for the victims of the massacre. Messages of sympathy addressed to the Tasmanian Premier or the Mayor of Tasman or occasionally, the Mayor of Tasmania, came flooding in. The people of Dunblane sent a public message of condolence through their provost, John Patterson, followed by advice from their community co-ordinator on key issues such as communication, co-ordination, trusts and memorials.<sup>282</sup>

Participants in this research singled out several positive contributions made by Australia's media in the aftermath of traumatic events. In summary, these included:

- the provision of valuable details and information that helped victims, survivors, witnesses, families and communities understand what happened, when and how people responded. This helped those most affected by events to establish a chronology of events and get other perspectives about matters than their own;
- immediate media coverage of the Port Arthur massacre (largely by radio reporters) helped keep roads clear and the community attuned to the needs of police and emergency services as well as safety issues;
- news coverage of traumatic events, especially ones that involve a crime or investigation, can elicit valuable information and new leads for police and families;
- by utilising experienced, responsible and credible spokespeople – such as then Deputy Public Prosecutor Damian Bugg – the media helps the broader community keep things in perspective while those most affected are reassured justice is being done;
- the few journalists and media organisations who offered to preview what they were likely to publish won the trust and respect of victims, survivors, witnesses and their families. While this goes against usual journalistic practice and could be harder to achieve where deadlines are tight, Australian radio and television journalists have proved it can be done as an act of faith and, potentially, accountability. Such a step also gives interviewees an opportunity to warn or shield susceptible members of families and communities from difficult or distressing details;

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Scott (1997), P207.

- media conferences and group briefings can reduce the extent of the impact of media attention for victims, survivors, witnesses and families. However, media need to (a) eschew the habit of approaching victims and their representatives as a 'pack', (b) respect their grief and personal feelings, and (c) give these traumatised people space and time to respond;
- intermediaries – whether they be publicists or officials who intervene on behalf of victims and their families – can provide a crucial brake on relentless media requests for information and interviews, especially when the targets are inexperienced in the ways of the media or necessarily focused elsewhere on the recovery/welfare of victims. Journalists and newsrooms that willingly work through intermediaries are likely to gain greater access to victims and families who respect the consideration they are shown;
- assigning experienced journalists who have received training about trauma and its impacts and who are courteous, respectful and sensitive when it comes to covering traumatic incidents is likely to optimise co-operation from victims and their families;
- media coverage of the predicament families find themselves in after a traumatic event can lead to valuable letters of support or encouragement as well as public pressure for positive changes in victims' circumstances (especially where bureaucracies and other bodies are forced to respond or review unfair practices). It can also give these families a chance to thank those who might have helped them and describe the good things their loved ones had done in their lives before the traumatic event;
- journalists and newsrooms that respect a victim's (or a family's) right to 'move on' over time are likely to be rewarded with notification about other newsworthy issues; and
- media interviews can spur positive action (or reaction) from the community, urge others to speak up about their circumstances and bring valuable coping information to those still struggling with issues in the aftermath of a traumatic incident.

Victims, survivors, witnesses and families may be especially critical of the media and its actions in the first year or so after a traumatic event. If those people are still critical years later, there is a good chance what they have to say has been moderated by time and a broader, perhaps healthier perspective. Journalists and newsrooms that reflect upon such feedback and revise any harmful practices are likely to improve the quality and depth of coverage of future incidents in ways that better protect the rights and privacy of victims and families.

'We fully co-operated with the media. First, we wanted our daughter found; second, we wanted those responsible for her murder held accountable; third, we wanted to thank others for their kindnesses; fourth, we wanted the world to know the real Stephanie.' (Mother of murder victim.)<sup>283</sup>

As US victim advocate Deborah Spungen points out, the many instances in which the media have made positive contributions should also be acknowledged.

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Spungen (1998), P230.

The benefits that may accrue from a media story are too often overlooked. If there were more opportunities for dialogue among the co-victims, the victim advocates, and the members of the press, it might be possible to increase the potential of the media to do good and not increase harm. Focus groups or seminars in which all the interested parties can get together provide such a forum. It is also important for co-victims and service providers to better understand what the press needs to accomplish its goals and objectives...

The media can use their power in many ways to make a positive contribution in the aftermath of a murder. Reporters and decision makers can

- (a) highlight some harm or peril that can come to a person so that others will be more vigilant;
- (b) give special meaning to an ordinary person's life and death;
- (c) aid in the grieving process by providing co-victims a platform to talk about a loved one and their pain and grief over the murder;
- (d) provide the public with information about the murder and suspects in no-arrest cases to help solve the crime and make an arrest;
- (e) facilitate the grieving process of the community by focusing on the manner in which the media deal with murders; and
- (f) educate the public by presenting information about grief, victims' rights, victim services, and the criminal justice system.<sup>284</sup>

#### 7.4 Adequacy of complaints mechanisms

According to Hurst and White (1994), some of the worst cases of lapses in judgment by news media do not reach the Australian Press Council 'because no one is sufficiently concerned to make a formal complaint about them or perhaps because of a belief that the council lacks the power or the will to change anything'. Other complaints did not proceed, Hurst and White said, because the council was the wrong body to be approaching. Examples the authors gave included instances where complainants approached the council about matters relating to television news stories, which are the province of the Australian Broadcasting Authority. One complaint was against the ABC TV news for showing the decapitated head of a murder victim being removed from a grave and another was about a television news crew persuading police to return the body of a murder victim into a river from which it had just been retrieved, in order to obtain news footage.<sup>285</sup> Research for this thesis found victims, survivors and their representatives rarely raise complaints against the media. This section briefly reviews the nation's media complaint mechanisms and suggests why that might be so.

##### *News content complaints*

In Australia individuals must raise content (i.e., publication) complaints first with the news organisation concerned before any complaint will be heard by industry bodies such as the Australian Press Council, the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters, the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations or the Australian Broadcasting Authority. Complainants may choose to make their initial complaints to news organisations verbally, but in order to have them officially recorded – and a lodgment date registered – the complaint must be in writing.

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Hurst & White (1994), P143.

The national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, has its own complaints mechanism for program content and probably has the most extensive recording system to track and report data about verbal and written complaints. After complaints are lodged, news organisations then have 28 days to respond in writing and, if complainants are not satisfied with the response they get from the news organisation concerned, only then can their complaint about news content be elevated to the appropriate peak body.

According to submissions made in 1998 to the Senate Select Committee hearings on the self-regulation of the information and communication industries, the number of complaints against Australian news media organisations for content-related matters that were upheld by review bodies were surprisingly low, given the total number of stories and images published or broadcast in any given year.

#### *How complaints are treated in the newsroom*

Primary research for this thesis suggests that in the relatively rare cases where people do raise content or ethical complaints with individual journalists, or with media organisations, the response is generally tepid. It is the author's experience, as a former journalist, that in newsrooms it is not uncommon to hear dismissive or defensive attitudes expressed towards those who ring to complain about a journalist's behaviour or about something published in the wake of a traumatic event. Such calls are sometimes discounted by news personnel as simply a natural (over)reaction to the trauma itself. A complainant who persists or elevates a complaint can be painted as vexatious.

### *Complaints about ethical behaviour*

Complainants may also raise specific complaints about journalists' ethical behaviour either directly with news organisations or via the Australian Journalists Association sub-section of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance. However, the MEAA will only hear complaints about journalists who are members of that union – in 1998, around 13,000 of the country's 15,000 journalists were registered members<sup>286</sup>. Non-MEAA journalists are not officially answerable to any independent ethical review process.

Should victims or their representatives choose to pursue a complaint relating to ethical behaviour, the MEAA is not only responsible for promulgating the journalist's Code of Ethics (see Appendix 1), it also oversees the complaints mechanism that investigates alleged breaches of that code. However, while the MEAA outlines its complaints mechanism on its website – at <http://www.alliance.org.au/complain.htm> – the process has some significant shortcomings. Some drawbacks are immediately obvious and give victims or their representatives little hope of a fair hearing.

Firstly, the process happens in an entirely closed shop. No independent persons – i.e., non-journalists – even sit on either committee in the roles of observers, let alone participate. All levels of appeals face the same composition of committee. Secondly, this process assumes the complainant (a) can identify the journalist concerned and (b) is conversant with the MEAA's Code of Ethics, the wording of which is sufficiently broad to make it tricky in some cases for even the most articulate victims or survivors – or representatives who complain on their behalf – to successfully argue whether actions were in fact unethical. Interpretation, argument and defense of points is likely, in a closed shop, to divide along lines of individual perceptions or personal readings of ethical guidelines.

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Figures provided by MEAA Federal President Tom Burton to the February 16 1998 hearing of the Senate Select Committee investigating self-regulation in the information and communication industries.

Thirdly, the MEAA does not make available historical data about findings – e.g., the number of complaints dismissed or upheld without hearing in a given year, the number settled at later stages, etc. – nor any action taken if complaints have been upheld. Finally, even if a complaint is upheld, victims and survivors have only the satisfaction of knowing that the journalist will only be exposed to those of his/her peers who happen to receive *and* read the MEAA's annual report and that might be up to a year from when their complaint was heard.

Unlike the initial action which may have privately harmed, publicly damaged and/or diminished the standing of the victim/survivor, an offending journalist is not publicly brought to account, nor is he/she forced to correct any published breach that, by the time the complaints process is exhausted, may have occurred many months before. The finding does not appear on the MEAA's website, nor are news organisations compelled to publish any finding against one of their journalists.

Victims and survivors who participated in this research almost unanimously said they were not in a position, emotionally or mentally, to raise a complaint about unethical behaviour, or publication, for a very long time after the traumatic event. Most put that time at several years, which would make a complaint difficult to pursue for all parties. Some victims/survivors would never pursue a complaint against the media because of the additional trauma they would have to endure to retell their stories. This protects many journalists from the truth about their actions and erodes the confidence of those who are aware of what happened.

The MEAA could be more accountable, not only to victims/survivors but to the wider community. It could publish on its website comparative historical data relating to past complaints heard and resolved. It could at least provide victims/survivors with an opportunity for simple mediation so that they can explain to the journalist concerned – and, where appropriate, to his/her peers – the extent of the impact of their actions upon them and their loved ones. Journalists could be offered the chance to apologise and to make amends when they are wrong. Better still, it could provide via its website readily accessed information for journalists and the public about best practice in relation to the coverage of traumatic events.

For some years the US news media has been undergoing an open process of learning about the impact of trauma, reviewing habitual practices and adjusting to the harsh realities of reporting a series of traumatic events on their own soil – e.g., schoolyard massacres, aeroplane accidents, significant natural disasters and terrorism on a grand scale. American journalists have embraced this challenge to change, in part, because the professional bodies like the Society of Professional Journalists have enshrined the concept of ‘do no further harm’ in the Code of Ethics. At least four universities are running programs that deal with trauma and journalism (or the media) – the University of Washington, Michigan State University, Columbia University in New York the University of Central Oklahoma. These programs seek to inform journalists, students and the broader community about the potential impact of trauma on all parties. These endeavours are complemented by the philanthropic Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma with its useful online resource for journalists (at [www.dartcenter.org](http://www.dartcenter.org)). While not the only source of trauma information for journalists, this resource has grown in stature enormously since the events of September 11<sup>287</sup>.

Perhaps the best warning for journalists is to avoid formulaic responses to individual traumatic events. While Moeller (1999) was primarily focused on compassion fatigue as it related to coverage of international affairs by American media, three of the four main observations she made about the media’s response to traumatic stories resonate timely warnings for all newsrooms that would help reduce further harm to victims of traumatic incidents:

- The formulaic coverage of crises, the if-it’s-Tuesday-it’s-time-to-wrap-this-all-up coverage of deaths and assassinations, for instance, shoehorns crises into a preordained time slot, ignoring the inevitable slop of a crisis beyond its formulaic moments.
- More sensational is not necessarily better – although, of course, the most space, the best time slot will always be reserved for the extravagantly sensationalistic. Whether the crisis is a single death or an epidemic, a massacre or a famine, the Ebola/Rwanda/Somalia Standard encourages the sensationalizing of a disaster and unbearably ratchets up the criteria for further coverage.
- By the same token, more graphic is not better.<sup>288</sup>

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287 Other online resources that include trauma information specifically in relation to media activities and coverage include: the American Psychiatric Association’s website (at [http://www.psych.org/pract\\_of\\_psych/disaster.cfm](http://www.psych.org/pract_of_psych/disaster.cfm)), the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (at <http://www.istss.org>), David Baldwin’s Trauma Pages (at <http://www.trauma-pages.com>) and the National Center for Victims of Crime (<http://www.ncvc.org>).

288 Moeller (1999), Pp313-317.

## 7.5 When the media make victims/survivors ‘celebrities’

Moeller acknowledges that ‘the creation of celebrity co-victims is usually engineered by the press who see the stories and the actors involved in certain (murder) cases as infinitely more compelling than others’. Often, she notes, the case revolves around an innocent or vulnerable victim, such as a child, or is somehow associated with ‘some other intriguing or high-profile case’. She also notes that these ‘celebrities’ must possess particular attributes that ‘magnify their attractiveness to the media, such as being available, articulate, physically appealing, or able to show emotion but with a level of control’.

The role of celebrity may allow the co-victim an opportunity to speak out about murder and its effects on the family and to address larger issues such as violence in our society, victims’ rights, and the criminal justice system. On the other hand, is the price the co-victim pays too high? The lure of the media and the possibility of 15 minutes of fame may be too seductive for a co-victim to decline. It is difficult for a co-victim, even with the advice and support of a victim advocate or other caregiver, to judge the long-term effects of this media exposure. Although they do not relish this newfound fame, some co-victims co-operate simply because they feel they ought to use their new role as an opportunity to accomplish something positive.<sup>289</sup>

After the Port Arthur massacre 1996, local pharmacist Walter Mikac became such a celebrity after his poignant interview with *A Current Affair*’s then presenter Ray Martin. That ‘exclusive’ interview only raised the stakes as far as other media were concerned.

I also had to tackle the strange experience of being a celebrity – for which I had no training and no time to prepare. The media wanted a piece of the action now. I was newsworthy and deadlines could not wait.

From the day after the massacre the television cameras and newspaper journalists set up camp at the bottom of George Street in Nubeena. Occasionally my brothers, John or Steve, would go down the hill to talk to them. No, there weren’t any photos. Walter didn’t want to speak. That situation would not change.

But on the Tuesday after the shootings [which happened the previous Sunday], I decided I would speak to Ray Martin on [National Nine Network’s] *A Current Affair*. If the media train was approaching, I was going to meet it head on. I could dictate the terms. I would speak once and that was it. Then I got the phone call that Ray Martin was on his way to our house. What would I say? Somehow I felt assured that Netty [his wife] would watch over me and, as I faced national television, I could feel her presence.

But a few weeks after the massacre, I experienced my biggest betrayal in this new world of being a media celebrity. I allowed a journalist into my house who said she was doing an article on how the community was coping with the aftermath and how we could all rebuild a future together. I still have the letter she faxed me stating this was the thrust of the story. I would just be one of several people interviewed.

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Spungen (1998), Pp225-226.

'I don't want to speak to you unless it's in this context,' I said to her at the front door. 'I expressly don't want you to do a story on my family.'

She seemed unfazed and gave me assurances this was the case. She asked if she could bring a photographer inside the house. Naively, I agreed. While she spoke to me, the photographer clicked away as Chris McCann and I leant on the kitchen wall drinking a cup of coffee. She took notes, writing down descriptions of what was on the fridge. Weeks later, in Melbourne, she confronted Nanette's sister, Bronwyn, telling her she'd been inside my house and had been talking to me, implying I'd agreed to be interviewed for a profile piece. By using similar tactics of subterfuge, she managed to get hold of some personal family photographs. The resulting article was splashed across several pages of *Who Weekly* magazine with the headline 'WALTER MIKAC FACES LIFE AFTER LOSING HIS FAMILY IN THE PORT ARTHUR MASSACRE'. It was a sobering lesson to me of how ruthless the media machine was.<sup>290</sup>

Mikac said he lost his anonymity and entered the gun debate 'without even realising it' when he gave his first interview when he was still in a state of shock. He looked back and reflected how he had been still in an extremely distressed state, unable to clearly articulate, even to himself, how he would cope without his wife and daughters. Although he pleaded with the public to enforce tighter gun control legislation, he spoke from the heart, based on his immediate desire to prevent any other person from suffering what he had, but with no really strong or entrenched position about guns or weapons and no aim to be aligned to any group.

His experiences show the price of becoming a public commodity after a traumatic event is high. A year after the massacre, he wrote in his book *To Have and to Hold* of how he found he could not get used to the public attention. That book was unable to chronicle the fascination that has persisted with Mikac's movements ever since: his personal struggles, his new relationship with another woman (ironically a former TV presenter) and his subsequent remarriage have all been the subject of media attention. Even a plea for privacy a few years ago appears to have been ignored.

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Mikac, W. & Simpson, L., (1997) . Pp135-136.

These words from his book now seem somewhat prophetic and underscore the turmoil victims experience in the months following their traumatic incident.

I know it will always be a problem, especially because I have been so outspoken in the media about gun control, but it's a price I will have to pay. Being a public figure means people will always want to know how I am coping. How would they react if I told them what is really happening? Usually, I'm in turmoil. My concentration span is dismal. Thoughts and plans are disjointed. It's hard to get tasks done in a coherent way. Before, doing jobs like paying the accounts or replying to mail were easy. They never fazed me, even if I'd left them to the very last moment. Now, however, it's a different situation. Doing ordinary chores requires more effort than I can muster. Procrastination. Something I was never guilty of in the past is now taking over my life. Avoiding things is much easier.<sup>291</sup>

In the US, where television talk shows are popular and particularly probing, Moeller notes that there are extra dangers for the would-be 'celebrity' of a traumatic event.

Victim advocates' agencies are often besieged by talk show personnel who request, 'Get me a victim.' The television producer often specifies bizarre criteria such as someone who has had all her family members murdered at one time or someone who was killed by a female teen. Service providers often face a quandary when approached by a talk show on which the co-victim would stand little chance to benefit. Many advocates are reluctant to expose a co-victim to the dangers of such shows. Some co-victims, however, may want an opportunity to speak out regardless of the emotional risk.<sup>292</sup>

The situation in the US has become so damaging for victims, that the National Center for Victims of Crime has issued a set of guidelines that warn people about the pressures they might face and what rights they have. (These are detailed in Appendix 8.)

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291 Op. cit., P183.

292 Spungen (1998), Pp225-226.

## 7.6 Managing the media onslaught

When it comes to traumatic events such as the Port Arthur massacre, some workplace accidents and high-profile rescues such as that of James Scott, the need for assistance with handling the media becomes evident when victims, survivors and families are overwhelmed with interest from newsrooms around the country and even around the world. In his book *Survival*, sole Thredbo survivor Stuart Diver described how his father and the Salvation Army's Lt. Col. Woodland worked hard to deal with the initial demands of the news media while he was being treated for severe exposure, having been trapped in dark, wet and cramped conditions beneath his crumpled ski lodge in freezing weather for nearly three days. After he was rescued, Diver recalled, his father found he had 150 messages on his answering machine and 50 more on his mobile phone. Woodland recalled in his interview how his mobile telephone had rung with calls from the media, around the clock, for two days. According to Diver, Thredbo's media manager was plagued by calls as well. He said the family was soon aided by the hospital, which 'put a blanket on all information and just released hourly reports: I was 'still alive, stable and doing well'.<sup>293</sup>

With so much media interest around Diver and his experiences, Woodland recommended the Diver family seek the services of an agent and the agent he recommended was Harry M. Miller because, Diver noted, Miller had worked with the Salvation Army previously and was a board member. Like the Scott family back in 1992, the Divers were adamant to put a barrier up between the media and their son and thought Miller would help control the media and, perhaps naively, ensure the accuracy of information reported. Diver wrote of how they felt by that stage that 'a lot of incorrect information had already been published and broadcast'. According to Diver, Miller emphasised that his utmost concern was for his family and that of his dead wife's and, like the Scotts, 'that's all I wanted to hear'.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Diver, S. & Bouda, S. (1999), Pp 169-172.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

The immediate deluge of media attention prompted Diver, who for some time after his rescue did not know he was the sole survivor of the landslide, to ask his father why the media were so interested in him. His father was then forced to confirm the reality of the fate of the remaining 19 people who had perished. Within three days of his rescue, Diver recalled, Miller had organised an agreement with Network Seven and *The Australian Women's Weekly* magazine and the contract was signed while he was in hospital but, like James Scott, he was not in a condition to worry too much about the fine points of any media deals.

I left the decision-making to Mum and Dad I had absolute faith they would do what was best for me. They told me the Network Seven agreement included going to the 1998 Winter Olympics, which sounded like a great opportunity, but the reality of the contract and its details were so far removed from what I was going through that none of it made any real difference to me. I knew it meant that I would only be dealing with Channel Seven – we hoped that this would ease the media pressure. We hoped that once we were aligned with one network and one magazine the others would leave us alone.

Day after day I got more mail. Of all those cares and letters, and I figure there would have been about 5,000, only one was negative – one out of 5,000. Mum accidentally let be read it. It was some guy extolling the virtues of me joining the media 'scum'. Now that I'd joined the media I was no longer to be respected. Basically I should go and cut my wrists and end it all. That letter infuriated me. It was signed with a return address; I came so close to writing back to him but then I thought, 'no, he's not worth it'.<sup>295</sup>

When Diver's release papers were signed at the hospital, the media attention was so fierce he was faced with the problem of where to go. His parents were concerned that the media would probably find their house in Melbourne. Miller offered the Divers his farm as a getaway, but in truth their son was more keen to get back to Thredbo than go somewhere 'foreign'; but his home was gone and he had nothing. While the decision was eventually made to go back to Melbourne and other members of his family, even departing the hospital became an exercise in subterfuge for the Divers with up to 50 media waiting outside the front door of the hospital anticipating his release. The family ditched its initial plans to fly to Melbourne and instead drove up to another entrance out of sight from the front door with a van, collected their son and drove several hundred kilometers instead with Stuart able to lie on a mattress and still keep his frostbitten feet elevated.<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Op. cit., P177.

<sup>296</sup> Op. cit., Pp180-181.

A few days later the media interviews began. Diver spent the next few days being interviewed by various Channel Seven programs and a team from the *Australian Women's Weekly*. He wrote how the interviews controlled his life for the rest of that week but, in contrast to the helter skelter demands of a media pack, that he retained a fair degree of control over demands put on him.

It was good in a way because I had to sit there for hours on end and talk. The journalists were all very understanding and didn't push points that they saw were affecting me – for that I was grateful. Dad was always in control of the situation and he set a timetable where every hour I would get a break for 30 minutes, a breather. The media couldn't come into my room, so I could get away from them whenever I wanted.

At the end of each day I would spend an hour or two in the shower bawling my eyes out. It was the first time I had really started to cry. This was just way, way beyond the strength that I had. I just couldn't deal with it. I was finally starting to realise the enormity of what had happened, how my life had irrevocably been changed. I was missing Sal. Every single day, every single night, every single hour, every single minute. All I wanted was for Sal to be sitting next to me doing those interviews so that we could bounce things off each other as we always had done. We could talk to the media – together. I was feeling the pressure. Sure it might have looked OK when I was talking on TV. I said the things I wanted to say and didn't get angry with the world or bawl my eyes out but the bottom line was I didn't want to be there doing it by myself. A very real feeling of loneliness swept over me...

I would've been happier without the media attention but it was probably very beneficial because it got me talking about what had happened. From the beginning I had spoken about the landslide with the police, Mum and Dad, Euan, Margy, Harry and Grovesy. Then to the media, five times in four days. Talking was probably my best tonic...<sup>297</sup>

Yet – like the experience of Lindy Chamberlain two decades earlier after she claimed her baby daughter had been taken by a dingo – journalists who interviewed Diver seemed unable to fathom how he could appear so composed after what he had been through.

During a lot of those interviews they kept asking, 'Why aren't you crying? You shouldn't be able to sit here and rationally talk'. They just couldn't understand it. I replied, 'When I get up in the morning I know you guys are coming so I focus on it'. I wouldn't have got through what I have got through if I couldn't focus...

The host of Channel Seven's *Witness* program, Paul Barry, asked a fair few pertinent questions during my time with him. One particularly sticks in my mind – he asked me how, after all that had happened, I could remain so positive? I just looked him in the eyes and replied, 'After what I've been through, how can you be so negative?'

That took him back a bit. That night he and his crew went back to their hotel and had a long discussion on that one question. They realised they were so used to seeing negativity and being negative yet here I was being so positive. Paul didn't think it was possible. What did he want me to do? Did he want me to be a blubbing mess because that's what the media and the general viewing public has come to expect?<sup>298</sup>

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297 Diver & Bouda (1999), Pp182-185.

298 Loc cit.

So anxious to draw some emotional response from Diver, the team from the Seven Network engineered a surprise ‘reunion’ with ‘Feathers’, Paul Featherstone, one of his primary rescuers. It did not come off, Diver recalled, because when he first saw Feathers when the cameras were rolling, which proved somewhat off-putting, and the reunion was strained.

While the act of appointing an intermediary is not without precedent here and overseas, more recently in the United States – according to Coté and Simpson (2000) – the Red Cross has removed some of the pressure on those at the center of large-scale traumatic events by not only co-ordinating initial mental health services but also taking on the role of public affairs, acting as an intermediary between media and any victims or survivors. Coté and Simpson note that, after TWA flight 800 exploded near New York in 1996, family members stayed in a hotel where their privacy was guarded by the Red Cross’ rapid response public affairs team. ‘When family members were willing to talk to the media, Red Cross volunteers assisted them.’ The Red Cross team also showed its worth after the Oklahoma City bombing.

After the first day reporters covering the Oklahoma City bombing talked with family members of victims through Red Cross team members. The Red Cross asked family members to volunteer for the press interviews; as reporters in small groups talked with the family members, Red Cross personnel stood by to assist. Beforehand, they had coached the families on the voluntary nature of the interviews and reminded them that they could end the sessions if they felt the need to do so. Unlike many accident scenes, National Guard troops limited the movement of the reporters, keeping them together near a church where family members were gathered.<sup>299</sup>

According to Coté and Simpson, the Red Cross public affairs teams ‘generally get high marks from journalists’ because its members are experienced professionals who work both inside and outside the organisation.

When they are on alert, they have their bags packed so they can be put on a plane to the scene within four hours of a call. They often are the principal intermediaries between the press and those most affected. They are not sources of official information about an accident or disaster, but they often provide invaluable support to journalists.<sup>300</sup>

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299 Op. cit., Pp64-65.

300 Ibid.

Even those around victims and survivors can play a useful role in reducing the impact of media attention according to US victim advocate Spungen (1998) who suggests caregivers, especially therapists, 'need to understand the emotional toll that interactions with the media can take on co-victims and offer opportunities for them to vent their emotions and concerns to the appropriate persons'. She suggests a brainstorming session be held among caregiver/s, advocate/s and the co-victim to formulate a strategy to empower the co-victim and allow him or her to take some action 'even if that cannot change what happened'.<sup>301</sup>

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Spungen (1998), P235.

## 7.7 What media personnel need to understand beforehand

According to Spungen (1998), trauma injures its victims in several ways. 'It disables the early warning system – our survival radar. It confuses us because we can no longer keep the details of our lives in order. It not only inhibits the expression of some emotions but it may rob us of the words we need to talk about that loss.'<sup>302</sup>

Traumatic incidents are usually sudden, violent and often deeply shocking to those directly involved and to others in the community. Major traumatic incidents affect, directly and indirectly, many hundreds to many thousands of people. Innocent and mostly inexperienced people are thrust, willingly or not, into the media's spotlight by such incidents.

When it comes to covering traumatic events, there is a compellingly strong argument for handling such stories very differently to, say, the pursuit of a conman, a drugs syndicate or someone who intentionally misleads Parliament. But, while 'doorstop journalism' is the exact opposite to what is required in the wake of a traumatic event, competitive and other pressures on and within news organisations often results in relentless and sometimes harsh approaches or coverage by news media when people are at their most vulnerable. The consequences of such behaviour and coverage are not only limited to those closest to the traumatic incident. They can be visited on news personnel as well.

This has been clearly evidenced in the United States and elsewhere after the September 11 terrorist attacks, especially those on the World Trade Centre in New York which received both live, uninterrupted coverage on the day and saturation repeats of the most disturbing images for several days. After repeatedly showing images of people trying to escape, jumping from the roof or from upper floors, and the subsequent building collapses, news media were heavily criticised by the public and by their own personnel.

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Op. cit., Pp26-27.

Within days, major US networks and newspapers had agreed to limit their reliance on repeat footage in deference to the families of those who died and media in other countries like Australia also became more introspective. Two months later, in the United Kingdom, the online edition of *The Independent* newspaper said the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority – which normally compensates people who witness in person a relative killed or injured in Britain – had decided that British families of New York victims should be eligible for compensation for the trauma they experienced during live coverage of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. The likely payouts were estimated to range from £UK1,000 (roughly \$A3,000) to £UK500,000 (\$A1.5 million), or an average of £UK20,000 (\$A60,000), which would rise ‘if the claimant can prove they have suffered long-term psychological damage’. Between 50 and 100 Britons were thought to have been killed at the World Trade Center on September 11, so payouts are likely to be substantial.<sup>303</sup>

A review of literature pertaining to traumatology, communication and journalistic practice and standards, along with a review of feedback from participants in this research – and that done by QUT colleague Philip Castle (who has examined the impact of covering traumatic incidents on reporters) – shows there are a number of constructive steps news decision-makers can take to minimise the impact of news coverage on victims, survivors (and their families, friends and communities) as well as on news teams and themselves.

This section presents a summary of feedback gleaned from participants and suggested practical considerations for responding to traumatic incidents that have been already been documented by educational, professional, government and philanthropic organisations in the United States.

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Beard, M., (November 19, 2001) “British families of New York victims may be compensated for trauma” from <http://www.independent.co.uk/story.jsp?story=105630>

Before they are sent out into the field to report on traumatic events, newsroom managers need to ensure all staff (but especially those being dispatched) are well trained about issues relating to trauma. They should also be counselled in relation to the specifics of that particular traumatic incident. They need to understand – and be reminded to take into account while they are in the field and afterwards – the:

- potential diversity and depth of people’s experiences and reactions;
- need for communities and individuals to make sense of what has happened;
- need for these people to regain some degree of control over their lives; and
- risk of themselves being vicariously affected by the traumatic event or its impact on others.

Newsroom managers need to stipulate that their reporting teams – reporters, photographers, camera operators, technicians and outside broadcast staff, etc. – are respectful at all times and should always aim to do no further harm to those already impacted by the event being covered. This should also be required of those back in the newsroom responsible for editing, packaging or promoting such news reports.

They should also be aware that the range of responses from people they meet, interview or photograph is likely to be varied.

Reporters who work on such stories for days after the event may encounter people who display a range of responses, including not only dissociation but self-destructive behaviors such as drinking, feelings of shame and hopelessness, fear of fairly familiar sights and sounds, and impaired relationships, as well (as) the key indicators of long-term traumatic injury. Each person will present a unique array of responses. Reporters cannot make medical diagnoses of each subject, but they can be sensitive about their assumptions. The ‘ghouls’ may be distancing themselves from the pain of the experience; the emotionless folk are not necessarily unaffected, and frenzied reactions often reflect more than excitement...

It is important for journalists to understand PTSD so they can alert their audiences to what trauma may be coming, as well as how to cope with what’s already there.<sup>304</sup>

Coté and Simpson quote trauma expert Dr Frank Ochberg who has testified as an expert for the prosecution in several civil suits to explain to juries why certain victims did not seem truly concerned or injured: ‘The victims were numb or avoidant, or both, and therefore didn’t come forward immediately. When they did come forward, they appeared, to untrained observers, indifferent, unconcerned, and unharmed, when, in fact, they were in a state of profound post-traumatic stress.’<sup>305</sup> Detecting such invisible trauma, say Coté and Simpson, can be even more difficult in a telephone interview than in person.

The numbing aspect of PTSD includes forgetting with a vengeance, as well as memories that cannot be suppressed. Called psychogenic amnesia, this kind of forgetting originates in the mind or in mental or emotional conflict, rather than from physical injury. In this situation the sufferer does not forget the horrible details of the bad experience but cannot remember all of what happened. In fact, the missing pieces lie beneath the protective cloak of forgetfulness, too terrible or painful to be exposed to the daylight of consciousness...

The final PTSD ingredient is a physical, not emotional, condition. It is caused by the mental trauma but takes the form of greatly aroused bodily reactions...Apparently, the body’s normal alarm mechanism is on a hair trigger, set off by things that really are not dangers...One of the scariest variations of the exaggerated startle response is the panic attack...

...post-traumatic stress disorder can show itself in very different and seemingly opposite effects: numbness or hyperactivity, reoccurring bad memories or spot amnesia, extreme irritation or withdrawal. No two people display PTSD exactly the same way. What the sufferers have in common is that a trauma has so distressed their lives that they cannot function well in social, occupational, or other important everyday situations...

Some experienced journalists may wonder why one person they interviewed appeared to have obvious trauma symptoms while another victim of the same event did not. In other words, is one person more vulnerable to such trauma than another? Researchers who wondered about such situations framed a definition of coping long before the American Psychiatric Association defined PTSD. Copers, the researchers observed, are people who achieve four goals when they face major life disruptions and transitions. They successfully accomplish necessary tasks, maintain relationships with significant others, preserve their self-esteem, and keep their anxiety within tolerable limits...

Most current research shows that the more intense and lasting a traumatic event is, the more likely it is to cause PTSD...

The axiom that ‘children aren’t just miniature adults’ may be trite, but it is one that journalists must remember when it comes to trauma. For that matter, it is also important simply to remember that children can be traumatized and should not be ignored or trivialized in coverage of events...

The axiom that ‘children aren’t just miniature adults’ may be trite, but it is one that journalists must remember when it comes to trauma. For that matter, it is also important simply to remember that children can be traumatized and should not be ignored or trivialized in coverage of events.<sup>306</sup>

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305 Ochberg, F. (1996). ‘A primer on covering victims’, *Nieman Reports* 50(3), Pp21-26. In Coté & Simpson (2000), P32.

306 Coté & Simpson (2000), Pp32-36.

In addition to being aware of PTSD and related disorders, say Coté and Simpson, journalists should have some knowledge of other emotional conditions that are not listed in the official psychiatric diagnostic manual.

shame ... deserves more attention because of its prominent place in the lives of victims of human cruelty ... The shame triggered when people see themselves as helpless, weak, or incapable can itself scramble their thinking abilities, a serious condition that the psychiatrist D.L. Nathanson (1997) calls 'cognitive shock'...Another powerful emotion is anger. Again, we easily understand why the victim would be angry, although often the victim's parent or spouse is most angry and after revenge. They can be considered co-victims...

Journalists need to be able to recognize signs of anger or shame because those emotions may greatly color how a victim reacts during an interview, especially in the hours and days after a traumatic event. The interviewee may displace anger from the prime target, the attacker, onto the immediate and convenient target – the reporter or photographer. Similarly, any question or comment that implies that the survivor should have acted differently may turn underlying shame into anger directed very specifically at the journalist.'

Having said that, some psychiatrists and psychologists caution that reporters should not necessarily stop an interview because someone is crying or appears to be angry. You might hand the person a tissue or turn off a recorder or camera for awhile; if the person wants to continue, respect that decision and his or her desire to have the story told. Trauma victims often feel hopeless, hostile, withdrawn, threatened, ineffective, or powerless. A thoughtful, accepting interview at the right time may help survivors regain some sense of security, control, balance, and power in their jumbled lives. Letting survivors talk about their experiences is a great prescription, many mental health experts agree – one way journalists can aid trauma sufferers.<sup>307</sup>

Especially while an incident is still in progress, news teams need to realise the number of media likely to be focusing on the story. Newsroom decision-makers need to consider the impact of their own news personnel on

- vital telecommunication infrastructure, particularly in rural or remote locations;
- efforts to secure the safety or rescue/recover victims and survivors; and
- the young, the elderly, the disoriented and the weak.

All news media need to be encouraged to approach victims, survivors and their families simply with an offer to be interviewed or a request for information, rather than demanding or insisting on co-operation. Leveraging such requests or coercion – e.g., threatening to expose the actions or inactions of victims, survivors or their communities – in the wake of a traumatic event is unwise, unethical and may, ultimately, be prejudicial to the quest for the truth.

Newsroom personnel need to listen carefully to what reporting teams tell them from their positions in the field. Don't surmise what the situation is, nor the next best thing to do. Ask reporting teams how things are unfolding, how sources and victims are reacting to their approaches or questions and never push those in the field to 'snare' or 'corner' suitable talent.

Reporting teams should never be encouraged to 'swarm' or 'ambush' victims/survivors, nor should they be urged to misrepresent themselves or invade people's privacy in order to 'get the story'. News personnel who behave in these ways – or condone such behaviour – should face public scrutiny of their actions and be accountable to their peers as well as those most affected.

Deal-making directly with victims, survivors or their families should be outlawed from the top down on the media's side. Individuals or news teams seeking to 'stitch up' exclusives and other deals with victims/survivors or their families, friends and communities are exploiting the difficult and distressing circumstances in which these people find themselves and are behaving in a totally inappropriate way that brings the entire industry into disrepute.

If people at the epicentre of intense media attention seek – or are given – assistance by a mediator, news personnel in the field and back in the newsrooms should work respectfully through that person or body. News managers need to ensure their teams resist the urge to find or run 'spoiler' stories – or mount campaigns casting doubt – simply because a mediator has been appointed. All news personnel should understand that invention of stories, quotes and 'facts' will be grounds for dismissal.

Reporting teams should not be assigned to the scenes of ongoing traumatic incidents for long periods of time. Wherever possible, seek to share the load and give people breaks, if only to give them some perspective about what is going on. Trauma research conducted over several decades shows the longer people are at the scene of a traumatic incident, the greater the likelihood of them experiencing psychological effects. Where a traumatic event is evolving over a number of days, weeks or months, individuals should spend time away from the site – and the story – as much for their own benefit as for the benefit of those who must continue to live with the event and its consequences.

Newsroom managers need to ensure back-up and/or peer mentors are available to help individuals or reporting teams if needed – and to let those going into the field to cover such assignments know, as well as those back in the newsroom, how to access those resources at any time.

When reporting teams return from the field they should be greeted with sensitivity. They have heard about – and possibly witnessed – the horrible reality of an event, as well as sights and sounds that may well intrude on their thoughts for some time, even for the rest of their lives. Do not bombard these team members with callous requests for stories – or images – of gore, guts and grief. Give them respect and support first. Help them to prepare their stories, images or packages with due respect for victims, survivors and those people's families, friends and communities.

Insist, absolutely, on accuracy for even the smallest details being reported. Inaccurate reports of details relating to traumatic events are likely to cause considerable further distress to individuals, families and communities, mislead those not connected to the events, and be perpetuated in historical accounts. Consider instigating a policy where those responsible for such errors – whether they be field or newsroom staff – must contact the victims, survivors or immediate families of those most affected by the error/s to apologise. Wherever possible, seek to re-publish the correct 'facts'.

Those in the newsroom need also to be responsible for minimising sensation and maximising substance. When it comes to traumatic incidents, it is especially important that all news staff steer clear of the temptation to be judge, jury and executioner. The role of the news media is to report fact, reaction and impact, not to speculate. Attributing guilt, blame, punishment and retribution are the responsibilities of other bodies.

Consider offering those likely to be most affected by publication of intimate details about themselves or their loved ones the opportunity to preview stories and/or images before publication. Far from letting them 'interfere' with the content or tone of a report, it will allow them, in turn, to prepare, reassure – or even shield – children, older relatives or others who may be deeply concerned for their welfare.

Remember award-winning stories and images are often extremely painful reminders for victims, survivors and their families, friends and communities. Re-running them endlessly is cruel and unnecessary. News managers also need to remember that, often, this group of people will be a much larger portion of a news organisation's audience than might be initially apparent, especially where a traumatic event has involved multiple victims or witnesses.

When there has been a very large and public traumatic event, newsroom decision-makers need to examine steps they might take to help the community understand what happened and when, as well as how the community is healing. This may mean extending coverage in ways that are not usual for that news organisation. News organisations are in a unique position in that they can not only help the community – including their own staff members – to understand what happened but also to have that community understood by those not directly affected by the events.

Live transmission or broadcasting of traumatic events as they unfold can be distressing for a very significant number of people – victims, relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues. Yet, as Hurst and White (1994) acknowledge, the 'luxury of postponing tough decisions' often does not exist for television news teams.

Modern technology that enables television to report live from the scene causes several ethical dilemmas ... In matters of privacy, however, live-to-air coverage poses another difficulty. Distressing footage that may once have been cut in the studio editing process now goes straight to air as the cameras roll. Either a spur-of-the-moment decision to stop intrusive filming must be made at the scene or the news channel must live with the consequences when the complaints flood in.<sup>308</sup>

Television newsrooms should consider utilising a tape delay as well as the use of a regular icon/logo somewhere on the screen to denote upcoming violent or traumatic scenes. This gives viewers the option of shielding children or of tuning out themselves if they are connected to anyone involved.

Another problem evident in news coverage of traumatic events is the overuse of clichés. Coté and Simpson (2000) speak of ‘disaster mythology’ and draw attention to the risks of relying on damaging clichés, especially by reporters ‘at the scene’.

Reporters easily find people who are angry, grief stricken, or appear to be in shock – all signs of the emotional turmoil wrought by the event ... Angry people sometimes capture the essence of a scene, but just as often their emotion needs to be checked and explained. Grieving people also trigger emotional responses in viewers and readers, yet sometimes such examples eclipse stories of aid and relief. People who appear too stunned to even speak may help a reporter show that everybody at the scene is ‘in shock.’ Some of those people ‘in shock’ recover from their weariness moments later and return to their duties. The shock cliché occurs often in news reports. Yet relief workers and disaster researchers say that those stunned survivors, far from being incapacitated, generally get the relief and cleanup efforts going well before relief agencies actually arrive ... Reporters at the scene can avoid perpetuating the myths by describing and carefully considering only what they see.<sup>309</sup>

Quarantelli (1989), a student of the reporting of accidents and disasters, debunks many of these clichés and offers a number of conclusions about human and social responses to traumatic incidents based on numerous published studies of the behavior of people under extreme stress.

(Victims of disasters) seldom engage in antisocial or criminal behavior such as looting. Similarly, on the whole victims neither go ‘crazy’ nor psychologically break down, nor do they manifest severe mental health problems as a result of disasters. Those officials and others with community responsibilities do not abandon their work roles to favor their family roles. In the aftermath of the disaster impact, survivors do not passively wait for outside assistance, but actively initiate the first search-and-rescue efforts, taking the injured to medical care and doing whatever can be done in the crisis. Mass shelters are avoided. Those forced out of their homes go overwhelmingly to places offered by relatives and friends.<sup>310</sup>

Although victims are often unfairly reported as irrational, Quarantelli notes that relief agencies are generally portrayed – equally unfairly – as more rational and better organized than they are.

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309 Coté & Simpson (2000), Pp70-71.

310 Quarantelli, E.L., (1989) “The social science study of disasters and mass communication.” In Masel Walters, L., Wilkins, L., & Walters, T. (eds), *Bad tidings: Communication and catastrophe*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.

There is also a possibility that reporting team members and other newsroom personnel will suffer some significant reaction to covering a traumatic event. This is not a sign of weakness, nor should it be ignored. Often it is a sign that people – including managers – have difficulty processing the impact or the realities of what happened or perhaps they relate to the situation so closely that they genuinely fear for the well-being or safety of loved ones or themselves. It is possible such reactions will be evident almost immediately, some time later or even brought on at some time in the future by similar or equally traumatic events. This is where newsroom managers need to respond with care and concern, not criticism and cutting remarks.

When the initial rush of coverage slows, news teams need to reflect on what they experienced, especially what it was like for people working in different places, what they each learned and what they would do differently next time. This can be a period of uneasy relationships between staff who might disagree on what course of action is/was best, but careful mediation and, ideally, reaching a consensus about future procedures will help a news team stay on track. Worthwhile observations and suggestions should be noted. When the media attention around a traumatic event subsides, the news team should draft or revise procedures that will apply for future coverage of traumatic incidents.

Coté and Simpson say that, increasingly, reporters and photographers are attesting to the need to address trauma and its effects on victims and on journalists.

Twenty years ago few in the business thought that trauma had anything to do with the education of a journalist. These days many journalists know that trauma has a heavy hand on them and on those they interview and photograph ...We weren't surprised to find that many reporters show signs of emotional injury that are a lot like those of police and firefighters.<sup>311</sup>

They add that that, while those most affected by the event and bystanders are often receptive to being interviewed or photographed soon afterward, journalists 'must balance what you gain against the harm that you may do'.

Find the details and information that help you tell the story and place it in context. Suffering is an arresting facet of such scenes, but it does not tell the full story.<sup>312</sup>

Work being done in the United States over the past few years has seen the development of interview guidelines for journalists working with victims of trauma. The co-ordinator of the Victims and the Media Program at Michigan State University, William Coté, and his assistant Bonnie Bucqueroux, developed the following list which could be a useful reference point for Australian journalists:

- tell people they can take a break from interviews whenever they need to;
- empower victims by giving them permission to turn off the tape recorder whenever they want to say something that they do not want used;
- tell them to tell you to put down your notebook;
- take advantage of opportunities to include them in the decision-making ('Are you ready to go on? Is it all right for me to ask a tough question?');
- give the subjects your business card – tell them that they can call you to discuss the story or just to talk;
- take care with first impressions (body language, in particular, can be important, and the goal is to exude confidence, poise and caring);
- discuss ground rules up front (ambush tactics have no place in a victim interview);
- discussing issues of privacy and confidentiality at the beginning can prevent misunderstanding and problems later;
- encourage the victim to ask questions;
- prepare for the possibility you will be the first to deliver (discuss) the bad news;
- ask permission (approach without your notebook in hand, ask if you can take notes, ask if you can use a tape recorder, it's better to ask whether they'd like a tissue than to thrust the box at them);
- watch what you say (a 'canned' phrase that strikes the right note is better than wrong words which may wound – 'I'm sorry this happened to you', 'I'm glad you weren't killed', 'It's not your fault');
- avoid the banal and never say 'I know how you feel', instead ask a 'when' question ('When did you hear the news?', 'When did the police arrive?');
- above all, be accurate – errors that make ordinary people angry can become monumental issues for traumatized people looking for a target for their frustration;
- be especially sensitive to imputations of blame; and
- be alert to the special impact of photos, graphics and overall presentation.<sup>313</sup>

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312 Op. cit., Pp67-68.

313 Adapted from Coté, W., & Bucqueroux, B, (1996), Violence, *Nieman Reports*, Fall 1996. [William Coté is Co-ordinator and Bonnie Bucqueroux is Assistant Co-ordinator of the Victims and the Media Program at Michigan State University.]

## 7.8 The risk of re-traumatisation

Every time victims, survivors and their families are re-exposed to their particular traumatic event it can be a painful and difficult experience. With the media's propensity to recall such personal tragedies or high-profile events for years, even decades, these people face sudden, unwanted and often disturbing reminders of their experiences or loss. Their concerns often begin with the images and stories initially collected and published. In some ways, the long-term impact on these people will depend on the sensitivity or sensationalism exercised by journalists and newsrooms at the outset. While Spungen (1998) talks extensively about the lack of sensitive behaviour by individual journalists and media packs, especially at trials following traumatic events, she lays the ultimate responsibility for publishing stark reports and images with newsroom decision makers.

Within the last decade both crime victims and journalists have begun to ask whether crime reporting is victimizing the victims again. The issue is not what newspapers and the electronic media have a right to do legally. It's what we ought to do ethically. (Thomason, 1986, p.2)

It is not a simple decision whether to publish or televise information; every choice that an editor, news director, or reporter makes is fraught with ethical considerations.<sup>314</sup>

Australian participants in this research said that while the media attention around court cases was difficult, the depressing reality was that the media would continue to run at will stories and images of their plight and that of other victims and survivors. Some said their recoveries were hampered by sudden re-runs. While they could understand the interest around the time of anniversaries, they were especially upset when they had no idea the stories or images were going to be published. Such sudden repeat coverage happens when similar events occur, when something happens to a perpetrator and even at ceremonies to present awards for outstanding journalism and photography.

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Thomason, T. (1986). 'The issue is ethics.' In T. Thomason & A. Babili (Eds.), *Crime victims and the news media* (p.2). Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Department of Journalism. In Spungen, D. (1998), P222.

This last point, perhaps, is the nub of the dilemma facing journalists and victims. One person's anguish is another's Walkley award. This trend is not solely Australian. A look back through the past half century's Pulitzer Prize photographs demonstrates the same very public and industry rewards for capturing a moment of terror or distress<sup>315</sup>. Victims and survivors interviewed for this research seemed to understand the need to document the truth of what happens during and after a traumatic event. They acknowledge the community's immediate need to know. What they do not understand is the media's need to repeatedly exploit such moments.

### *An important reminder*

In the previous chapter the experiences of a family with a positive outcome to their traumatic event has been explored. It is wise to remember that those people at the centre of traumatic events where the outcome is negative – that is, they lost someone close in a sudden, violent death – will also be battling grief and, potentially, other psychological symptoms. For these people, their treatment by the media may be – at least initially – secondary to the loss itself. Over time, though – as participants in this researcher's study have earlier testified – these people are highly likely to draw on media reports to help them discover what happened, where and in what order. At that point, they may face several significant impacts, including:

- intense psychological distress and possible traumatisation/re-traumatisation as 'sounds', 'images', 'facts' or 'inaccuracies' are discovered – this may trigger or worsen nightmares, flashbacks and other psychological or physical responses;
- renewed anger, confusion and/or distress, especially when details conflict between different reports;
- worsening of symptoms of grief, anxiety, depression or other psychological symptoms;
- an increase in avoidant, fixatious or hypervigilant behaviours;
- an increased sense of detachment/estrangement from their communities;
- restricted access to a normal range of emotions; and
- heightened anger, anguish or startle responses.

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Rubin, C. & Newton, E., (Eds.) (2001), *Capture the Moment: The Pulitzer Prize Photographs*, New York: The Freedom Forum Newseum.

For victims who experience such responses as a result of media activity, the cost is often impairment of social, occupational and other important areas of functioning.<sup>316</sup> But – as those surveyed also recounted – for those family, friends and community who seek to support such victims, the impact of media behaviour remains evident from the outset of reporting activity and, at times, has been the cause of great distress in addition to what they were already experiencing.

Increased sensitivity, too, needs to be displayed when reporting on similar traumatic events, when it is the media's habit to hark back on previous events. This is one area where victims, relatives and friends will have their feelings dredged up, often without warning. Joanne Robertson summed up her feelings of such reports and their impacts on survivors' families in her interview for this thesis:

...you can certainly identify with anyone who's gone missing, or anyone who's going through what we did, like [sole Thredbo landslide survivor] Stuart Diver. I felt very upset by what was happening with him. Even now, it's not uncommon that I am at times contacted by relatives of someone who's gone missing or things like that [and] that's fine, because if I can do one little thing to help, then I'm pleased to do it. I think I have a much greater empathy. I don't think it's a negative thing, necessarily.

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Drawn from symptoms outlined in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder in Appendix 4 and discussions with Victorian trauma counsellor Louise Bailey.