

Chapter 8 A balancing act

The question of intrusion into private domains, such as bereavement or personal tragedy, is one of real difficulty for all providers of news and current affairs programs. It is a matter of balance between what should be reported in the interests of the general public and what, if reported, would cause an individual or group of individuals unnecessary anguish.

*Australian Pay TV Code of Practice*³¹⁷

Coverage of traumatic incidents is much like reporting other areas of controversy: a balancing act between freedom of speech – or freedom to report – and other social rights like the right to privacy and respect for personal grief. Other pressures exist, too, including the imposition of a consistent formula for collecting and presenting the news that reflects the editorial direction and management styles within individual news outlets.

As Moeller (1999) points out, the nature of news is that it is constant and structured³¹⁸. The reasons for its shape and presentation – so well evident to trained journalists – are largely transparent to those outside the media, who generally see, digest and debate content but usually need to understand little about structure.

Deconstructing a news story, or a series of reports, can be a particularly valuable exercise. Done with some input from journalists themselves, it can deepen the understanding of those outside the profession and can make the work of journalists richer. Most journalists know this, but few have – or take – the time to do this because the demand for more news is relentless. This chapter looks at the impacts of deadlines, competition and other pressures journalists face when covering traumatic events and how they sometimes tip that balance precariously.

317 A copy of this code is available at <http://www.aba.gov.au/tv/codes/payTV>

318 Moeller, (1999), P17.

8.1 Pressure to publish and the public's interest

Journalists often describe themselves as warriors who sometimes have to fight for access to sources, to information or to the truth about the situations they cover. They see themselves in this role on behalf of the community and they constantly strive to protect and exploit that access, resisting vehemently any moves they consider will place restrictions on them. Sometimes such fervour underpins intrusive behaviour, according to Coté and Simpson (2000).

As police, military, and other agencies gradually bring the chaotic nature of information about what happened under control, reporters and photographers may encounter unofficial but important efforts to limit access ... When deaths occur, funeral homes and family representatives may seek to limit the media presence. Although these actions often keep the press at a distance from funeral ceremonies, family gatherings, and grieving, we know of many print and broadcast reporters who, against the wishes of survivors, gained access to morgues, funerals and burials, and family gatherings. There is no simple answer to this. We think the best approach for the news media is to plan coverage of funerals and memorial ceremonies with the survivors and their representatives ... Camera and sound technology allow photographers and television cameras to work some distance from the people gathered at a funeral or a gravesite. Even so, it is easy to underestimate the sense of intrusion funeral participants may feel when they see a swarm of media people with their equipment.³¹⁹

This observation was repeated by several participants in research done for this thesis, usually those who had roles in organising, or contributing to, funerals and other ceremonies.

The pressure on journalists to gather and publish the news as soon as possible so that the public might be well informed is sometimes the root cause of ethical breaches or dilemmas. Australian criminologists Peter Grabosky and Paul Wilson found that some journalists they talked to were prepared to be 'super-assertive, and sometimes manipulative' in obtaining information from distraught relatives.

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Op. cit., Pp65-66

Others talked of the tricks of the trade used to con photographs out of a bereaved family and one reporter accused his opposition of stealing photographs off mantelpieces. Their research led them to the conclusion that 'for many journalists the pressure to deliver a story tends to eclipse ethical considerations'.³²⁰

This observation is consistent with feedback from both Port Arthur participants (Chapter 4) and the Scott family (Chapter 6).

Often, as Hurst and White point out, the pressure to publish can come from outside agencies such as police. They spoke to several Melbourne-based police reporters, including John Sylvester from *The Herald-Sun*, who said that detectives who wanted to keep a story alive knew relatives could make 'good copy'. 'They know that the longer a story is active the more chance of someone coming forward with information. More than once a seemingly hopeless investigation has turned for the better as a result of public response to a newspaper story.'³²¹ In other situations, say Hurst and White, the media justify intrusions into privacy and grief on the presumption of the public's need to know.

... it is often argued that news and pictures which convey the horror and pathos of major disasters help to mobilise emotional and financial support for the victims, and focus public attention on problems such as road, rail and air hazards, deficiencies in safety regulations or public health facilities, inadequate policing, or the need for stricter gun laws.

Another common rationalisation is that families of victims find it therapeutic to talk about their grief to the media. Grief counsellors, however, argue that following sudden news of the death of loved ones the bereaved are in no state to make rational judg(e)ments about whether they want to be interviewed, and may be manipulated by the media. Some journalists share the same qualms. A former police rounds reporter for *The Age* said she found the whole idea of intrusions distasteful and added: 'I think people are often taken advantage of when they're at their most vulnerable and probably just looking for a shoulder to cry on. The journalists end up being the shoulder. I'm sure a lot of victims and their relatives end up regretting it later.' Some other journalists agree, arguing that in the immediate aftermath of tragedy the most helpful reaction is usually silent sympathy.³²²

320 Grabosky, P. & Wilson, P. (1989). *Journalism and justice: How crime is reported*. Sydney: Pluto Press. (P117) In Hurst & White (1994), P116.

321 Hurst & White (1994), P115.

322 Ibid.

In research done for this thesis, a psychologist, a trauma/grief counselor and participants from all three cohorts expressed concerns about journalists relying on ‘the public’s right to know’ to excuse intrusive behaviour. Another cost of such intrusive behaviour, according to Coté and Simpson (2000) is that journalists themselves, more than ever before, are expressing concerns about the social and personal costs of reporting violence. ‘Today, journalists candidly voice the pains of news work, which were once disguised by a code of professionalism and macho style that even the first women on the city desk felt compelled to adopt.’³²³ They assert media corporations, ‘aided by dazzling technology’ rush to the scene of traumatic events in minutes and deliberately ‘build pain and injury into their news formulas’ and exploit people’s suffering in order to satiate their audiences’ ‘gluttony for violence-filled products’.

Only the more media-aware participants in this research understood or acknowledged both the potential costs to journalists of covering traumatic incidents. However, they were also able to see the media’s ‘unseemly rush’ to use their tragedy to gain ratings points, readership or an advantage over competitors. Hurst and White (1994) note that journalists and media commentators themselves tend to agree that intrusive reporting tactics are a predictable consequence of the intense competition in the news business and the fear of being scooped by the opposition. ‘Even when most reporters at a disaster scene approach grieving relatives of the victims with sympathy and discretion their job can be made more difficult by the clumsiness of a few.’³²⁴

323 Coté, W. & Simpson, R. (2000). *Covering violence: A guide to ethical reporting about victims and trauma*. New York: Columbia University Press. P2.

324 Op. cit., P114.

Social scientist, victim advocate and the mother of a murder victim, Deborah Spungen describes – in *Homicide: The hidden victims* – how and why family members become co-victims when a loved one is murdered. In explaining the media’s motives to other victims, Spungen acknowledges the need for ‘certain elements to put together a newsworthy story’.

First, it must be determined whether a story is going to be printed, where it will appear in the newspaper, or how much time it will be given on television or radio. Some of the hooks that the media look for in a story include new or unique stories, appeal to the general public or impact on the community, controversial content, and timelines or relation to some other current event. In addition, television needs a story that is highly visual and action oriented, and newspapers want good photographic opportunities. Larry Platt, during his appearance on ABC News Nightline, said it well: ‘If it bleeds, it leads’ (Bettag, 1996)³²⁵

Spungen notes that the public’s fascination with crime stories has been labeled ‘the pornography of grief’ and describes several battles between the public’s right to know and an individual’s or family’s right to privacy, including her own.

The reporters were back ... They crammed our front porch and spilled out onto the lawn, jabbering with each other, jockeying for position close to the front door. There were photographers and television cameramen. There were microphones and tape recorders and lights. One of the reporters rang the doorbell. He kept his thumb down on it so it rang over and over and over again, demanding my attention and co-operation ... The freak show was on again. (Spungen, 1983, p.1)³²⁶

In a democracy, the notion of censorship is most repugnant to journalists, because to censor closes off the public’s access to ideas and images that might help the community understand the reality and scope of a situation. The freedom to report is held in the highest esteem by journalists who work in democratic countries like Australia. Yet, while the public has a right to know about traumatic events, those at the epicentre of an incident, especially those who seek to protect victims and survivors, can be overwhelmed by the intimate nature and/or extent of the media’s coverage and fail to see the larger good coverage may do because it is so painful to those most affected.

325 Bettag, T. (Executive Producer). (1996, September 24). *ABC News Nightline*. New York: American Broadcasting Company. In Spungen, D. (1998), *Homicide: The hidden victims*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

326 Spungen, D. (1983) *Victim services for homicide co-victims*. Philadelphia: Anti-violence Partnership of Philadelphia. (P1) and Greenfield, J. (1986). ‘TV: The medium determines impact of crime stories.’ In T. Thomason & A. Babili (Eds), *Crime victims and the news media*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Department of Journalism. (Pp19-23). Both in Spungen (1998), P223.

Spungen, a non-journalist, acknowledges the dilemma journalists face. On the one hand, ‘the public does have a right to know, especially if the reasons are compelling and if the reporting of the event can be helpful to the public’s safety and well-being’. But, because a ‘co-victim’ – i.e., a family member or loved one of victim/s – does not want to see the story in print or on television is not sufficient cause for news media to ‘desist and go away’. On the other hand, ‘news organizations need to be aware of co-victim issues’. What to report and how to cover a story, she says, will continue to be controversial.

Many in the media believe that no matter how careful the reporting might be, some news stories will still be met with a feeling of pain and even outrage by the co-victim. Gissler (1989) reminds us that ‘it remains a balancing act for the media to cover the news about death and tragedy with balance, to provide compelling reports but with reasonable sensitivity’.³²⁷

Coté and Simpson found that journalists conceded that they, too, suffered as they did their work, ‘a thought that would have stunned the brash, cynical reporters of earlier eras’. Despite their concerns, the two American journalism professors, both former reporters, are convinced the answers for besieged journalists are close at hand, in the traditional skills and values of reporting ... ‘searching responsibly for the truth, keeping the public interest in mind, caring for the people in the story and others close to them, respecting the voices of people at the center of an event, knowing that the storytellers also are at risk, and doing no harm’.³²⁸

The research done for this thesis would seem to back this up. While work needs to be done on the industry’s codes to meet an expectation of more compassionate coverage of traumatic events, just abiding by the spirit of the current guidelines, practising good journalistic standards and learning something about trauma itself would lead to significant improvements to the way victims, survivors, their families and their communities are treated by the media.

³²⁷ Gissler, S. (1989, February 16) ‘Death and the media: An editor’s dilemmas’. Paper presented at the Interdisciplinary Education Conference on Bereavement and Grief, Yeshiva University, New York. In Spungen (1998), P237.

³²⁸ Op. cit., Pp3-4.

8.2 When victims or their loved ones become advocates

Over the past few decades, victims, survivors, their relatives and their representatives, having learned what can be gained by working with the media, realise that they can make valuable and public steps towards achieving other goals. Whether it be pressuring governments to introduce or change legislation or lifting community awareness about dangers such as guns or the consequences of criminal behaviour, these people can become advocates for a cause, aided by the publicity they can attract. That advocacy can be short-lived or ongoing. It can be healthy or it can become jaundiced, but it thrives on publicity. What might have been, at first, a chance encounter becomes a more regular contact. Provided the talent can continue to deliver, their story takes on a new life as a backdrop to their continued efforts to achieve their new goals. This was the case with the sources interviewed for this research, especially those who had lost loved ones in single-victim industrial fatalities.

If things go wrong, however, journalists can be faced with tough decisions. In the case of missing young Sunshine Coast woman Tabitha Hodge, her mother became quite close to journalists over a period of time when she sought information about her young daughter's sudden disappearance. Journalists readily engaged with the distressed mother, publicising her remarkable energy for her painful search. She made good talent as she endlessly placed posters up across South-East Queensland describing her daughter and where she was last seen. Journalists would ring regularly to see if any more clues had come in, filing the occasional brief update. Some even grew quite close to her, particularly those working in the district.

More than a year later, when police advised they thought Tabitha's body was in a submerged car that had been found when work was being done on a new canal estate near her home, those same journalists then had to face the question of whether to speak to her mother. According to one former senior ABC radio reporter, Alexandra Wake [in personal communication, 2001], this was one instance where ABC journalists based in the local newsroom agreed unanimously not to intrude on her grief out of their respect for her and they were backed up by their newsroom managers who understood the ethical stance these reporters had taken. Other reporters, particularly those from commercial television, did not exercise the same right. Because Tabitha's mother had been so open with the media during her long search, perhaps these journalists thought she would naturally give them access during her most anxious moments as she watched and identified the car being dragged from the canal.

8.3 Journalists as scapegoats

A shooting, a car crash, or a rape afflicts friends, relatives, and neighbors as well as victims. If truth is the first casualty of war, privacy often is the first casualty of any devastating, unexpected event. Reporters, photographers, and editors – just doing their job – interview and photograph victims and relatives, moving their pain to the front page or the evening newscast where everyone can see it.

It isn't surprising that the public and the people in the stories complain about insensitive, callous, and excessive coverage. Anger drives people to throw rings of protection around children and other victims, defiantly shouting off or closing out the circling reporters. Journalists quickly become scapegoats for the discomfort that ensues from exposure to tragedy...

Other calls for change in media coverage of violence come from religious, parent, or women's advocacy groups. There were signs at the close of the 1990s (in the US) that the issue had the attention of some political leaders. Many of the harshest critics of the news media were subjects of news stories, at once victims of the violence that drew newshounds to the area and of the media invasion itself. But other thoughtful people ask simply why a wealthy industry can't do a better job of reporting violence.³²⁹

Coté and Simpson's words underscore the reality of what happens to journalists sent to cover traumatic events. Just in being there, doing their work, journalists attract criticism. Those journalists who carry equipment such as camera or sound equipment, which immediately identifies them as media, are often the first to be criticised. Yet they have little alternative if they are to retain their jobs and do their work of documenting what happened.

Most rise to the occasion, according to Coté and Simpson: 'Journalists routinely face and pass trying professional tests – writing a story that will be read, making a photograph in an instant, and interviewing a person who is not prepared for the emotional stress of such contact.' Although mistakes are made, 'a huge corps of journalists regularly does its work with a high standard of ethical and professional excellence'.³³⁰ This conclusion is consistent not only with what happened after the Port Arthur massacre, but also after the 1997 Thredbo landslide and the earlier Moura mining disasters discussed earlier in this thesis. However, in these Australian instances, the bad behaviour of a relatively small number of journalists saw the much larger group of journalists covering these events ostracised, penalized or limited in their access to important news sources.

329 Coté & Simpson (2000), P2.

330 Op. cit., P12.

Often two of the first groups of journalists to feel the brunt of an individual's or community's wrath are photographers and camera crews, largely because their equipment makes them immediately identifiable. In many instances, too, they are first on the scene often before authorities and sometimes their reporters.

Coté and Simpson also point out that photographers at the scene of tragedy rarely have time to ponder the ethical implications of what they are doing and tend to 'shoot first and edit later'. They may also become scapegoats who are 'criticised by the public simply for being there, "like vultures" '. 'However, they cannot be blamed later for being beaten by competitors. The pictures of pathos are in the bag and the decision about whether they should be used can be discussed calmly with superiors, who are paid to bear the responsibility if anything goes wrong.'³³¹

Spungen (1998) acknowledges that the reporter or photographer may not be directly responsible for the publication of offensive material. Often, she notes, the problem is with an inappropriate headline added by a copy editor – or sub-editor in Australia – and not with reporters or photographers who are unlikely to have had input or approval. 'The challenge is that once the label or euphemism has appeared, it is difficult to overcome even if additional facts later reveal that this appellation is wrong.' Whether they are made scapegoats or are genuinely guilty of behaving badly after a traumatic event, Coté and Simpson suggest journalists should not feel guilty if they have 'failed to recognize and understand many aspects of trauma and victimization'.

Even psychologists and psychiatrists have only recently come to recognize, name, and devise specific treatments for what now are believed to be the special after-effects of violent crime. Physicians traditionally were not taught to treat crime victims differently than accident victims. So it is not hard to understand why reporters working on deadline may not distinguish such differences or reflect an understanding of them in their interviewing and reporting.³³²

Their advice for journalists is to be better prepared by becoming aware of what they might encounter by pre-planning certain aspects of coverage for a major traumatic event.

331 Hurst & White (1994), P119.

332 Coté & Simpson (2000), Pp23-24.

When you cover an accident, you may not be around survivors and those directly affected long enough to notice changes in their emotional responses. If you stay at the scene of a disaster, you may notice what one experienced disaster worker calls the 'heroic', 'honeymoon', 'disillusionment' and 'reconstruction' phases ... (these) observations are packed with relevance for journalists. Continue to monitor as many parts of the affected region as possible ... People at the center of disasters often direct their anger at the media for abandoning their story of recovery ... On your own and in your newsroom plan how to cover major accidents and disasters. Know what to do – and not do – in the first minutes and hours after you hear the sirens or calls on the police scanner.³³³

It is clear from this research that Australian journalists could improve their understanding about the impact of trauma, not only on the victims, survivors, families and communities they must cover but also on themselves; they would certainly have the support and encouragement of many participants in this research if they chose to do so.

333 Op. cit., Pp73-74.

8.4 The content conundrum

In contrast to previous sections this section deals with the balancing act that journalists face when it comes to selecting and presenting content related to traumatic incidents. Hurst and White (1994) argue that the primary duty of news media 'is to inform the public of important events, not to act as moral guardians'.

the mere fact that an article or photograph could cause offence is not of itself a reason for not publishing it or, subsequently, for censoring it. Objections on grounds of poor taste need to be weighed against the usefulness or importance of the information that is published. In short, did the story do more good than the harm it caused, and could the harm have been avoided by gathering the information and telling the story in a different way? There is no easy answer. The problem of withholding information to avoid giving offence is to know where to draw the line. One kind of censorship easily leads to another. The newspaper or periodical that is always being praised for common sense and good taste is also likely to be mocked at times for its stodginess and lack of originality. But the more permissive approach is potentially as dangerous. Material that gives serious offence can result in widespread public disapproval, reflected in a decline in circulation and revenue. Again, it is a matter of knowing where the line should be drawn.³³⁴

They argue some of the most difficult ethical problems for the news media are caused by the use of dramatic photographs and television film showing horror and grief. 'The portrayal of human agony may well be good for newspaper sales or television ratings. Nevertheless, it is not always clear why the public needs to see close-ups of anguished relatives who have just lost their kin in an air crash or a bushfire.'³³⁵

334 Hurst & White (1994), Pp140-141.

335 Op. cit., Pp116-117.

Hurst and White argue that, while police and authorities at disaster scenes sometimes make decisions to limit the media's access to sites, consequently also limiting interview opportunities and any visuals that could be depicted, usually such controls only occur when media activities might interfere with rescue operations or public safety. More commonly, these decisions are left to news editors.

Most news organisations say that they try to avoid stories which merely capitalise on people's grief although they acknowledge that competitive pressures sometimes make it difficult for them to ban material which other channels are showing. At the same time they are against 'sanitising' the news to the point that it no longer bears any resemblance to actual events. Channel Seven's Melbourne news editor, John Gibson, keeps a film record of gruesome or gut-wrenching scenes that have been cut from the news because of fears that they might be offensive to the audience. 'Gibbo's ghoul tape', as it is known in the Seven newsroom, is the channel's response to viewers who might accuse them of insensitivity.³³⁶

In contrast to Hurst and White, participants in research for this thesis were vocal about news media 'crossing the line' when it came to the selection and presentation of news content. Many said they doubted the choice would be the same if the decision-makers' families had been involved in the tragedies. They were inclined to label this reality an unfair 'double standard'.

Spungen (1998) suggests controversy surrounds the places the media put victims of violence in crime stories. She quotes the experience of one woman whose child was murdered: 'The police answered only questions we asked and promised to return and tell us the rest of the story. Before that could happen, a TV news report devastated our family with the account, including pictures, of where she was taken and set afire.'³³⁷ One key area of concern, Spungen notes, is the publication of a victim's or co-victim's address and/or showing their residence on television, especially where coverage has already disclosed 'certain details and circumstances of the murder'.

In cases in which there is no arrest, co-victims may fear that information in the media could be used to threaten or harm them. Still others may worry that this information could expose them to anonymous calls from mentally ill strangers or to criminals who might burglarize or vandalize their property.³³⁸

336 Ibid.

337 Spungen (1998), Pp221-222.

338 *ibid*, P222.

A similar concern was aired by at least one Port Arthur participant (in Case Study 3, Chapter 4 of this thesis).

Coté and Simpson (2000) say each interview should involve a deliberate judgment about the capacity of the interviewee to understand what an interview entails, including potential ramifications for the interviewee, family members and friends. 'It is not enough that a person agrees to an interview. The ethical burden is not on the interview subject but on the journalist.'³³⁹ They argue that doing the interview is not ethical unless the reporter has received what some journalists call 'informed consent', a phrase picked up from medicine.³⁴⁰ Hurst and White (1994) agree, suggesting media intrusion 'begins where consent ends'.

However, sick and injured people are often not in a condition to indicate whether they give their consent, and many dramatic pictures have been taken without permission, including several which have won journalism's national Walkley Award. For instance, Ray Saunders won the 1958 prize for his photograph of a would-be suicide clinging to Brisbane's Victoria Bridge and Stephen Cooper earned the 1986 award for his photograph of a police sergeant carrying the body of a 12-year-old girl who had been drowned in a Sydney flood. In neither case could the victims [or families] give their consent yet Saunders and Cooper could argue that a strong public interest in both events overrode the individual right to privacy.³⁴¹

The people at the epicenter of traumatic incidents who were interviewed for this research often said they and their families were not ready, equipped and/or able to even agree to dealing with the media for quite some time after their traumatic incident. If people who are unable to give 'informed consent' – or there is little time to seek it – journalists risk causing further, substantial harm. Exploiting someone who is unfit or unable to give informed consent may also be laying the groundwork for potential litigation on the grounds of additional mental anguish suffered, deliberate invasions of privacy or, for persistent intrusion, stalking.

339 Coté & Simpson (2000), P88.

340 Ibid.

341 Hurst & White (1994), P118. Bracketed comment mine.

8.5 What Australian journalists can do to minimise further harm

Good journalism needs to be practised every time news media respond to a traumatic event. This section presents concrete advice for Australian journalists in the field when interviewing, photographing or filming known or potentially traumatised people. It also offers steps that newsroom personnel and decision-makers can take to help reduce additional harm to victims, survivors, their families and their communities.

For journalists in the field, deadlines and chaos in and around the site often mean there is little time to consider the ramifications of a complex tragic event however, as this research shows, it is critical to do so. The first things to remember or consider are:

- the overall number of media there or working elsewhere on the story
- will local infrastructure be strained or overloaded by media activities? (If so, what can be done to alleviate this – e.g., a satellite telephone, own supplies?)
- witnesses and victims can be further harmed by swarming media or those who would “ambush” them for the sake of a story
- the safety or rescue/recovery of victims should never be jeopardised
- media activity and reporting impacts particularly harshly on the young, elderly and the weak, all of whom are often powerless to object or whose views or welfare are overlooked in newsrooms
- it's critical to be accurate and to check details thoroughly
- it's important to ask and not to demand, cajole, leverage or threaten
- demonstrate respect and compassion, not insensitivity and competition
- don't misrepresent yourself, the facts or the situation
- don't invade people's privacy or focus on their apparent grief
- it is not the time to offer deals (e.g., exclusives)
- it is better to work with mediators and intermediaries rather than work around them
- don't punish victims because they engage assistance to handle constant media enquiries
- your actions are watched, noted and remembered by victims, survivors, their families, their communities and authorities

These areas closely match Coté and Bucqueroux's tips on interviewing victims (see previous chapter). Their tips demonstrate to journalists how to be sensitive to the predicament of a victim and at the same time cognizant of the victim's particular vulnerabilities.

Australian journalists should also take responsibility for learning more about trauma and its potential impacts on themselves and those who they might work with, interview, photograph or film. This research has shown they can begin to access information to help their understanding of the interface between trauma and journalism by:

- visiting online sites such as
 - the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma at www.dartcenter.org/Curriculum/module1/content_main_intro.html
 - David Balwin's Trauma Information Pages at www.trauma-pages.com
 - the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies at www.istss.org
- review articles such as those by
 - Hal Himmelstein and E. Perry Faithorn (2002) 'Eyewitness to Disaster: how journalists cope with the psychological stress inherent in reporting traumatic events' in *Journalism Studies* [Vol 3 (4)]
 - Jocelyn Suitor (2001) 'Tragic consequences: How journalists survive on a diet of death and destruction' in *Australian Journalism Review* [Vol 23 (1)]
 - Lindsay Simpson (2001) 'Reporting Port Arthur: A personal account' in *Australian Journalism Review* [Vol 23 (2)]
 - Audrey McCollum (2001) 'A neighbor wonders about her role as a media source: Had my attempt to honor dear friends actually caused harm?' in *Nieman Reports* [Fall, (Vol 55 (3))]
 - Ann Jemphrey & Eileen Berrington (2000) 'Surviving the Media: Hillsborough, Dunblane and the press' in *Journalism Studies*, [Vol 1 (3)]
 - Richard Lower (1999) 'Port Arthur Massacre: A TV editor's experience' in *Asia-Pacific Media Educator* [Vol. 7]
 - Bruce Shapiro (1995) 'One violent crime' in *Nation* [(April)]
 - Nic Place (1992) 'Journalists and Trauma: the need for counselling' in *Australian Studies in Journalism* [Vol 1]
- reading books such as
 - Coté and Simpson's *Covering violence: A guide to ethical reporting about victims and trauma*
 - Diver and Bouda's *Survival: The inspirational story of the Thredbo disaster's sole survivor*
 - Mikac and Simpson's *To have and to hold*
 - Moeller's *Compassion Fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*
 - Scott's *Port Arthur: A story of strength and courage*
 - Spungen's *Homicide: The hidden victims*
- discussing what they learn with newsroom colleagues and managers
- adopting 'best practice' guidelines for responding to traumatic events

Research for this thesis has also shown that, back in the newsroom, media executives, managers and supervisors across the country need to:

- be cognisant of the fact that their own organisation will be one of maybe hundreds of media outlets covering an event and that repeated contacts with individuals within communities, especially smaller ones, can be upsetting and even harmful to their circumstances or recovery
- review the way their organisation responds to traumatic events, particularly instructions given to frontline staff as events are unfolding that might be thoughtless or require staff to be insensitive to victims, survivors, families, communities and others
- train staff who are likely to attend or manage such events about trauma and its potential impacts on individuals and communities, prepare them for what they might encounter, how they can recognise signs of traumatic responses in themselves and others
- actively seek pooling arrangements with other media outlets to lessen the load on affected individuals, families and communities
- provide adequate support for staff while they are in the field, when they return and as time goes on, not simply expect staff to work around the clock or without periodic breaks from the scene, nor to come back into the newsroom without someone enquiring of their own reactions to the events they covered and whether they need a break to deal with what they have witnessed
- allow frontline staff who have been granted interviews the discretion to permit victims, survivors or their immediate families to preview sections of copy, images or film that will be pertinent to them
- ensure their staff understand that they are expected to uphold the MEAA/AJA Code of Ethics at all times during coverage of a traumatic event and that
 - they should do no further harm to individuals, families or communities
 - confirmed incidences of harassment, coercion, connivance or deception will be considered serious misconduct, with appropriate penalties (up to dismissal)
 - no deals or exclusive arrangements are to be sought or signed

8.6 Epilogue: A kerbside view of the 1987 Queen Street massacre

This section, presented in a journalistic narrative form, is not only a personal account of how the author of this thesis came to be interested in this topic but also attempts to draw together some of the key issues of this chapter and, ultimately, this thesis. The next and final chapter draws the pieces of the thesis together in a more traditional, academic-style summary and analysis.

It's not something at the front of a news person's mind when filing or presenting a 'breaking news' story after a traumatic event, but for every victim or survivor there is from an incident, there is a much wider circle of family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances who can and will be affected by the act of gathering and presenting the news.

These people not only desperately wish the event had never taken place but are also concerned for the welfare of victims and survivors and want to shield them from any more pain or anguish.

It is not uncommon for bystanders, relatives and friends to harshly criticise – sometimes even physically confront – media sent to cover traumatic incidents.

At a time when deadline pressure is greatest on these news personnel, victims and survivors as well as their families and communities are often in a state of deep shock and at a loss to explain what happened.

Police and emergency services are on high alert, attempting to assist, rescue or recover victims and survivors and perhaps cordoning off the crime, disaster or accident scene.

If large numbers of people are involved, actual communication can be chaotic and, even in capital cities, is likely to fail at some point.

When lone gunman Frank Vitkovic terrorised the occupants of an office block in Melbourne in December 1987, fatally shooting eight people and harming many others before plunging to his death from several stories above the pavement, the shock waves were felt around the world.

The office block he chose for his vengeful massacre usually housed up to 850 Australia Post and Telecom Australia employees. The two organisations shared a credit union on one of the lower floors, where Vitkovic began his rampage.

It was barely two months after the Hoddle Street massacre, where sniper Julian Knight had killed seven people and wounded a further 19, and police had barely had time to review and upgrade their plans for handling such major incidents.

The chaos was evident almost instantaneously.

After initial radio reports of shootings in a Queen Street office block, the relatives and friends of those 850 people – and many others – hit the telephones, causing an almost instant meltdown of the switchboard at the nearby William Street police station as well as widespread congestion on a large part of the city's telephone network.

Unable to get through on the telephones, people flocked to the precinct, most on foot because traffic and trams using the city's streets ground to a halt very quickly.

They reached the scene to find police barricades had been hastily erected to seal off the adjacent intersection, protect the crime scene around the building and a body which lay on the footpath.

The shootings had happened late in the day, after 4pm, and police responded immediately, guns drawn, locking down the building and calling for backup.

Those who were still inside – the majority of them staff – remained where they were until police could determine how many "shooters" there had been, whether the scene was secure as well as the immediate toll from the gunman's floor-by-floor shooting spree.

Senior Australia Post and Telecom managers, who were based elsewhere in the city, were immediately alerted by the building's security staff and media liaison personnel from both organisations were despatched to the precinct on foot with early model mobile telephones that would soon come in handy.

Within half an hour, there were more than 100 people milling around the barricaded intersection – large numbers of police, ambulance, fire and emergency services personnel, along with representatives of all news outlets and police media liaison staff, office workers from nearby buildings and even friends or family of those still inside.

From then on, roughly every half hour, the most senior police officer on the scene would give a brief media conference from the western edge of the barricaded intersection, updating attentive news crews on body counts, injury and other details as they became clearer.

Police even brought a special caravan – and a chaplain – inside the barricade around 5.30pm. It was set up beside a busy Telecom team of technicians who quickly patched telephone lines from the caravan straight into the backbone of the telephone network to ensure dedicated communication could be ensured.

Just prior to the last media briefing before the 6pm television bulletins were due to go to air, police media liaison officer Jane Munday approached me, perhaps recognising my face because I had previously been a police rounds reporter who now worked on contract for Telecom Australia as a media liaison officer.

Munday asked if Telecom could help take pressure off the police telephone system by providing 'some sort of dedicated number on a large exchange'.

One call on the chunky old mobile phone and the police not only had a landline number to give the media, but a team of Telecom personnel who were willing to take incoming calls and provide basic information channelled through from police.

That number went to air on 6pm television and radio bulletins and the impact was immediate. Luckily, two off-duty operators who were driving through the city heard the number go out, recognised it as a 'headquarters office number' and promptly parked outside the office where the team of volunteers would be based throughout the night.

For not only did the local television and radio stations broadcast the number, direct feeds to interstate and overseas newsrooms gave family members and friends around the globe somewhere to get more information.

Back on Queen Street, while the initially chaotic scene outside the building was gradually being brought under control, there were still hundreds of people 'locked down' inside, where the massacre took place.

So police ordered more than half a dozen coaches to come up to the western side of the barricades, ready to ferry the building's occupants to other locations.

Police officers co-opted their own and outside media liaison personnel to basic crowd control, having them encourage members of the public to clear a space and to move on to the William Street police station if they wanted to find out more about an individual thought to still be in the building.

As I stood around talking to media and the public, an anxious grey-haired man in his sixties and a younger male companion approached us wanting to know if the older man's daughter was safe because he could not reach her by telephone and he felt something was wrong.

The pair were directed to William Street but, with no information available there, returned to wait patiently at the barricades while police and others went about their business.

The senior Telecom media liaison person on the scene – another former newspaper police rounds reporter Gerry Morrison – was taken by police on a tour of the building around 7pm to see for himself the impact of the shootings and get some idea of the immediate needs of staff.

Meanwhile, I stayed on outside talking to ABC reporter Peter Jepperson and other media – and, on occasion, to the two men who had approached earlier.

Well after 7pm, police began to evacuate still terrified and deeply shocked staff in small groups, and held another media briefing as these people began to emerge from the building.

The first person to emerge was an Asian woman, heavily pregnant, who was quickly ushered to safety by the chaplain and others. A few seconds later the second person to come out onto the intersection was a young woman in her late teens.

The older man who had been waiting behind the barricade with his friend must have recognised the girl, for he somehow dived under the tape barrier and called out loudly to her, so loud that some media huddled around the Police Commissioner for his update spun around to see what the noise was.

When the young girl looked up and realised who the man was, her face told him everything he needed to know. She had sat beside his daughter at work and saw her mowed down in a hail of bullets.

His cry of anguish was like a starter gun for already primed news teams. As the reality that his daughter would not come home again dawned on him he lashed out angrily at a camera operator from a commercial television station who had made a slight move towards him.

Almost instinctively, I moved to restrain him as gently as possible, almost pathetically reassuring him that the cameraman 'doesn't want to hurt you, he's only doing his job'.

But the very moment of pained recognition on the girl's face was captured by a news photographer from *The Herald*, where I had worked until earlier that year as a sub-editor.

The photograph of the young woman became a seminal image of the massacre, telling at once of the depth of trauma felt by people who were there. I recall that image was run several times over the following days throughout the newspaper as the 'Queen Street massacre' icon that accompanied daily reports.

Knowing this was a common approach for a newspaper to take, I was still disturbed by the apparent absence of sensitivity for the trauma being endured by this young person, her family, the family of the slain girl and her injured colleagues.

In the weeks after he toured the inside of the building, Morrison confided in me that, in some ways, he had regretted going inside.

Munday, who moved to the Northern Territory some years back, was responsible for drafting one of the country's first papers on victims and the media.

Nearly 15 years later, I repeatedly heard echoes of what I sensed earlier when I researched and wrote a thesis on the impact of news reporting on victims and survivors of traumatic incidents.

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