

## Chapter 9      In conclusion

Media moguls have long known that suffering, rather than good news, sells. ‘People being killed is definitely a good, objective criteria for whether a story is important,’ said former *Boston Globe* foreign correspondent Tom Palmer.<sup>342</sup> According to Moeller (1999), ‘watching and reading about suffering, especially suffering that exists somewhere else, somewhere interestingly exotic or perhaps deliciously close, has become a form of entertainment. Images of trauma have become intrinsic to the marketing of the media.’ The media make the most of emotional images of crises. Yet reporting at the scene holds many perils for the unwary or ‘drop-in’ reporting teams, according to Coté and Simpson (2000).

Both Lockerbie and Oklahoma City were stages for inevitable meetings of the local reporters and the news teams from national and international media. The two groups often have different goals in mind, and their accounts of the events reflect those differences. Reporters who parachute in would do well to remember the visit of CBS anchor Connie Chung to Oklahoma City a short time after the bombing. Chung not only arrived at the federal building in a limousine but later angered many in Oklahoma City by asking an assistant fire chief whether the city could handle the crisis.<sup>343</sup>

Sensitivity is important in times of traumatic events and, while news reporting is not likely to be the sole trigger for post-traumatic stress disorder in victims and survivors, it clearly is a significant contributor. The research for this thesis reinforces observations by others that behaviours, sights, sounds, words, concepts and reminders can and do deepen the impact of an event on those closest to it. Further, it concludes that, in a major traumatic event, the pool of people affected is usually much larger than is immediately obvious in newsrooms. For these reasons, it is imperative that news reporters and producers choose carefully both their methods of operation as well as materials for publication. Repeatedly failing to show sensitivity at such times is increasingly likely to lead to a degree of restriction of the media in future.

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342      Moeller (1999), P49.

343      Op. cit., P61.

In the first chapter of this thesis, key elements of news coverage of traumatic incidents were outlined, along with the roles of journalists and newsroom decision-makers in gathering, crafting and presenting such news. This initial chapter also sought to challenge the ‘well-honed mode’ of the news media’s response to coverage of such incidents. It flagged the fact that the remainder of the thesis would validate claims that *hypercoverage* – saturation news coverage – of traumatic incidents is harmful to victims, survivors, their families and communities by presenting nine Australian case studies that echo findings overseas.

The literature review for this research constitutes Chapter 2 and draws a thread through readings in the fields of journalism, psychology and communication. It demonstrates the richness of academic and anecdotal material available for Australian journalists to inform themselves about the consequences of trauma on those they cover and on themselves. It also provides a number of definitions pertinent to the central research question: What is the impact of news reporting on victims and survivors of traumatic incidents in Australia? Finally, it contrasts extensive observations made to a series of Australian Senate hearings into self-regulation in the communication and information industries in 1998 with other local and overseas observations of similar topics.

The qualitative, comparative case study methodology applied in this research is then outlined in Chapter 3, along with the reasons behind the selection of three main ‘cohorts’ for the nine case studies. This chapter discusses the logic and methods applied when examining a multiple-victim traumatic event, single-victim traumatic events and a traumatic event with no loss of life. It also presents some quantitative data which aids in understanding the sample selected for this research.

Chapter 4 presents four case studies drawn from people with direct experience of the Port Arthur massacre of April 28, 1996. It particularly highlights the demands news media, *en masse*, can put on individuals and communities. It also begins to draw out examples of behaviours demonstrated and decisions made by individual journalists and news outlets that had often negative consequences for victims, survivors, witnesses, families and the broader community as well as for themselves and their peers. Each case study concludes with valuable, specific feedback for journalists and newsroom decision-makers.

While some issues raised in Chapter 4 reappear in the case studies of Chapter 5, the four industrial death case studies relate the somewhat different experiences of those who lost loved ones with news media and demonstrate other concerns and agendas that can be at play. Lack of coverage in some instances was as distressing for families as hypercoverage had been for those connected to the massacre at Port Arthur.

Chapter 6 documents the intense media attention experienced by the family of James Scott, who was lost in the Himalayas for 43 days in 1991-92. While this was a traumatic incident without loss of life, this case study reflects many of the concerns of the eight earlier case studies and reinforces media critic Stuart Littlemore's observation that news organisations in Australia are tending to cover high-profile rescues in a dysfunctional, formulaic manner that has serious and sustained consequences for survivors and their families.

Drawing together the observations and feedback of the nine case studies presented in this thesis, Chapter 7 examines common themes evident in the experiences, responses to and shortcomings of news coverage of traumatic events in Australia in the dual lights of the process of gathering news as well as the content of resultant news reports. Australian journalists, news managers and regulators can see in this chapter exactly what concerns victims and their loved ones as well as practice areas requiring urgent industry and individual reflection. This is especially important given the inability of current complaints mechanisms to meet the special needs of traumatised individuals and communities.

The penultimate chapter acknowledges the balancing act facing journalists who cover traumatic events. Notions of freedom of speech versus censorship, and the public's right to know versus an individual's right to privacy are examined, along with issues that surround victims and survivors who become advocates as well as journalists who become scapegoats. It also looks to findings by overseas researchers and shows that, in most instances, Australians who participated in this research had similar experiences or observations to make. It concludes with a personal, narrative account of a traumatic incident, Melbourne's 1987 Queen Street massacre.

The final chapter presents four key observations and five conclusions by the researcher, a former newspaper journalist with strong experience in professional communication and media relations.

Throughout the case studies presented in this thesis there are two clear sets of experiences, those that are common and those that differ. The ways victim, survivor, witness and community experiences often overlap, produces common themes or concerns. In summary these are:

- large numbers of media descending after a traumatic incident occurs, especially when they behave as a 'pack';
- a lack of sensitivity in gathering and presenting news stories and images of an incident and those it has affected;
- the harm caused by the repeated airing of stories and images relating to the initial traumatic incident or others like it;
- inaccuracy of details reported;
- a lack of energy to complain about the behaviour of or news reports by journalists;
- available complaints mechanisms were poorly understood, confusing and/or unsatisfactory;
- the elevation of sensation over substance in many news reports of traumatic incidents;
- deceptive, dishonest or coercive tactics employed by some journalists and news media outlets;
- a lack of sensitivity when traumatic incidents occur in smaller communities, especially by non-local media;
- exploitation of individuals who make good media talent, having unforeseen consequences for those who become 'unofficial spokespeople';
- media actions eroding victims', families' and/or communities' sense of control, setting back or complicating recovery;
- news coverage of deaths preceding official notification of families, causing distress and potentially endangering others;
- coverage of reasons contributing to a traumatic incident was sometimes absent or minimal;
- journalists or news organisations with pre-conceived notions of how stories would play out; and
- superficial and/or formulaic coverage of some types of traumatic incidents.

These common themes contrasted with the essential differences between the three cohorts examined. For instance, the lack of coverage was more an issue for the families of those killed in the workplace, especially where the death was seen by the media to be relatively routine. Those interviewees who had previous experience in dealing with the media responded differently to media expectations and had a richer understanding of the processes and pressures on journalists than those who were novices in their interactions with news media.

## 9.1 Observations and conclusions

Largely echoing findings in other countries, the primary research done for this thesis has led the author to four certain observations and five major conclusions about the impact of news reporting of traumatic events in this country that are outlined below.

### Observation #1

**It is immediately possible to reduce impacts on trauma victims caused by the actions of the media.**

Judicious use and commitment to the existing MEAA Code of Ethics and other codes of practice by all in the media would diminish the ‘savagery’ experienced by those in the midst of a traumatic event. Promulgation of best practice responses would also assist others work through challenges faced when covering traumatic events.

### Observation #2

**Media personnel need to better understand what the consequences of trauma are for victims/survivors, communities and for themselves.**

An intimate understanding of the emotional psychological and other impacts of trauma is generally rare among journalists, especially younger or newer journalists, especially those who have yet to face a significant personal trauma (for instance, loss of a parent, partner, child or relative in difficult circumstances or a threat to their own lives). In 1998, before the Senate, MEAA President Tom Burton acknowledged that situation.

I think we could do a lot more in training people in basically how to approach, in a more personal sense, people who are grieving, and perhaps detail in some sort of working way what is a fair approach to things and what is not ...<sup>344</sup>

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344

Tom Burton, Federal President, Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, in Commonwealth of Australia Senate Official Committee Hansard (1998, February), *Self-regulation in the information and communication industries*, February 16 hearing, Canberra (uncorrected proof).

Sending untrained personnel into the field to relate to people undergoing extreme trauma is irresponsible and unwarranted. No other agency responding to the event would send out untrained personnel. Why should the media? Journalists in the field are often largely directed by those back in the newsroom. It is equally important for newsroom personnel to understand the nature of trauma and secondary trauma and to provide support, advice and reassurance to news teams both when they are in the field and when they return. Debriefing should be employed early and include office-bound and field operatives.

### **Observation #3**

#### **Pressure is mounting for Australian news media to clean up their act or face regulation.**

Accounts by victims, survivors, witnesses and others are being shared with policy-makers, politicians and researchers. Public debate about setting ‘boundaries’ for the media is more evident than ever. More people are articulating disgust at the micro-coverage of tragedies such as the death of the Princess of Wales. The Australian Senate has heard from several individuals and organisations about the inadequate nature of media self-regulation, complaints mechanisms and defamation laws.

### **Observation #4**

#### **Responsibility for adopting harm-minimisation strategies when dealing with trauma victims – and policing those standards – needs to be taken by news managers and the MEAA.**

Despite the ‘unique’ nature of news, with its privileged access to traumatic events – often from the moment they unfold – nobody has given news media permission to cause further harm to victims/survivors and their families/communities. Indeed, such harm can only be detrimental to the long-term reputation of media outlets and the profession. To be able to step back from the words, sounds and images that shock and repel, the impetus for change must come from those who set expectations and standards. The call to review content and practice relating to traumatic events is not about restricting the public’s right to know or watering down news. It’s about human decency and acknowledging the media’s responsibility to limit the harm it can do.

*Researcher's conclusions*

As a result of this work, the researcher some realities face individual journalists and decision-makers:

- (1) the body of knowledge about trauma and its impacts is freely available and accessible, is already being utilised by many "first responder" agencies (e.g., ambulance, fire/rescue, SES, police) which have developed sophisticated systems to deal with it over the past decade, yet it appears to be largely overlooked by Australian media decision-makers who continue to assign unprepared news teams to cover critical incidents;
- (2) Australia's "self-regulated" media relies too much on "public interest" and "freedom of the press v. censorship" arguments to defend what are actually incidents of malpractice and voyeurism;
- (3) current journalistic practice in Australia does not always give those involved "a fair go" because it seeks to impose operational constraints and paradigms which are neither broadly understood, nor accepted, outside the media;
- (4) Australian media should be more committed to improving journalistic practice because that would help improve the industry's reputation which, in turn, would make it easier for journalists to do their jobs effectively; and
- (5) unless media outlets address malpractice issues they may soon be held culpable for trauma caused by their actions via civil or workplace health and safety litigation; and enough people are going to express concern to Australian authorities about media malpractice that, eventually, regulation will become inevitable.

## 9.2 In closing

The real shame of any media malpractice surrounding traumatic events is the harm it can cause to victims, communities, journalists themselves and society as a whole. If journalists continue to fail to acknowledge this and to behave badly when faced with traumatic events, they will force the rest of society to act. Journalists need to accept that the rights bestowed on the news media under the freedom of speech come with the concomitant responsibility to behave in a morally and ethically acceptable manner, especially in the wake of traumas involving loss of life or serious threat to life.

It is not until journalists, as individuals and employer groups, break with the daily grind of producing news and examine carefully the consequences of their behaviours and publishing choices that they can confront the scope and truly brutal nature of a traumatic event. In the midst of potential significant psychological and physical harm, journalists need to treat those they interview and photograph with dignity and respect while caring for themselves as well. Letting the news caravan roll on without such reflection is a gross abuse of the power to probe and publish. It also fails to heed the lessons there to be learned about the human cost of trauma. For those who strive to do no further harm when covering traumatic events not only demonstrate respect to victims/survivors and their families/communities. They also contribute greatly to the advancement of responsible journalism.