

## Reporting moral outrage: Reducing the ramifications of royal commission coverage

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### Introduction

Australia's imminent [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#) presents a unique opportunity for the country's news media organisations to reflect - not only on the potential shape of coverage as the commission unfolds but also on the consequences of that likely massive body of reporting for their own personnel, for those most closely affected by the commission's investigations as well as for the broader public.

With its first public hearing due on April 3, 2013, in Melbourne, the commission is likely to run for up to three years and hold its initial hearings and investigations around the nation over the coming year before filing its interim report. From the Australian media's perspective, the royal commission will likely involve reporting by most if not all news media outlets, from the largest to the smallest. Its hearings, discoveries and witnesses will provide a continuous stream of challenging assignments for newsrooms to cover.

Journalists - reporters, photographers, videographers, producers, sub-editors, researchers, section editors and other news personnel - will not only have to sift through detailed submissions about systemic abuse and sit through graphic, even distressing, personal accounts of specific abuse incidents in hearings but they will also find themselves interviewing, photographing, taping or broadcasting stories about traumatised victims, their loved ones, subject matter experts, institutional representatives and authorities. In certain instances, these journalists will be repelled and deeply moved by what they hear, see and discuss.

While individual journalists may not be directly connected to any abuse cases before the royal commission, potentially over time - especially if they are assigned to regularly cover these stories - they will be exposed, albeit vicariously, to many more disturbing recollections and shocking details than even some victims, survivors, experts or investigators. In addition to their direct contact with key players, just staying abreast of events unfolding at the royal commission will require ongoing monitoring of a wide range of official documents, coverage by print media, broadcast news reports and current affairs programs as well as relevant research papers.

What is known from [Australian and international research](#) is that journalists tend to say the greatest challenge, stress and distress comes from reporting deliberate harm to, or abuse of, children. During this royal commission, there will be no end of stories of such harm to the young. In similar inquiries into child sexual abuse overseas - such as in [Ireland](#) or the [United States](#) - the shocking [short- and long-term psychological effects evident for victims and their loved ones](#) has been well documented. Witnessing, comprehending and recounting Australian stories around child sexual abuse is likely to expose journalists to no less harrowing accounts.

It is incumbent, then, on responsible news organisations to take heed of a growing international body of research knowledge - as well as pertinent industry discussions - around the impact of reporting traumatic news. Regardless of how "tough" an individual journalist is thought to be, repeated exposure to traumatic news assignments can have serious, possibly lifelong consequences if that exposure is not properly managed.

More urgently than ever, Australian newsrooms need to develop and encourage trauma awareness and resilience among editorial staff members who will be exposed to an accumulation of distressing details arising from this particular royal commission. Newsrooms also need to pay attention to ensuring (a) the best professional and psychological support possible is available to staff or stringers who will be doing this challenging work over the coming years, and (b) that these journalists know they can access support in confidence and without professional consequences.

The cost of not paying attention to these aspects of royal commission reportage is likely to be significant: increased turnover of highly trained and capable news workers, potential psychological harm to employees or stringers, further harm to victims and their loved ones as well as diminishment of the company's reputation with key stakeholders and the broader community.

While engagement in social media can bring great benefits to newsrooms, the emergence of sometimes vitriolic and sustained online and social media dissection of perceived news media misbehaviour also has potentially deleterious consequences for already stressed reporting teams and needs to be nimbly managed. Intense scrutiny and criticism in an already charged environment has the potential not only to distract staff from their main work but also to wear down even the most resilient reporters and moderators. While it is generally inadvisable to engage in social media slanging matches with persistent critics, some unwarranted, vitriolic or disruptive commentary will still need to be addressed and misinformation corrected. A regularly reviewed social media management strategy around royal commission-related postings will therefore be essential.

Indeed, a broader internal communication strategy would be in order when it comes to keeping employees, stringers and affiliates informed about how a media outlet is responding to the coverage challenges presented by this royal commission.

Planning for protracted coverage, then, needs to take on extra dimensions as well as a new mindset. While newsrooms need to manage the day-to-day disclosure of graphic details of misdeeds against the most vulnerable in our communities, they also need to recognise the points of greatest stress in so doing. They need to seek to mitigate risk wherever possible. They need to instigate adequate training and procedures that support their personnel as well as factor in a robust mechanism that allows them to be open to constructive criticism - from within and externally - about the nature and ramifications of their coverage. At the same time, they need to filter out destructive, unwarranted or vitriolic content. In short, especially for this demanding task, Australian newsrooms need to embrace the 'do no further harm' maxim.

Taking steps in this direction may well challenge long-established newsroom cultures and editorial practices but it will help protect personnel and promote the company's stance as a responsible news provider. It will also lay the groundwork for [best practices in reporting traumatic news](#) more broadly.

This issues paper canvasses a range of potential risks and presents some practical options for strategic steps that can help newsrooms and newsroom managers ameliorate those risks.

### **Recognising stresses & risks for frontline personnel**

There are four broad categories of potential stress or risk facing news personnel covering the royal commission and stories emanating from this watershed inquiry:

**1. repeated exposure to**

- graphic, even distressing details of child sexual abuse - including repeated rapes of young children - and the consequences flowing from that abuse in evidence, interviews, transcripts
- disturbing details of adult grooming/intimidation behaviours
- unsettling descriptions of depraved behaviours, including the 'normalisation' of some of these behaviours for young victims
- distressed relatives/friends of child sex abuse victims who have taken their lives
- shocked and angry relatives/friends of victims who were unaware of the plight of their loved one/s
- confronting evidence/defence of accused offenders
- mystifying evidence/defence of responsible others in institutions
- shocking revelations of abuse in safe places (schools, churches, other 'trusted' institutions)

**2. extended duration of this royal commission**

- pre-hearing reporting, including
  - pre-interviews with experts
  - researching/cross-checking details of abuse/alleged abusers
  - formal & informal updates from authorities & advocates
  - implied & actual pressure from a variety of sources pursuing agendas
- public hearings themselves
  - multiple hearings at multiple locations where evidence will be heard from multiple experts, a multitude of witnesses (victims & others), a parade of alleged abusers as well as a litany of institutional failures
  - royal commission-imposed restrictions (if any)
  - complications caused by overlaps with concurrent investigations in other jurisdictions
- related interviews with victims/families/perpetrators/institutional elders
- post-royal commission fallout

**3. potential psychological harm**

- sense of hopelessness/horror, loss of trust, erosion of sense of personal safety, clinical depression
- physical & psychosomatic anxiety reactions through to anxiety stress disorder
- vicarious stress reactions through to vicarious PTSD
- re-awakening personal traumatic reactions from similar or even unrelated experiences
- flashbacks, nightmares, disrupted sleep, hyper-vigilance, exhaustion
- numbness, reduced range of emotional expression
- maladaptive coping behaviours
  - substance abuse - alcohol, prescription drugs, illicit substances
  - accidental or deliberate overdose
  - avoidant behaviours, social withdrawal, dissociation, psychosis
  - mood swings, aggression, rage, violence
  - obsessive behaviours, particularly in reaction to RC individuals (perpetrators, victims, responsible others)
  - relationship breakdowns
  - eating/dietary disorders
- exacerbation of existing medical conditions or previous psychological injury
- unwarranted hyper-vigilance around loved ones - especially children - as a result of exposure to the ease of multiple harm scenarios
- questioning of own personal/professional behaviour, especially where there has been a serious negative reaction to their reportage

#### 4. online and social media complications

- reporters or editors being unfairly criticised, or worse, on online or social media
- reporters or editors being targeted/stalked via social media by malcontents
- reporters or editors being threatened by people intent on causing harm
- hyper-vigilance & other forms of personal/social/professional disruptions due to such exposure

#### Newsroom attitudes

Duty of care will be especially critical in every newsroom covering the royal commission. Every editorial staff member contributes to this. In turn, the product of their editorial work not only will contribute to societal awareness of the commission's activities and its disclosures, but also to how audiences and staff perceive the accuracy and standard of that editorial content as well as the company's respect for victims, due process and democracy.

The welfare and wellbeing of all staff covering what will be a protracted process that presents many challenges and stresses should be paramount. Failure to demonstrate a duty of care will not only negatively affect individuals and diminish broader staff morale, it is also likely to expose the company to a greater chance of successful litigation and, potentially, damage its reputation as a responsible employer.

A number of elements that are evident in most robust newsrooms, conversely, can erode that duty of care:

##### *Ignorance*

- senior managers, news/section managers and peers need to be cognisant - and respectful - of the special difficulties in covering a royal commission into child sexual abuse when they are assigning, communicating with or debriefing their news personnel
- they also need to be aware of the impact of traumatic stress on individuals and communities so that they can exercise their duty of care and guide editorial staff to minimise harm/further harm to themselves and to others
- all editorial & production personnel need to appreciate that child sexual abuse has lifelong consequences & serious, disruptive implications not only for victims but also for their loved ones

##### *Insensitivity*

- those who interact with royal commission reporting teams and the people they cover need to be sensitive to the unfolding situation as well as to their most pressing needs
- given the extent and seriousness of this royal commission, those discussing matters relating to it in one-on-one, group situations or publicly should do so with the assumption that someone within earshot may have been directly or even indirectly affected
- they need to resist making superficial assumptions about people's reactions and, instead, seek first to properly understand before passing judgment, snide remarks or cracking insensitive jokes
- managers need to foster trust relationships that allow/encourage all of their staff to honestly disclose concerns or procedural shortcomings and feel confident that those disclosures will remain confidential
- they need to ensure staff at least have some workplace support mechanisms in place (e.g., a peer-support program, an arm's length confidential counselling service) and, especially for younger/less experienced staff, have established mentoring relationships with trained, experienced mentors
- leaders need to set a strong example and to listen and act promptly when people bring royal commission-related concerns to them, letting the person know what action has been taken
- newsrooms also need to monitor and be aware of public sensitivities in relation to royal commission coverage &, where reasonable, publicly justify warranted actions and apologise for unwarranted ones as well as reinforce to staff the reasons behind such disclosures

*Macho newsroom culture*

- doesn't foster understanding or support, it allows misunderstanding to fester, degrades decision-making & can be seen to dismiss the welfare of individuals as trivial or unimportant
- buries problems or concerns rather than addressing/rectifying them
- diminishes individuals' sense of worth, creates a climate of 'us' and 'them', excluding those 'not in the inner circle'
- misses critical social & interpersonal cues that something needs attention before it gets out of hand
- fails to institute a healthy rotation policy to spread the load among a crew of capable journalists
- falsely assumes 'tough' individuals are unaffected by the work they do or the difficult assignments they are asked to cover
- fails to foster resilience in all news workers, instead relying on a limited number of 'tough' individuals to deliver, repeatedly, under exceptionally stressful conditions
- can be seen by the public as uncaring, insensitive, bombastic, oafish and unfair - in the realm of this royal commission, the reputational damage could be far worse

*Tendency to act as judge, jury and executioner*

- this royal commission will be complex, convoluted and will continue over a relatively long timeframe, but while a newsroom's role of uncovering important aspects - that may or may not become the subject of the commission's deliberations - remains vital, newsrooms should resist the urge to pre-judge what particular outcomes *should* eventuate from these discoveries/disclosures
- because reporters and newsrooms will, in all likelihood, hear even more than what is disclosed to or in the royal commission itself, the tendency to 'campaign' for particular outcomes or against specific individuals or institutions should be resisted as it may present significant ethical and other ramifications, place additional pressure on staff and expose news teams to potentially justifiable accusations of perverting the course of this important commission
- this royal commission is, at its heart, about investigating allegations of gross abuse of power by those in positions of trust and influence, and if newsrooms, editors or reporters rush to judgment and bay for blood, they risk being deemed as no better than alleged perpetrators by their audiences and by their own journalists.

**Strategies to overcome these potentially negative factors**

[Building resilience](#) and providing appropriate, timely support for individuals are important steps that can be taken to help protect employees and stringers from royal commission-related harm or, at least, to help minimise potential impacts and to manage actual impacts. Taking these steps would also demonstrate a willingness to manage quite evident risks and provide the safest workplace the employer can while being seen publicly to respect the difficult predicament of victims and their loved ones. The following options are some suggestions to begin this process:

- **Build trauma awareness**

Recognising symptoms in self & others is at the heart of rudimentary trauma awareness training. Understanding the impact of traumatic stress on individuals and communities goes hand-in-hand with exploring and implementing constructive, ethical alternatives to problematic news-gathering and presentation choices around traumatic incidents. The leader in such training, internationally, is the [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#), based at Columbia University in New York, which has an Australian affiliate, the [Dart Centre Asia Pacific](#). Since 1997, Dart centres have offered face-to-face as well as online training on trauma and journalism plus a wealth of topic-specific information sheets and relevant industry discussions, including informative ones on [the challenges of covering child abuse](#). [Disclosure: The author, a trauma and journalism researcher since 1997, was a founding board member of Dart's Australian affiliate from 2004-2009 but is no longer a member of that board.] Another useful source of quality trauma information for journalists is the [Trauma Support](#) website hosted by the Reuters Foundation and AlertNet. Other reputable, mostly Australian and overseas government websites offer broader community advice in relation to dealing with traumatic stress, however few if any discuss the ramifications for those news workers covering such incidents.

- **Emphasise self-care**

A news organisation can only do so much to protect individual staff members. Staff themselves also need to adopt healthy self-care strategies to increase their resilience and ability to continue doing this important work. However, news organisations do need to cultivate a self-care climate and to continuously promote activities that support that objective.

Self-care is well-described by an increasing number of reputable trauma research bodies and, for journalists, specifically by the [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#), the [International News Safety Institute](#) (of which most larger Australian media outlets are members), and [Reuters-AlertNet](#). In addition, the Dart Center has an excellent [tip sheet for editorial managers and editors overseeing news personnel exposed to traumatic events](#).

- **Mentor those who need it**

Trained editorial mentors could provide a confidential, one-on-one professional and personal sounding board, especially for younger or less-experienced reporters and editors. A mentor would be a trusted listener with whom the reporter/editor could discuss concerns, complications, options as well as their general wellbeing. Importantly, contact does not have to take place in the workplace. In fact, in certain circumstances, this alternative will be preferable. While face-to-face meetings might be ideal, there is also value in less-direct contact options (e.g., telephone calls or point-to-point, confidential online conversations via Facebook Messaging, Skype, etc).

Early and ongoing contact with a mentor who can be trusted may defuse many concerns that would otherwise fester and emerge later in unwanted reactions or behaviours. With a journalist's permission, mentors could then discuss broad-brush or specific deployment issues, or needs, with relevant workplace manager/s. Where warranted and appropriate, mentors could also advocate more generally for positive change/s in the workplace to assist and/or protect reporters or whole editorial teams.

Potential mentors could include

- willing senior reporters or editors who have limited current royal commission responsibilities but who are aware of the stresses such coverage might present
- respected retired reporters or editors with similar experience who would be willing to assist in the support & development of a younger/less-experienced journalist
- trained psychologists who are also well-versed in the practicalities & stresses of news reporting, especially covering ongoing, difficult assignments

Training for mentors should encompass critical knowledge skills such as

- awareness of the impact of trauma on individuals & communities (reactions, symptoms, red flags)
- non-judgmental, active listening
- encouraging verbalising of concerns, options & potential solutions
  - basic psychological first aid/debriefing steps
- ability to set sensible ground rules with reporter being mentored
- ability to encourage protective, resilience-building behaviours
- ethical interpersonal influencing
- negotiation/dealing with difficult people/situations
- observing/uncovering/discussing worrying symptoms
- respecting confidences until there is an agreed deal-breaker
- knowing when to refer someone for a higher level of psychological support
- awareness of potential complications presented by social media exposure/activity
- ability to discuss the extent of communication between journalist and their partners/close family
- ability to summarise succinctly to the journalist being mentored what has been discussed

- **Set up peer-support network**

“It won’t necessarily be the story of the year that will bring a colleague undone.

It might be covering a court case with gruesome details months later, or dealing with grieving relatives outside the court when they see they have been denied justice for their slain loved one.

You don’t need a psychology degree to make a difference. If your colleague is covering a story that you think you might find tough, pick the phone up and check on them.

Make sure you are aware of counselling services that your work offers and don’t rely on management to think about it in the daily grind of the news cycle. Encourage colleagues to look after themselves, and if need be, refer them on to your company’s counsellors.”

Paul Bentley, Psychological first aid, a presentation to Melbourne Press Club  
[www.melbournepressclub.com/news/psychological-first-aid\\_16\\_07\\_2012](http://www.melbournepressclub.com/news/psychological-first-aid_16_07_2012)

Trained peer supporters can provide practical, one-on-one, confidential and immediate support in the workplace and, in doing so, help to defuse seriously stressful situations that could potentially be unhealthy if overlooked or ignored. Having a network of trained, active peer supporters is a visible sign that a media organisation does consider the welfare of its editorial personnel. Spreading that responsibility across a decent number of trained individuals means that support can be available year-round, for all shifts. The call for editorial volunteers for peer support roles should also be extended to those who no longer report on a daily basis but who have expertise, experience and a willingness to provide such support.

Potential peer support personnel could include

- willing, ethical reporters, producers or editors who have limited or no current royal commission responsibilities but who are aware of the stresses such coverage might present
- respected editorial staff from sister publications/programs with similar experience/s

Training for peer supporters should encompass critical knowledge skills such as

- willingness to agree to & observe confidentiality (unless a deal-breaker emerges)
- awareness of the impact of trauma on individuals & communities (reactions, symptoms, red flags)
- non-judgmental, active listening
- encouraging verbalising of concerns, options & potential solutions
- basic psychological first aid/debriefing steps
- ability to recognise & encourage protective, resilience-building behaviours
- observing/uncovering/discussing worrying symptoms
- knowing when to refer someone for a higher level of support (e.g., suggest a mentor, refer to trauma specialist in the organisation's confidential employee assistance service, assist individual to find an external trauma specialist if they are uncomfortable approaching the organisation's EAS)
- monitoring social media exposure/activity that involves their peers
- ability to summarise succinctly to the peer what has been discussed & take responsibility for checking necessary action/advocacy is completed in a timely manner

- **Cast a wider net**

Covering something as complex as this royal commission will require many resources and for a long time. The tendency for newsrooms will be to deploy the 'A-team' or to fall back on specialists such as investigative reporters, but the main risk this entails will be overloading, over-stressing and potentially exhausting the organisation's most-valued editorial employees. Ultimately, this could contribute to unwanted exits from the organisation and even the industry.

Despite the contraction in staff numbers, newsrooms already have a much broader pool of capable but untrained staff to draw from and, often, more of those capable individuals would be willing to step up if asked than editorial managers realise or recognise, provided they receive adequate preparation for the work.

Regardless of which individuals end up being assigned - or accepting - the challenge of covering this royal commission, it will be essential that all of these staff members receive adequate training and briefing ahead of time about what to expect, what the company expects of them as well as what it will offer them in terms of ongoing support and further education. These personnel need to know that a sensible rotation policy is up for negotiation and that peer support will be the norm, with mentoring available for those who would like it.

- **Implement a rotation policy**

Trauma researchers around the world have established that one of the most obvious predictors of psychological damage in the wake of significant traumatic stress is 'time on site'. This means the cumulative time individuals spend covering stressful elements of this particular royal commission is likely to be a significant contributor to potential symptoms and consequences that they end up experiencing. While some reactions will be transient and manageable, others can end up being debilitating and persistent, especially where individuals persist in staying - or are forced to stay - on the job after it is evident they need or want to have a break.

This is the principal reason a sensible rotation policy is vital. Looking at the entire scope of activities involved in covering a royal commission, it is procedurally possible for newsrooms to rotate people through different sets of responsibilities required. It should also be possible to

- rotate people out of the team to concentrate on other work to give them a break
- respond to a request for relief from this work
- bring other staff in to cover an absence, should that be necessary

Editorial managers need to be cognisant that even experienced journalists will tend to assume they will be expected to stay on that project indefinitely, regardless of what they feel or experience. That, of itself, increases the pressure on those frontline individuals and their peers.

Informing team members that there will be a rotation program in place and that they can request rotation within the team or relief from the project altogether, either temporarily or permanently, without professional consequences, will reduce that pressure. It also communicates to those team members and the broader organisation that individual welfare is the company's primary concern. Team members who feel they have the company's support may also be more considerate of the welfare of those they find themselves covering - or managing - as the royal commission unfolds.

- **Organise team get-togethers**

Periodically gathering a newsroom's royal commission team and passing on the accolades, feedback/critiques and future coverage plans as well as listening to collective concerns or answering questions is a positive way to build a functional, supportive team that stays focused on the goal: To provide the best possible coverage while doing no further harm to themselves or others.

Editorial leaders should not let the frequency of such meetings drift too far beyond two-monthly and they should not assume that these can replace additional, occasional one-on-one discussions about how the project is progressing.

- **Encourage a complimentary culture**

Covering a royal commission is a difficult assignment. Covering it well and having a positive impact on the community's understanding is worth public and peer acknowledgment.

Team leaders or editorial managers should not be the only people to express their admiration or gratitude. If frontline royal commission reporters know their peers genuinely respect what they are doing, it will go a long way to reassuring them they are on the right track.

Conversely, if a reporter's actions are to be criticised, that should come through an editorial manager in a private setting at the appropriate time and not as direct or public criticism. All staff should understand that.

A critical peer who has little or no understanding of the context of a disputed report may end up unnecessarily harming a colleague with ill-informed criticism or assumptions. Better any critical remarks be directed through the royal commission team leader or a masthead editor, who can address the matter in a reasoned, informed manner and take any appropriate action if warranted.

- **Manage critical online and social media**

Apart from the obvious potential legal pitfalls presented by unfettered online or social media commentary, this royal commission is likely to present an almost constant stream of remarks about the nature and specifics of news coverage of matters before the commission. Regardless of the social media

platform, some of these remarks will be complimentary, but others will be ill-informed, misguided, bitter, critical, nasty, personal and/or unwarranted.

Establishing clear guidelines for managing any social media flare-ups ahead of time is wise. Who can/will reply and under what circumstances? What steps will be taken if a threat to harm sounds genuine? Having the professional Twitter and Facebook accounts of royal commission coverage team members independently monitored can give the team leader/s a heads-up on emerging issues. While it is usually best not to engage in a one-on-one social media slanging match with a strident critic, some erroneous assertions demand a considered, factual reply to set the record straight. Circumstances may mean the best person to post the reply is the royal commission team leader or a more senior editorial manager.

Sustained social media attacks not only draw attention away from the task at hand, they wear down the resilience of otherwise strong, independent and forthright team members. This is where team leaders and peer supporters can play important roles in listening to the concerns and strategies proposed by those who are targets of vitriol as well as reinforcing team-agreed responses and, where necessary and appropriate, advocating on behalf of team members.

- **Realise heightened stress doesn't clock off**

While journalists are widely thought to be experts at 'professional dissociation' - working on for days, weeks, even months in difficult conditions - they are human and editorial managers need to realise that these team members don't simply switch off when they leave the office or put down their gear. The greater the level of stress journalists endure because of their work, the more likely they are to experience unwanted or undesirable consequences beyond their workplace. Family relationships are strained, friendships break down, avoidant or destructive behaviours such as alcohol or substance abuse and even sleep disturbances all can become obvious in their home and social lives yet be practically invisible in the workplace.

This is why it is important to establish and maintain a close, trusting relationship with team members. Those out-of-work-hours symptoms may well be red flags for more serious, long-term problems that can lead to unfortunate professional consequences.

- **Prioritise victim/witness welfare**

Newsrooms need to do their best to protect the welfare of the royal commission's victims and witnesses. And journalists need to know they have permission to do this. A careless interview, a throw-away remark or an insensitive observation may seem a minor transgression to those working in a robust newsroom, but it can have devastating consequences for those at the receiving end and has the potential to light a social media firestorm. In the highly charged climate surrounding this royal commission, victims and witnesses should be respected and never exploited. [Vulnerable sources have been known to do drastic things after their stories are made public](#). Sadly, sometimes coverage of [children at risk also has tragic consequences for news personnel](#), too.

When particularly difficult content is about to be disclosed, opt for fair warning for audiences. Newspapers can do this by spilling the explicit content inside with a warning on page one. Online news outlets may include advance warning on click-through content, allowing reader discretion whether to follow the link. Radio and television stations may air a warning in advance of airing distressing or disturbing segment. More often than not, those most affected by a traumatic event such as institutional child sexual abuse will want to shield vulnerable individuals among their families and friends from such content.

- **Respect people's stories**

It will be important for newsrooms to avoid sensationalising stories coming out of the royal commission. For those most affected, this is a reality they never asked for and don't want for others. Their stories should be told with respect rather than to some 'formula' that prioritises headlines, keywords, graphics and tickers over telling the truth, simply.

Online and broadcast news outlets need to be conscious of visual and sound content used to promote upcoming coverage. In particular, the frequent repetition of salacious sound bites or shocking images only serves to inflict more pain and distress on those concerned. In the instance of this royal commission, given the number of complaints, complainants and their families, friends and colleagues, the potential number of people sensitive to such sound bites, images and graphics will number in the hundreds of thousands.

- **Come clean on complaints**

If a news organisation does not already have a well-promoted and clearly identifiable complaints mechanism, now would be a good time to implement one. Those that do have one should also be open about its existence, especially on clearly sensitive stories.

Complaints relating specifically to the royal commission should be handled by one senior manager to ensure consistent investigation, action and public or private responses. That manager should also be involved in the feedback loop for the royal commission reporting team and should promulgate best-practice procedures for future coverage. They may also want to add a footnote to online stories clarifying or responding to a particular complaint or ensure a brief response is included in a future electronic media broadcast.

News organisations might also want to consider appointing a public contact officer for the duration of the royal commission at least and, if they do so, extending the same level of professional and psychological support to this person as to editorial staff who will work on royal commission coverage.

### **Online resources that may be of use**

Poynter's News University  
Resources for Covering Sexual Abuse of Children  
<https://www.newsu.org/resources/sri/child-sex-abuse>

John Jay College of Criminal Justice (church study)  
The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States  
<http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/churchstudy/main.asp>

Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ireland)  
Executive Summary of findings  
<http://www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/>

Professor Alexander C. McFarlane (Australian expert)  
The long-term costs of traumatic stress: Intertwined physical and psychological consequences  
World Psychiatry  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2816923/>

Australian Psychological Society  
Psychological preparation for natural disasters  
[http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip\\_sheets/disasters/](http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/disasters/)

Mind/body health: Stress  
American Psychological Association  
<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress.aspx>

Stress Tip Sheet  
American Psychological Association  
<http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2007/10/stress-tips.aspx>

Tips for Media Covering Traumatic Events involving children  
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/for-the-media/tips-for-covering-events>

### **Conclusion**

Australian newsrooms face significant and protracted challenges as they cover the coming Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse over the next three years. They not only have their usual duty of care towards their employees and stringers, but also there are psychological risks to news personnel from over-exposure, potential reputational risks for insensitive organisations and possible unintended additional harm to people outside of newsrooms. All are potentially costly, in human and financial terms, and largely unnecessary consequences for today's already pressurised newsrooms. However, with training combined with careful, considered and timely management, risks to individuals inside and outside the newsroom can be ameliorated. Further, the groundwork done for this particular royal commission may have positive ramifications for best practice trauma coverage in newsrooms that goes well beyond that brief.