Traumatic incidents as 'news events' ... fair game or fair go?

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Despite numerous prescriptive ethics codes – and, more recently, growing public criticism – Australian news media continue to confront victims/survivors and their families/communities when they are at their most vulnerable and sometimes in ways that are, at best, questionable. Increasingly, in the name of news – or more probably competition – traumatic incidents become 'media events'. But what are the consequences for victims and survivors or maladaptive media behaviours? And does Australia's media understand the potential ramifications for victims or for itself? This presentation explores feedback from victims and survivors of a multiple-victim trauma, the shootings at Port Arthur in 1996, contrasting that with feedback from victims of single-victim traumatic incidents, mostly deaths in industrial settings. It also seeks to shed light on what issues the media faces when covering traumatic incidents as well as what extra steps it could be taking to minimise harm.

Introduction

Attempts to understand the impact of media reporting on victims of trauma and critical incidents is a relatively new area of specific research endeavour. However, there are already growing bodies of research and knowledge about three central elements which contribute to the potential impacts of media reporting on victims and survivors – (1) the psychology of trauma, (2) journalistic practice and (3) communication in times of crisis. Some work on trauma and the media has already been completed at two United States universities (by Roger Simpson and James Boggs at the University of Washington and William Cote & Bonnie Bucqueroux at Michigan State University) where research programs have already been established thanks to seed funding from the philanthropic DART Foundation. At the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, two Master of Arts by research students in the School of Media and Journalism are beginning to compile this country's first organised body of work. Fieldwork by this researcher – a former senior newspaper journalist who has practised in Queensland and Victoria – constitutes some of the earliest work done in Australia on the media's impact on trauma victims.

This paper looks at the effect of journalistic activities on victims/survivors and their families/communities in the wake of traumatic, multiple-victim and single-victim events. It draws on research conducted across three Australian states in late 1999 that included:

- 16 structured, in-depth interviews with people who had confronted a traumatic event (either the Port Arthur massacre on 28 April 1996 or the death in the workplace of a close relative or partner over the past 13 years),
- a focus group discussion with eight participants who had experienced a workplace death; and
- five detailed conversations with experts who dealt with these traumatic incidents (a forensic psychiatrist, an author, an electronic media journalist, a government media liaison officer, and a counsellor to victims/survivors).

Background

With 35 deaths spread over six distinct crime scenes, a further 20 people having their lives threatened, three people receiving serious physical injuries and eight others wounded, a house fire, hundreds of shots exchanged with police and an overnight siege with hostages, the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania was reportedly the world's most deadly toll by a single gunman in a non-war setting. It has certainly been one of Australia's most horrific and widely reported crimes. A complex event to report and confounding to re-create for investigators, this event began in a tranquil, beautiful setting on a remote peninsula on a Sunday afternoon when more than 500 visitors were in the grounds of the Port Arthur

Historical Site. The danger subsided 19 and a half hours later, but – nearly four years later – the shockwaves from this multiple-victim event are still being felt in the local community, across Tasmania, interstate and overseas.

By comparison – given that they almost outstrip the number of deaths on the nation's roads each year – individual deaths in the workplace are often under-reported, leaving shocked and grief-stricken relatives and friends to deal with sudden, violent loss in somewhat of a "news vacuum". In Victoria, a support group known as Industrial Death Support & Advocacy has recently begun to lobby for recognition and assistance for the families of these (usually) single-victim traumas, especially in relation to changes to state legislation which had limited employer liability, workers compensation and families' access to common law action.

Psychology of Trauma

Over the past century, psychiatrists and psychologists around the globe have established protocols for identifying common physical and psychological responses to traumatic situations and for the clinical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in victims/survivors[1]. Considerable controversy surrounds both the frequency and manner in which such diagnoses are made as well as the proper steps to prevent or minimise serious or recurrent psychosocial responses in those who experience a traumatic incident[2]. While debate remains heated when it comes to accurate diagnoses, correct treatment and appropriate prevention options, practitioners and researchers concur that – in any given population or community that has experienced a traumatic or critical incident – responses vary from person to person and can be immediate or delayed[3]. Trauma experts say that a small number of victims/survivors report few if any impacts, most experience some impacts and a few will have virtually every known symptom and then some as they attempt to process their experiences, anguish and pain. Victims/survivors who experience PTSD appear to be unable to process their traumatic experiences and, consequently, continue to be troubled by vivid flashbacks, powerful recollections and other physical and psychological responses well after the event/danger has passed[4].

Experts in psychology agree that debilitating PTSD symptoms are common after extreme events. Such events include one or more threats to a person's own life or the loss of a loved one in sudden, violent circumstances. Symptoms may persist for a short period, for years or for the remainder of one's life. They may be chronic or intermittent, triggered unexpectedly or periodically. Of those who seek professional assistance to overcome the debilitating symptoms of PTSD, most find som relief, but anything like a "cure" eludes a significant number of sufferers. However, much research and clinical practice literature confirms that early diagnosis and treatment appear to increase the likelihood of success (e.g., van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth 1996).

While many of the advances in the study of trauma and PTSD have occurred in the wake of wars – where returning soldiers had been observed to be suffering "war neuroses" or "shell shock" after one or more exposures to traumatic events – the cluster of symptoms now known as PTSD is widely acknowledged as impacting on victims/survivors of other serious events, including attempted murder, violent assaults and even motor vehicle accidents. People who suffer PTSD are unable to function in the way they normally would. Some theorists argue that the severity of PTSD symptoms – and, hence, length of any potential recovery – is magnified if the traumatic event results from the deliberate action (or inaction) of one or more humans rather than a perceived accident or "act of Nature" such as a flood, earthquake or tidal wave[5].

For those closest to the dead or injured, however, there is also grief for those who have died – or perhaps for a loss of ability or potential in either themselves or a loved one (e.g., due to physical or psychological injury). Some symptoms of grief overlap those of PTSD, yet a useful diagnostic checklist provided by the American Psychiatric Association helps to confirm whether or not a person is experiencing PTSD.

Diagnostic Criteria for PTSD

American Psychiatric Association (1994)
Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th Edition)
Washington DC

A: The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following were present:
  (1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others
  (2) the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror
  Note: In children, this may be expressed instead by disorganized or agitated behavior.

B: The traumatic event is perisistently reexperienced in one (or more) of the following ways:
  (1) recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions
  Note: In young children, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the trauma are expressed.
  (2) recurrent distressing dreams of the event
  Note: In children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content.
  (3) acting or feeling as if the traumatic event was recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur on awakening or when intoxicated)
  Note: In young children, trauma-specific reenactment may occur.
  (4) intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event
  (5) physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event

C: Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by three (or more) of the following:
  (1) efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma

(2) efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
(3) inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
(4) markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities
(5) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
(6) restricted range of affect (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
(7) sense of a foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span)

D: Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma), as indicated by two (or more) of the following:
(1) difficulty falling or staying asleep
(2) irritability or outbursts of anger
(3) difficulty concentrating
(4) hypervigilance
(5) exaggerated startle response

E: Duration of the disturbance (symptoms in B, C, and D) is more than one month

F: The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Because imagery, flashbacks and the action of recounting what happened are interlinked with traumatic responses, what lessons does this body of research hold for reporters, photographers and camera crews who descend on victims/survivors often within a very short time of a traumatic event? Are those who experience a traumatic event – whether they go on to develop PTSD symptoms or not – especially at risk from the news-gathering actions of the media itself or by the reports subsequently published by the media?[6]

According to psychiatrists, trauma counsellors and psychologists[7], even when the media publishes first-person accounts – of what happened or how what happened had since affected victims/survivors and their families, friends and communities – such reports can be especially distressing for others directly or indirectly affected by such events simply because they do not share the same perspective, experiences, background or even communities.

Ironically, the ability to fully tell of one's experiences can be cathartic and some victims find journalists encourage them to be frank, often in ways they would not with partners, friends or family. However, to publish those difficult experiences can offend both victim and their loved ones.

In Australia, a growing number of victims/survivors are beginning to question the way the news media goes about its work in times of trauma.

Journalistic practice

In terms of accepted industry-wide ethical practice, Australian journalists[8] have a raft of baseline professional expectations set out for them in the Media Entertainment & Arts

Alliance's AJA Code of Ethics (see following pages). The new code – formally approved in 1999 after several years of discussion – is clear about displaying sensitivity, providing adequate disclosure and discouraging deceptive practices. The previous code was also[9]. Within Australia's diverse media, there are additional, medium-specific operational and performance requirements for print, radio and television journalists (usually known as codes of practice). In most large media organisations such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Nine Network, Fairfax Newspapers and News Limited, there is usually yet another set of institutional guidelines for appropriate behaviour when reporting in the field or when subsequently publishing reports.

Despite this apparent extensive "self-regulation", there is a groundswell of criticism about Australian media's behaviour when covering traumatic or critical situations, the echoes of which could be heard in the 1998 Australian Senate Select Committee hearings into the self-regulation of communication and information industries. While many instances of media "malpractice" were cited at the Senate's hearings, the Committee also heard of the inadequacy of complaints mechanisms currently overseen by the Australian Press Council, the Australian Broadcasting Authority and individual media outlets (whether privately or publicly owned). Similarly criticised were Australia's defamation laws which do not deliver affordable means of seeking legal redress for the average citizen.

Until February 1999, the Journalists' Code of Ethics (which applied during the time of the events examined in this research) was:

> Respect for truth and the public's right to information are over-riding principles for all journalists. In pursuance of these principles journalists commit themselves to ethical and professional standards.
>
> All members of the AJA Section engaged in gathering, transmitting, disseminating and commenting on news and information shall observe the following Code of Ethics in their professional activities.
>
> They acknowledge the jurisdiction of their professional colleagues in the AJA judiciary committees to adjudicate on issues connected with the Code.
>
> 1. They shall report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts or by distorting by wrong or improper emphasis;
> 2. They shall not place unnecessary emphasis on gender, race, sexual preference, religious belief, marital status or physical or mental disability;
> 3. In all circumstances, they shall respect all confidences received in the course of their calling;
> 4. They shall not allow personal interests to influence them in their professional duties;

5. They shall not allow their professional duties to be influenced by any consideration, gift or advantage offered and, where appropriate, shall disclose any such offer.
6. They shall not allow advertising or commercial considerations to influence them in their professional duties;
7. They shall use fair and honest means to obtain news, films, tapes and documents;
8. They shall identify themselves and their employers before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast;
9. They shall respect private grief and personal privacy and shall have the right to resist compulsion to intrude on them;
10. They shall do their utmost to correct any published or broadcast information found to be harmfully inaccurate.

This code was overseen by the Australian Journalists Association section of the MEAA and was reviewed – and debated – over a period of several years in the 1990s.The MEAA adopted a revised Code of Ethics in February, 1999, which states:

> Respect for truth and the public's right to information are fundamental principles of journalism. Journalists describe society to itself. They convey information, ideas and opinions, a privileged role. They search, disclose, record, question, entertain, suggest and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy. They give a practical form to freedom of expression. Many journalists work in private enterprise, but all have these public responsibilities. They scrutinise power, but also exercise it, and should be accountable. Accountability engenders trust. Without trust, journalists do not fulfil their public responsibilities.
>
> **MEAA members engaged in journalism commit themselves to:**
>
> - Honesty
> - Fairness
> - Independence
> - Respect for the rights of others
> - Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts. Do not suppress relevant available facts, or give distorting emphasis. Do your utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply.
> - Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability.

- Aim to attribute information to its source. Where a source seeks anonymity, do not agree without first considering the source's motives and any alternative attributable source. Where confidences are accepted, respect them in all circumstances.
- Do not allow personal interest, or any belief, commitment, payment, gift or benefit to undermine your accuracy, fairness and independence.
- Disclose conflicts of interest that affect, or could be seen to affect, the accuracy, fairness and independence of your journalism. Do not improperly use a journalistic position for personal gain.
- Do not allow advertising or other commercial considerations to undermine accuracy, fairness and independence.
- Do your utmost to ensure disclosure of any direct or indirect payment made for interviews, pictures, information or stories.
- Use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material, identify yourself and your employer before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast. Never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice.
- Present pictures and sound which are true and accurate. Any manipulation likely to mislead should be disclosed.
- Do not plagiarise.
- Respect private grief and personal privacy. Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude.
- Do your utmost to achieve fair correction of errors.

Guidance clause

Basic values often need interpretation and sometimes come into conflict. Ethical journalism requires conscientious decision-making in context. Only substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people allows any standard to be overridden.

However, not all journalists working in Australia are MEAA members.

Crisis communication

Communication amidst the confusion that inevitably surrounds a traumatic event is, at best, fraught with problems[10]. From a practical standpoint, it usually takes some time before numbers of dead or injured can be determined and identities confirmed by police, to

establish the status and whereabouts of those injured and to locate witnesses. Consequently, early media reports are short on detail, long on speculation and prone to be inaccurate.

News reports can reach families/communities of victims/survivors well before official notice is possible, causing additional distress[11]. Victims/survivors interviewed for this research indicated that decision-makers in the media should better appreciate the time-lines involved after a traumatic incident, especially the fact that the thorough and time-consuming processes of identifying a body or victim can take many hours and that official notification of next of kin can be complicated by difficulties in reaching them. Several victims/survivors interviewed for this research could vividly recall the media images/texts of reports or requests for interviews that pre-dated – sometimes by several hours – their official notification of a death. Indeed such images/sounds/words seemed to form a core part of their painful recollections and flashbacks.

Sample & methodology

For the purposes of this research, identification of traumatic events and critical incidents themselves was not a difficult task, given the steady flow of major local, national and international incidents which have attracted extensive – and increasingly more intimate – media coverage in Australia and around the world over the past decade. As a result of those traumatic events – mass murders, bombings, natural disasters, horrific crimes, etc. – many people's lives have been touched and irrevocably changed. In approaching people to participate in this research, the researcher was aware that many would have suffered greatly already and, in some cases, might still be suffering. The challenge faced was to inflict no further harm while attempting to determine what effects media reporting or media reports had on participants during, and since, their traumatic incident/s. Despite this, participants were remarkably willing to share recollections of acutely painful and distressing experiences. Most agreed to be part of this research "as long as some good comes from it".

Twelve in-depth, standardised interviews were conducted with participants who had experienced the same multiple-victim event (1996 Port Arthur massacre on the Tasman Peninsula in Tasmania three and a half years earlier), with each interview lasting between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. The eight males and four females were either (1) victims/survivors themselves, (2) family members or friends of victims/survivors, or (3) pivotal community members from the Tasman Peninsula who had a strong connection to this event. A further five substantial conversations were conducted with significant others involved in this event – a forensic psychiatrist, an author, an electronic media journalist, a government media liaison officer and a counsellor to victims/survivors. Two of these were male, three female.

When it came to single-victim events, the researcher chaired a 1.5 hour discussion with eight members (two male, six female) of the Industrial Death Support & Advocacy (IDSA) who

shared their experiences with the media in the wake of several workplace deaths in the state of Victoria. This was followed by four in-depth interviews with female participants who had experienced sudden loss of a parent, partner or child from separate events which took place in different workplaces. Those surveyed were interviewed at varying periods since those events happened (18 months, two years, four years and 13 years). All were IDSA members.

Third-party facilitation was also an important factor in the high acceptance rate experienced when approaching potential participants. Following an early conversation with the Salvation Army's Lt. Col. Don Woodland – who has assisted those affected by trauma in numerous "big news" events for three decades, often acting as a "go-between" for them with the media – this researcher elected to examine the impact of news reporting on victims of the Port Arthur massacre (April 28, 1996). An experienced trauma counsellor from Victoria, Louise Bailey, facilitated contact – through Industrial Death Support and Advocacy – with a number of people who had lost a partner, parent or child as the result an industrial accident.

Scope of research

This research examines to what extent media reporting may impact on victims or survivors, their families, friends and their communities. It also compares the overall impact of media reporting where an event has multiple victims with those impacts reported in the wake of single-victim events (i.e., where the pool of people directly affected is much smaller). As a consequence, this research is documenting both incidents that reflect journalists in both a positive and in a negative light.

Examination of instances of best and worst practice when it comes to reporting trauma is critical for a number of reasons. Most participants felt that those most affected would not have the energy to make a formal complaint about the media in the wake of their trauma, because in the initial period they would just struggle to do the simplest tasks and get through each day. However, across both multiple- and single-victim events, there was clear evidence that – traumatic and grief responses notwithstanding – quite soon after a traumatic event, victims, survivors, families, friends and communities were driven to find out who, what, where, when and, most importantly, why an event took place. At the same time, the core challenge of those working in the news media covering such events is to deliver answers to those same questions to a curious and often sympathetic world which exists largely beyond those directly affected.

Advances in telecommunications, broadcasting and Internet technology over the past quarter of a century mean today's news media bring images and reports of almost any traumatic event into homes half a world away – and, simultaneously, to the homes of those who live in the very street or district where the event occurred – often within minutes of it happening or even as the drama unfolds. This puts pressure on journalists in all media to report events

quickly and, due to the very nature of competition, with increasing intimacy. How much of this rush to cover traumatic events is healthy, and when does the focus on increasingly graphic details move the media from covering an event to intruding upon the vulnerable, those people affected by that event?

There are potentially unseen and ongoing impacts on victims, survivors, families, friends and communities of such media coverage. While both print and electronic journalists often regard their work as "here today, gone tomorrow", this researcher found that those directly affected by a traumatic event often closely and repeatedly examined relevant media reports to help them construct meaning, viz. both a broad chronology of what happened and, where possible, why it happened. In the struggle to make meaning, many of those directly affected were supplied with (or sought) copies of news coverage related to their traumatic event from family members and friends who lived elsewhere (interstate or overseas) or even from news outlets directly.

Their use of the media to construct meaning in tragic circumstances appears particularly important because several participants in this research, victims and experts, noted that individual news reports or images had been triggers for a host of distressing responses in those who had been traumatised by what happened. These ranged from immediate physical stress symptoms (such as increased heart rate, palpitations and cold sweats) to longer-term psychological problems such as horrendous flashbacks, disturbing dreams, deep depression, substance abuse, episodes of self-mutilation and suicide ideation or attempts and even sudden death[12] .

Such traumatic responses could occur in the period immediately after the event or months or years later, especially when anniversaries or retrospectives of similar events saw the "recycling" of details and images, sometimes with little or no warning. The power of imagery was underscored in one case, where the viewing without warning of video footage of a partner's death scene some months afterwards precipitated full-blown symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, a significant portion of which persist more than a year later. It should be noted that, in this particular case, the footage was neither shot nor supplied by the media, but by a workplace health and safety authority and mistakenly forwarded to the deceased's partner by a legal firm along with other media footage. For those most traumatised, it appears reports of similar but unrelated traumatic events can also be painful triggers for acute PTSD symptoms. This is also true for other sensory information – sounds, smells and even rhythms (like the sounds of gunfire recorded on a tourist's video) – as well as similar surroundings or sequences of events.

The same images and reports that can cause so much pain to victims/survivors and their families/communities often resurface when they are submitted for national or state journalism awards. Some interviewees who had been hurt by the initial reports or images reported their disgust at such industry recognition, especially when they were broadcast or

reprinted within the painful first year of the incident and without consultation with them or their representatives, nor prior warning that the images/reports would be republished.

Additional, unnecessary distress and avoidable harm was also intentionally inflicted on victims, survivors, families and communities by some in the media who were blatantly insensitive in their news-gathering or reporting or who – by any ethical, legal or moral measure – could be accused of malpractice. Several participants reported that deception, duplicity, lies and offensive suggestions were used to cajole or co-erce potential interviewees or to gain access to "off-limits" areas. In the eyes of those most affected, the thoughtless or wanton actions of the few besmirched forever the reputations of the many and, in their wake, other media found their jobs all the more difficult to complete.

For those outside the media, it is often difficult to understand that journalists face enormous challenges to achieve accurate reports within relentless deadlines as sketchy, confused details unfold from a vast array of sources. Securing people's safety, tending to the wounded and detaining a perpetrator necessarily come ahead of the information needs and deadlines of the media. Yet to ensure the public remains informed – and, in the longer term, hopefully to prevent the recurrence of such a tragedy – it is essential that police, emergency services personnel, politicians, other agencies and affected individuals continue to provide the media with a stream of specific details about a critical event.

One obvious problem with complex events that are played out over longer periods – such as the Port Arthur massacre – is that, from the outset, they generate enormous amounts of newsworthy detail from many sources which journalists then attempt to fit into known reporting "frameworks". These usually initially constitute the guts, gore and grief of the situation. Back in the newsrooms, when making the decisions about what to publish or broadcast, decision-makers often blanket their coverage with a patchwork of "bite-sized" chunks rather than longer, in-depth pieces.

Over the following hours and days, news teams face stiff competition both from within their own newsrooms and outside their organisations to deliver the "most comprehensive" coverage that will ensure immediate ratings points and longer-term professional kudos. As obvious news angles about the event itself begin to peter out, the media draws on other reliable news values. They focus on community grief, unearthing accusations or apportioning blame, running conflicting accounts or divergent explanations, even focusing on the "good news" by covering the community's first steps towards recovery, spotlighting both the confused and the confusing – in order to keep the story alive, oblivious to the fact that, for many of those directly affected, recovery may be extremely distant.

Not only do journalists covering such complex and traumatic incidents instantly face a dilemma about what reports or images to include or leave out – often without the benefit of first-hand knowledge of those directly affected – they can face the exciting but uncertain

situation that their reports and images are virtually legally unfettered until someone is formally charged and legal/investigative processes get underway.

Port Arthur

In the case of the Port Arthur massacre, former Tasmanian Director of Public Prosecutions (now Commonwealth DPP) Damian Bugg actively intervened after several days of media frenzy to remind decision-makers that careless reporting could jeopardise any future case against the then accused gunman, Martin Bryant, and potentially draw subjudicae action from the bench. As it turned out, Bryant subsequently changed his plea from not guilty to guilty and a trial was averted. However, in the absence of a coronial inquest into the shootings, many victims/survivors and their families/communities were reliant on media reports to piece together what happened.

Reportedly the world's largest massacre perpetrated by a single gunman in a non-war forum, Bryant's actions have become Australia's most widely reported criminal actions this century, outstripping coverage which followed the Hoddle and Queen Street massacres in Victoria, the Westfield Shopping Centre shootings in New South Wales and even Scotland's tragic Dunblane schoolyard massacre which predated Bryant's carnage by only a few weeks.

In Tasmania's print media alone, there have been well over 600 news stories published in metropolitan, regional and suburban newspapers in the three and a half years since the event. By far the greatest number appeared in the first week or so following the event and then around the time of Bryant's final court appearances and his sentencing seven months later. While coverage of the events at Port Arthur were unprecedented in Australian media history, they accord with more recent "micro-coverage" of multiple-victim traumatic events such as the spate of high school massacres in the United States. Early in 1999, a teacher and 13 students died before two gunman turned their weapons on themselves in the Columbine High School at Littleton in Colorado. Similar close media coverage of schoolyard carnage occurred in 1998 at Jonesboro (Arkensas), Paducah (Kentucky) and Pearl (Mississippi), with on-line news agencies like CNN beginning around-the-clock coverage and analysis within a couple of hours of the shootings.

Less than a year after Tasmania's 1996 massacre, Royal Hobart Hospital's director of emergency medicine, Dr David Smart, told those attending a seminar on Port Arthur organised by Emergency Management Australia that the "continuous pressure of media added significantly to the workload of key senior medical and administrative staff of the hospital"[13]. The hospital also endured several bomb threats when it became known through the media that Bryant was under the same roof as his victims and their devastated families. For many days, the media camped out on the forecourt of the hospital, looking for every possible skerrick of news, even jostling those attempting to visit injured family, friends or

colleagues. Few visitors or staff spoke to the media, many expressed outright contempt at their presence. One cadet journalist who witnessed "the pack" phenomenon for the first time at that hospital was so distressed she required counsel from her chief-of-staff and colleagues, followed by some unscheduled time off to consider whether to continue in the profession at all.[14]

It is time individual journalists and media decision-makers questioned what right do ever-larger numbers of news media have to demand the attention and assistance of stretched service providers – such as first responders, hospitals and community support agencies – let alone that of victims/survivors and their families and communities who are even more directly affected.

If one revisits the media coverage of the Port Arthur massacre, sensationalism and insensitivity are evident. Liberal use of powerful, evocative headlines, penned by media personnel who never left the comfort of their offices in Hobart, Melbourne, Sydney or elsewhere. Snappy captions accompanied graphic photographs of the dead and injured, while snazzy line drawings recreated the scene for those who were not there. To those directly affected by those events (but perhaps not present when the shootings took place), such reports and illustrations created vivid pictures of the dreadful horrors their loved ones endured in their final moments. What these victims needed most at the time was compassion but what they experienced instead was callous competition by journalists who were largely perceived to be "hunting like a pack".

After speaking to a cross-section of those affected by the massacre, it was clear that crass competition – both between commercial media organisations and with the Australian Broadcasting Corporate and international media – became more fierce as the days went on and hundreds of local, national and international journalists jockeyed to be the first with the latest news or the juiciest angle. Unsavoury deal-making appeared to be the order of the day for some media outlets. There was "stitching up" of eyewitness accounts, and the chequebooks came out to secure "rights" to amateur still photographs taken during the massacre and the distant, chilling video footage which documented the rapidity of the 18 initial gunshots that fatally mowed down 20 victims and seriously wounded a further dozen people in 15 seconds. These deals were quickly followed by various bids for "exclusives" and even ultimatums where journalists threatened to disclose adverse angles to ensure interviews were given. These facts were independently confirmed by those interviewed for this research and by Tasmania Police. Ironically, when it came to locating at least one of the key tourist videos for potential use in court, prosecutors found that its copyright had been bought by a mainland commercial television station which had to be approached for permission for its use as evidence if required.

Victims/survivors, witnesses, families and communities described incidents of media insensitivity that were evident throughout the first days after Bryant had been captured.

When the host of one national (mainland-based) current affairs program secured an exclusive interview with the grieving Walter Mikac even before the bodies of his wife and children had been removed from the site, the high-profile journalist rushed to the Tasman Peninsula by helicopter and attempted to land in the grounds of the district's only school which was located across the road from Mikac's pharmacy and within walking distance of the Mikac home. This small school had lost one of its pupils in the shooting. Many of the school's pupils and staff had themselves lived though a terrifying afternoon and night with the continual sounds of helicopters and hundreds of gunshots exchanged between the gunman and police. Additionally, many of those who died or who had been injured were well known by, or related to, a large number of the school's students and staff.

The school's angry council slapped an immediate ban on any further media approaches to those at the school. Additionally, a police officer and security guards were engaged to enforce a "media exclusion" zone for weeks after the event[15]. Some months later, when a local ABC TV reporter was compiling a report about how the community was recovering and interviewed the school's principal, the still-enraged school council met immediately, censured the principal and appealed directly to ABC management in Hobart, insisting the interview not be included in the final report. It wasn't.

Pestering of potential interviewees was also reported to this researcher. Some participants reported up to two dozen incoming media calls a day during the two weeks after the event. Some still receive periodic calls for comment on controversial matters which can be in some way related to the events of April 28, 1996.

In Margaret Scott's (1997) sobering account of those events in *Port Arthur: A story of strength and courage*, site staff told of how incoming media calls continuously jammed the limited number of telephone lines available in the hours after the event began as staff desperately tried to convince authorities about what had happened and to establish the whereabouts of the gunman. Ironically, a staff member from CNN's Atlanta office who managed to get through and speak to the security manager at Port Arthur was able to share the news about the gunman being holed up in the nearby Seascape Cottages surrounded by police, yet local authorities were unable to reach the site to tell staff what was evolving.

The massacre had begun in the site's Broad Arrow Cafe around 1.30pm. It quickly spilled out into the adjacent parking area and then to an access road to the site's toll booth, before moving to a service station near the site's front entrance and on to the nearby Seascape Cottages where the massacre came to its fiery conclusion some 19 hours after it began.

Of those who died, two were international visitors from Malaysia, one was a New Zealand winemaker living in Australia, 16 came from Victoria, three from New South Wales, two from South Australia and one from Western Australia, while 10 were Tasmanians, at least

seven of whom were locals, including three site staff). All but two of the dead were adults, the Mikac children were three and six years of age.

Deaths in the workplace

Many concerns aired by those affected by the events at Port Arthur were also raised by participants who had experienced the sudden, violent death of a loved one in an industrial setting. Much of the anguish and distraction caused by the circumstances of sudden, violent death was evident in this cluster of participants who had experienced loss in a single- or multiple-victim incident. PTSD symptoms were evident, and these (with treatment) appeared most severe in the first 6-18 months after a death had occurred. Participants in this cluster again complained of mostly shallow, cliched news coverage that focused more on the circumstances of the death rather than the person killed and what contribution they might have made to their families/communities. Participants also reported insensitive approaches by media personnel at funerals, coronial inquiries, memorial services or subsequent protest marches, yet the same interviewees noted that not all journalists had treated them badly. Many had high praise for compassionate, careful journalists who checked even minor details to ensure their accuracy.

However, while multiple-victim murders like that at Port Arthur tend to receive saturation coverage, industrial deaths are often given minimal coverage unless they occur in unusual circumstances, in high-profile or controversial locations or on "slow news days". This, in itself, can be frustrating and dispiriting. One participant noted that, despite the fact industrial deaths, nationwide, accounted for more deaths than the annual national road toll, no "scoreboard" was regularly published to put pressure on those whose responsibility it is to oversee safety in individual workplaces.

Several relatives were concerned that accidents had been reported on radio or television several hours before next of kin and immediate family were formally notified. In some cases, families themselves had a good idea of the identity of the person who had died either through direct clues (such as mention of the occupation of the deceased and/or the location of the accident), various "premonitions" or outright naming of the victim.

One participant whose son died from injuries sustained a fortnight earlier in an explosion at his workplace, said she had been haunted by a photograph taken by someone on an adjoining property moments after the explosion which was then "sold to (a metropolitan newspaper) and run the following morning". It showed dazed staff wandering around the site of the explosion. Her son was shown wearing just his boots, his burnt flesh and other wounds exposed to the world. Three of his colleagues died before he did, and the media kept a daily vigil of the status of those most seriously hurt in the blast.

Clusters of concerns

From the research interviews, three main clusters of concern have been identified:

(1) Legal/ethical/moral issues that concern/distress those dealing with the media after a traumatic event

- disregard for predicament victims/survivors and their families/communities find themselves in;
- evidence of trespass, deception, fraudulent misrepresentation, entrapment;
- sending young/inexperienced journalists to cover major events (without mentor/s);
- "crossing the line" in the name of circulation/ratings;
- "crossing the line" because of pressure from newsrooms;
- deal-making – approaching victims/survivors and/or their families/friends for "exclusives";
- going for the well-worn cliched news frames of gore, guts and grief;
- selecting sensation over substance;
- many of those people the media comes into contact with after such events lack even a basic understanding of how to deal with one journalist, let alone dozens or hundreds; and
- it is not the role or responsibility of these people to engage with the media, yet media act as though it is.

(2) Dubious practice in the field

- swarming & badgering victims/families – the "pack" and the "pests";
- insensitive approaches, callous questions or tasteless photographs – lack of empathy;
- lies, deviousness and placing victims/survivors in further peril;
- assumption of particulars, inaccuracy with details;
- competition outweighing compassion when it comes to victims/families/communities; and
- the absence of "pooling" to reduce load on victims/survivors, families/communities and service providers.

(3) Newsroom/publication decisions that cause further alarm

- inappropriate use of images/sounds which cause further upset/harm;
- exposing victims/families/friends to harrowing accounts/images of their loved ones;
- repeated re-exposures – retrospectives, comparisons to similar events, anniversaries;
- "juicy" speculation/innuendo, deliberate slanting of reports;
- absence of understanding of how trauma impacts on victims/survivors and how secondary trauma can impact on first responders, children, elderly, friends, mentally ill and journalists; and
- lack of consideration for scope & timing of – as well as triggers for – traumatic responses.

The irony of "media malpractice" in the wake of traumatic events is that it:

- often harms the very audiences the media depend on;
- serves to silence cautious victims/survivors/families and communities;
- leads to unbalanced reporting of facts;
- erodes public confidence in the profession, turning supporters into cynics; and

- can have unseen consequences which could prove costly in future.

On the other hand, some reasons behind "malpractice" could include:

- young/inexperienced journalists feel their careers are "on the line" if they don't deliver what the newsroom wants, despite what facts or obstacles they encounter in the field;
- decision-makers underestimate number of people potentially traumatised by an event;
- journalists and decision-makers lack independent feedback (could the Internet or an ombudsman assist here?);
- despite the industry-wide code of ethics, medium-specific codes of practice as well as local operational guidelines, distribution and discussion of best practice information related to the covering of traumatic events is patchy;
- journalists and media decision-makers receive little training about trauma and its impacts;
- they are not encouraged enough to reflect on the ramifications of their actions;
- journalists and decision-makers use deadlines and competition to excuse malpractice; and
- cynicism and competition are so ingrained in the media that little else matters.

Recommendations

Former Tasman Peninsula pharmacist Walter Mikac – who lost his wife and two young daughters at Port Arthur – has written a frank, uncomfortable account of what it is like to grapple with terrible grief and trauma under the glare of an incessant, insensitive media spotlight in his book *To Have And To Hold,* co-written in 1997 with freelance journalist Lindsay Simpson. This, along with the Port Arthur Seminar Papers published by Emergency Management Australia, should be compulsory reading for those who report on traumatic events and newsroom decision-makers who deploy others to cover such critical incidents.

There are some practical steps journalists can take when approaching victims/survivors. Michigan State University researchers Cote and Bucqueroux (1996) have developed some tips for interviewing victims:

- tell people they can take a break from interviews whenever they need to;
- empower victims by giving them permission to turn off the tape recorder whenever they want to say something that they do not want used;
- tell them to tell you when to put down your notebook;
- take advantage of opportunities to include them in the decision-making ("Are you ready to go on?" "Is is all right for me to ask a tough question?");
- give the subjects your business card – tell them that they can call you to discuss the story or just to talk;
- take care with first impressions (body language, in particular, can be important, and the goal is to exude confidence, poise and caring);
- discuss ground rules up front (ambush tactics have no place in a victim interview);

- discussing issues of privacy and confidentiality at the beginning can prevent misunderstanding and problems later;
- encourage the victim to ask questions;
- prepare for the possibility you will be the first to deliver (or discuss) the bad news;
- ask permission (approach without your notebook in hand, ask if you can take notes, ask if you can use a tape recorder, it's better to ask whether they'd like a tissue than to thrust the box at them);
- watch what you say (a "canned" phrase that strikes the right note is better than wrong words which may wound – "I'm sorry this happened to you", "I'm glad you weren't killed", "It's not your fault");
- avoid the banal and never say "I know how you feel", instead ask a "when" question ("When did you hear the news?", "When did the police arrive?");
- above all, be accurate – errors that make ordinary people angry can become monumental issues for traumatised people looking for a target for their frustration;
- be especially sensitive to imputations of blame; and
- be alert to the special impact of photos, graphics and overall presentation.[16]

These recommendations were useful when interviewing victims/survivors for this research, and survivors/victims appreciated and singled out things like sensitivity, ethical behaviour, attention to detail and, above all, accuracy.

The valuable insights and anecdotal evidence shared by those who participated in this research has contributed greatly to the scope and depth of this work, reinforcing a good part of the academic research already completed elsewhere in three relevant areas, i.e., psychology, journalism and crisis communication. Further, specific accounts by more than two dozen Australian participants have enabled this researcher to explore whether victims/survivors and their families/communities feel this nation's news media are more likely to regard victims/survivors and their families/communities as "fair game" or deserving a "fair go".

A period of reflection is needed in Australian newsrooms. Practitioners need to better understand the scope of trauma and managers need to reassess news priorities and content selection practices. They need to be able to see examples of best and worst practice. The MEAA needs to spend time and effort on fostering such reflection and highlighting examples of best practice.

Emerging hypotheses

- **That 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 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.

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

  An intimate understanding of the impact of trauma is generally rare among journalists, especially younger ones who have yet to face major life stresses (for instance, loss of a parent, partner, child or relative in difficult circumstances or threat to their own lives). 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? Secondly, news teams are directed by those 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.

- **That pressure is mounting for 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 the "boundaries" required for the media is more common 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 quarters of the inadequate nature of media self-regulation, complaints mechanisms and defamation laws.

- **That the 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 the 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 individual media outlets and the profession as a whole. To be able to step away from the words, sounds and images that shock and repel, the impetus for change must come from those who set the 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 the news. It's about human decency and acknowleding the media's responsibility to comprehend the needless harm it can do.

Conclusions

As a result of this work, the researcher has half a dozen specific conclusions for 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 malpracticeandvoyeurism;

(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;

(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

(6) enough people are going to express concern to Australian authorities about media malpractice that, eventually, regulation will become inevitable.

Important Note

The contents of this research paper have been drawn from field research, a colloquium held in Brisbane in November, 1999, a refereed journal article about to appear in the *Australia-Pacific Media Educator,* analysis of research findings and media content, and ongoing work towards a Master of Arts thesis by the author.

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[1] These are articulated in DSM-IV, the most recent revision of a useful diagnostic tool developed by the American Psychiatric Association, a copy of which appears in this paper.

[2] One school – typified by Mitchell, J.T., & Bray, G.P. (1989) and Mitchell, J.T. and Dyregrov, A. (1993) – proports that PTSD can be minimised in emergency service personnel and other first responders by implementing carefully planned Critical Incident Stress Management systems which include a component known as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. Another group – represented by academics such as Wilson, J.P. & Raphael, B. (1993) – challenge that CISD and CISM are yet to face (and survive) rigorous academic analysis. While some post-1993

research casts doubt on the suitability of CISD/CISM, emergency services personnel continue to use these tools throughout Australia and are supportive of their place in minimising harm to first responders. Concern about frequency of PTSD diagnoses has also been raised following an upswing of such diagnoses in compensation and other legal cases.

3 See Figley, C.R. (1978, 1985a, 1985b and 1995); Hendricks, J.E., (1985); Janoff-Bulman, R. (1985); Howarth, I. & Dusseyer, I.E., (1988); Grabosky, P.N., (1989); Mitchell, J.T., & Bray, G.P. (1989); Myers, D.G. (1989); Creamer, M., Burgess, P., Buckingham, W., & Pattison, P. (1993); Mitchell, J.T. and Dyregrov, A. (1993); Ursano, R.J., McCaughey, B.G. & Fullerton, C.S. (Eds.) (1994); Green, L., & Cloonan, D. (1996); Resnick, J. (1996); van der Kolk, B.A., McFarlane, A. & Weisaeth, L. (Eds.) (1996); Scott, M. (1997); Rock, P., (1998); and Simpson, R., Koehler, E., & Martin, B. (1998).

4 A precis of an informal explanation of the impact of PTSD by Victorian trauma counsellor Louise Bailey who has worked with survivors of trauma for more than a decade, including several who experienced the Port Arthur massacre as well as relatives of those killed in industrial accidents.

5 Various authors in Wilson, J.P., & Raphael, B. (Eds) (1993).

6 These issues were addressed during field interviews with victims/survivors and their families/communities done by the author in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland in late 1999 as well as various discussions during the Senate Select Committee hearing into self-regulation or communication and information industries throughout 1998.

7 Raised by Victorian trauma counsellor Louise Bailey, Tasmanian forensic psychiatrist Dr Ian Sale and mentioned in frequently in clinical practice literature reviewed for this paper.

8 "Journalists" are defined in this instance in the broadest sense to include reporters, photographers, camera/sound crews, producers, editors, graphic artists and so on.

9 See copies of the new MEAA Code of Ethics and its predecessor which accompany this paper.

10 See Fink, S. (1986); Martin, T.G., & Conte, P. (1992); Gottschalk, J.A. (1993); Mitroff, I.I., & Pearson, C.M. (1993); Dowling, G. (1994); Dyer, S.C. (1995); More, E. (1995); Fearn-Banks, K. (1996); Lerbinger, O. (1997). For reasons of space, further discussion on this point will appear in the researcher's thesis.

11 This was repeatedly reported by victims/survivors interviewed for this research.

12 An elderly woman who had watched the drama unfold on television with a neighbour from her home in Bicheno to the north of the Tasman Peninsula became increasingly anxious about the whereabouts of her daughter and son-in-law who had been at Port Arthur. She collapsed and died when police arrived late in the evening.

13 As reported in EMA's record of proceedings of the Port Arthur seminar of 11-12 March, 1997.

14 This incident was related by then ABC Radio's Hobart chief-of-staff Richard Lower in a colloquium in Brisbane in late 1999.

15 Confirmed by the then president of the Tasman district's school council and related in Margaret Scott's book *Port Arthur, a story of strength and courage*.

16 William Cote is Co-ordinator and Bonnie Bucqueroux is Assistant Co-ordinator of the Victims and the Media Program at Michigan State University. (Adapted from a Violence article in the Nieman Reports, Fall 1996.)

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