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Recommended Citation
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Port Arthur Massacre: A TV Editor’s Experience

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On 28 April 1996, a gunman armed with two high-calibre, semi-automatic weapons shot dead 35 people, injured 18 and attempted to kill a further 20 in Port Arthur, a former penal settlement and popular tourist destination in Tasmania, Australia. He then attempted to burn down a bed-and-breakfast cottage, the Seascape Cottage, belonging to two of his victims, apparently in an attempt to kill himself. Police arrested a 29-year-old man, Martin Bryant, who was tried in Hobart’s Supreme Court on 72 criminal charges, including 35 counts of murder. Tasmania’s Chief Justice William Cox sentenced Bryant to imprisonment for the term of his natural life, with no eligibility for parole, for the 35 murder counts, plus another 21 years for each of the remaining counts, with the remaining terms to be served concurrently. Richard Lower was the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC’s) Television News Editor for Tasmania when the Easter massacre occurred.

I had taken my kids up to a lovely little place called Swansea on the East Coast of Tasmania for the weekend and, typical Tasmania, it was a pretty bleak weekend. I am not sure why, but we headed back to Hobart around about lunch time on the Sunday, which was a bit unusual because it is only about a two-hour drive. As it turned out, it was advantageous, because as soon as I drove in the front drive at home, the phone was ringing. It was my Chief of Staff saying that there had been an incident at Port Arthur. She thought there had been some shooting with maybe six or seven people either killed or injured. I dropped everything, went to work, and by the time I had got there about 20 minutes later, the six or seven had increased to ten or 12. An hour later it was 18 or 20. It just kept rising.

The initial reaction was to try to come to terms with that and to believe that this was happening in a place like Tasmania. How could this happen, why is this happening, what has actually
happened – getting hold of all of that information very quickly. We had some luck, because a lot of our staff were at a golf day near the perimeter of Port Arthur. While the crews and editors were playing golf, they could see the ambulances and police coming and much activity on the highway. One of them rang the office, and we were able to organise our resources and facilities to get the crews down to Port Arthur quite quickly. We had never been able to get live pictures out of the Tasman Peninsula because of its location. It is trapped in behind the range that includes Mt Wellington, and this is where our technical people came to the forefront. They did manage to get pictures out, and we were the only people in the world who were able to at that stage.

We put our bulletin out at 7 o’clock that night and worked throughout the night. In those days, the ABC had First Edition, which was a breakfast show and a godsend for us in that we were able to get material out to people first early in the morning. Then we were providing material for our lunchtime television news program, The World at Noon, and the 7 o’clock news. In those days I was the Head of Television News and did not have much to do with radio. We were so busy doing the TV coverage; the radio people did their own thing. Now it seems as though my role has been merged into both TV and Radio, so I don’t know how I would have coped emotionally and physically if I had had to look after both. I hope I never have to be put through that.

The Sunday passed and we had three crews down there. As editor, I was confronted with the situation of making dozens of editorial decision on the run when details were emerging all the time. People had to go to the scene. It was about a 90-minute return drive, and even on that Sunday night I started to pick up that the people returning were pretty agitated, even though they hadn’t been allowed to go onto the site, because the whole area was cordoned off for days until the bodies were cleared away. So initially we were operating in a void to a certain extent, relying on media conferences with the police. We were set up in a car park outside a hotel about 10 or 15 minutes from the actual site.

After a few days, I started to notice that odd things were happening. All of us were really wrapped up in the adrenalin of the situation. We were confronted with arguably the biggest story in the world at that point, and for a journalist, this is a wonderful thing to happen. Wonderful is not quite the right word, but although you are dealing with this terribly tragic story, there is this huge rush of excitement. You know – what a fantastic story this was, in the sense that it was so big. I was extremely proud at the way the journalists were covering it. The last thing to think about was the impact that this was having on the people who were going down to Port Arthur, because I never had to go down
there. In fact I have not been back to Port Arthur to this day, but it was my job to send them there day after day. I was observing it from a distance, and I was probably the best person to see how they were affected when they were coming back. About Tuesday, I started to notice things. I walked past an editing suite and saw an editor crying at the controls, which was pretty unusual. He said, "I am sick of dealing with this material. It’s just too depressing. I can’t run any more stories on this sort of stuff. I don’t want to cut it any more." I subsequently found out that while the bulletins were being aired, the staff operating the autocue at the back of the room burst into tears half way through the bulletin.

Another thing that happened was when our cadet – now a successful producer for *The 7.30 Report* – came to me by Wednesday and said: "I am having second thoughts about my career options. I don’t think I have done the right thing. I don’t think I want to be a journalist any more." Because we were so busy covering everything down at Port Arthur, when the story shifted very quickly to the hospital near ABC, we had exposed her unwillingly to the “pack”, which she had never seen before. Pack journalists can be quite daunting when you first see them in action, because they are very hungry for the story, for any angle, and they are fighting each other. They were out in the car park, and there were ambulances rolling up and people being admitted. The accused, Martin Bryant, was still in the hospital. The journalists were in the car park, yacking away, smoking and cracking jokes. She saw this and was traumatised by it. I sent her away for a couple of days, and now she is a successful journalist, but it shows how it affected different people in different ways.

Another journalist came to me very early in the piece, and he said that he didn’t want to go down there any more, we really shouldn’t be doing as much on this story, and it was too close to us all. He said that we all knew what had happened and didn’t want to see any more. This obviously was slightly unrealistic, but when he said that he didn’t want to go back there, I had to do something. We gave him a few days off and the same with the editors who were handling the material.

I was faced with a decision on what to do, because we had to keep putting the material out. It was a big story, and we were required to cover it. Clearly people were starting to be affected and could not do their jobs properly. A professional counsellor landed on my doorstep about Wednesday morning. I thought we were in a bit of trouble, and his advice was that unless we went into a fairly large counselling session almost immediately, most of the people would not get through to the end of the week. I found this a bit hard to believe, because journalists are very cynical people. I was not sure whether it was absolutely necessary at that
time, because we were so busy covering the story. The initial reaction was that we did not have time to do this. We had pressures and deadlines that we were servicing. The whole network was expecting us to come up with the stories, and we had to keep on going. He convinced me by the end of the conversation that I had a huge job persuading my staff that we should stop for an hour or two and do this, which we ended up doing the next day. I certainly had to do a lot of homework, particularly with my senior staff, because I figured that if I could get the seniors on side and realising that we had to do this, then we had half a chance of getting through to the end of the week.

On Thursday afternoon we had about 40 of us, and that included cameramen, editors, journalists and production staff – anyone involved with the story on a day-to-day basis. A lot of them were like myself, who did not have to go down there but who were dealing with an enormous weight of material that was coming back almost on an hourly basis. It was very depressing, and you would ask yourself, why is this happening? Why has this man done this? That was the one answer the staff wanted. Maybe we don’t know the answers to this day and probably never will.

In the meeting, we were all asked to go around the room and recount what we had to do during the week and how we felt – that included myself. What amazed me was that as we went around the room, people spontaneously told their stories and burst into tears. It was a very emotional two hours. These were people who I had worked with for a number of years, and a lot of them were pretty tough customers. They had been exposed to all sorts of stories. Like any other newsroom, we dealt with axe murderers and all sorts of bizarre cases that were unpleasant to cover. But this story, obviously because of the magnitude of it, deeply affected them all. Some of the people who were upset over it certainly surprised me. Looking back, holding the session was absolutely the right thing to do. People came up to me the next day or two afterwards and said, “Thank God we did that because virtually we were going home of an evening and not knowing what to do.”

I made a point of being at the session, and I thought that as the leader it was very important for me to be there. In this whole process, very few people care about the editor, and I do not recall anyone ever asking me how I was feeling. All the time I was asking the staff how they were feeling.

As I said earlier, I have never been back to Port Arthur since this happened. It is a “grey” area. I have spoken to people who absolutely love it. There have been times that I have been there with my family before this incident. I love the history, and it was just fascinating. But I know other people who have said it gave
them the shivers even before the Bryant incident, and they did not like going there because of the convict history and knowing what the convicts had been put through. So some people had a bad feeling about it, and then to be sent down to cover a story of this nature had an impact on them.

Once the story progressed, we had to decide whether to cover the funerals. I had a view that this was a part of the unfolding story, but some people thought we should not cover the funerals, because we would put people through more stress. Again, this was part of an evolving story. Like it or not, there was huge interest in these events, and there was a very big public memorial service to let people express their grief. We were very sensitive to our audience, but we felt that we should be there. Some other people say: “Why are you interviewing that guy, Walter Mikac [whose wife and two daughters were killed]? He has been through enough. He has lost his whole family.” But it was his way of trying to cope. I would not say he was over-willing to talk to us, but I think he accepted that he was a major player in this unfolding story.

So there were all these emotional and traumatic issues that I had to deal with as an editor and that reporters had to deal with in going down there. The telephone would never stop ringing, with people all around the world calling our newsroom wanting to speak to our journalists. “What is happening down in Port Arthur? It’s BBC news; could I just speak to you for five minutes? I just want to ask you a few questions.” It was hard to get down there, even to fly into Tasmania. Very quickly all the plane seats were taken, probably by journalists. There were even a couple of distasteful incidents when journalists pretended they were relatives just to get on the plane, which is the darker side of the industry.

On the other side, Bryant was taken into custody, which none of us had ever expected. Traditionally in these kinds of cases, the gunman would shoot himself. Bryant had obviously tried to burn himself down inside that Seascape Cottage, but that didn’t happen. Once he was arrested and charged, we had a huge legal problem. In the interest of a fair trial this man could not be named or identified, so we dealt with the lawyers on everything that we wrote and put to air. We quite clearly should have had legal advice on-site. We have a 24-hour legal service that we can phone, but we should have asked advisers to come into the office because we had people from radio and television current affairs and news all ringing up at 6 o’clock at night trying to get their scripts vetted. The Director of Public Prosecutions wrote us all a letter and was quite clear that we had to be careful in what we said. It was doubly difficult because The Mercury newspaper had come out very early
in the piece, explicitly identifying Bryant as the gunman and interviewing ex-girlfriends and that sort of thing. People were fed up with this, and to this day, as I understand it, I still have contempt of court hanging over my shoulder. It was definitely in the case of the public interest that we published Bryant’s name and the details of his background. That was an additional pressure on covering the story and probably the last thing we needed.

There was another incident where a reporter spoke to Bryant, and until recently she was one of the very few people who had heard his voice. We had dispatched her on the Sunday afternoon, and she was innocently ringing around various locations around Port Arthur. She rang the Seascape Cottage, and who should answer the phone but Bryant, and she got into conversation. It was only very brief, and he ended up hanging up on her. She returned to the office that evening really agitated saying: “I’ve spoken to him. You’ve got to do a story on him.” We decided that we would not pursue that particular angle, because we had half a dozen other stories involving witnesses. We were also very sensitive and wary, because we remembered the time when [the national Channel 9 television network’s] \textit{A Current Affair} host Mike Willessee had spoken to hostages in a helicopter siege, and the last thing we wanted to do was get involved with that type of reporting when there were so many other angles of the story to cover. \textit{The 7.30 Report} picked up the story a few days later, but I often wonder whether I made the right decision. I don’t know, but I would probably do the same thing again.

I would like to discuss one interview with a nurse, who was down at Port Arthur when the incident happened, which encapsulates in one story all the material that we had to cover. It was an interview on \textit{The 7.30 Report} that I watched again the other day for the first time in a long while. I still found it quite harrowing, and to me it displays anger at what happened and the hopelessness of the situation and not being able to do anything. It poses those questions – why has this happened, and why would anyone do this? It also displays courage from this woman, and it is quite a remarkable piece of television.

That won the \textit{Walkley Award} (Australia’s most prestigious journalism award) for the best piece of journalism at the time. We won a \textit{Logie Award} (Australia’s excellence in television awards) as well. It was a dilemma for me, because I wasn’t certain whether we should be pursuing awards on this sort of topic, but as an editor I was very proud of the work the journalists had done, and I thought that the story would have a happy ending of sorts. I don’t think it ever will, but I put together the nomination and we ended up winning. I would like to think we won that award because we were a group of Tasmanian journalists covering the story, and that
we did it better than anyone else because we could relate much more with the community. We were part of that community and very sensitive to the feelings and emotions that the story generated, particularly in the Tasman Peninsula which I don’t think has recovered to this day from what happened.

RICHARD LOWER is currently the ABC’s Head of News and Current Affairs in Queensland. This is a revised version of a paper he gave to “Toil and Trouble: A Colloquium on Trauma and News” at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, on 27 October 1999.