Journalism and trauma: Proposals for change

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I feel I have to give some humanity to those terrible people, journalists, who go out and report on all the awful events that happen around us. Journalists have often been depicted as people who have little empathy or emotions when dealing with the tragedies they report about. Little has changed in news content over the years, but what has to change is the way journalists are treated by their employers when they report on trauma. My concern about this topic has been long term and my pursuing this area of post-graduate study reflects this. In 1986 the Australian Journalists Association asked me to write an article about trauma and how it affects journalists. “A reporter’s lament: Is anyone there?” featured in the Australian Journalists’ Association in-house journal, provoking a large response from readers. I am surprised that it is still so relevant. I wonder whether much has changed since then. At the time I was a police reporter and had been so for many years, and my complaint was that nothing was done for journalists who may have felt the effects of reporting trauma.

After leaving frontline journalism, I went into public relations with the Australian Federal Police for nine years. I realised that those working in public relations within a police or similar organisation were equally exposed. I suffered more trauma as the Director of Information for the Federal Police in handling some of the crimes and tragedies, because I was much closer to the incident and knew more details. My reactions were tempered because I had some benefit from the police counselling services available, although such services were in their infancy.

There is a popular saying in the media that “if it bleeds, it leads”. We cannot ignore that tragedies, disasters, accidents, crime and other misfortunes dominate the news. But this is the case in our personal relationships too. The news delivered is just a magnification of life. If there is a death or illness in the family, we will telephone someone in the middle of the night and give the news. Bad news is conveyed rapidly and is important.

All journalists, and that term includes photographers, are likely to report on human tragedies. Police and crime reporters are the first on call, but any journalist can expect to report on
traumas. One example is a general print reporter in Melbourne, who was asked to cover the 1987 Hoddle Street massacre, which she found difficult to do. She had little previous exposure to police/crime stories and had not expected to report on such a tragedy. She retreated from the scene and refused to cover that story any longer.

Whatever criticism can be made of the journalist’s quest, it is true that every journalist has personal and social connections with family, friends and colleagues, and they can be hurt and affected by what they experience. The public perception is that journalists seem to be less than human; that they don’t bleed or grieve or experience things other people do. To perhaps change that perception is the challenge of my study.

Journalists are more likely to suffer secondary rather than primary post-traumatic stress, because they usually arrive after a traumatic incident and may suffer secondary effects, except in cases of reporting live at a siege or war. Many journalists have said that they have been affected by traumatic events, as I have. It would be absurd to suggest that all journalists could be so inhuman that every one of them could constantly report on such matters without being affected adversely. (I will not pursue the interesting argument that some may suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because they have traumatised others or behaved unethically, which is another valid point.) If anything is to be done to alleviate the negative effects of trauma on journalists then I suggest they should not be treated differently to other people regularly exposed to human suffering. If they were treated with a little more empathy then they too may be more professional and more compassionate in their exercise of chasing ambulances and tragedies. My aim is to explore the ramifications of changing the current culture and providing journalists with the support given to other professional groups who regularly deal with trauma.

For instance, the Queensland Ambulance Service provides PTSD counselling for its members, emphasising colleague support. PTSD counselling in Australia did not begin through any great humanitarian reasons. It began seriously in the mid-1980s because the Victorian Ambulance Service discovered through exit interviews that it was losing many skilled officers. A major reason given was the lack of what we now know as PTSD treatment and support. This helped to develop the positive industry response today seen in many of the emergency services, but not much in journalism. This could be a reason why so many competent journalists abandon their journalism careers.

In my research, I interviewed 12 journalists, including one photographer, who covered the tsunami that hit northern Papua New Guinea in July 1998. Out of the 12, eight expressed some
post-traumatic stress symptoms following their coverage of the tsunami.

A few broke down and cried during the interviews as they recalled their experiences. I know Sean Dorney of the ABC did a live cross from PNG about a week or so afterwards while waiting at an airstrip, and the footage clearly showed that he had been greatly affected. Another journalist described his reaction while he was returning to Sydney via Cairns from PNG. When he went outside the airport terminal to have a smoke, he broke down into uncontrolled sobbing. He sobbed so much that he made his nose bleed, and he could not stop for at least half an hour. He has covered many tragedies and has a fine reputation. He was and remains deeply affected by them. So I am not going to wear the argument that journalists don’t suffer.

Sean Dorney (See article this issue) has confirmed that there are real problems about how journalists respond to tragedies and why their concerns are so often ignored. One thing Sean touched upon, which has been confirmed by other studies, is that often trauma results not just from the event itself, but the frustration workers feel with their own organisations, which appear to lack support or understanding of their situation and make unreasonable and uninformed demands. A similar concern has been revealed in overseas police studies where those who attended disasters felt additional stress about the frustrations with their managements. Poor management support and lack of empathy can exacerbate PTSD.

Sean was the first outside journalist to arrive at the tsunami disaster site. He had to fly over the mountain range in an unpressurised aircraft, suffering altitude sickness, which is very painful and ongoing. On his arrival he delivered both radio and TV material and then, because of communication problems, had to fly back to Port Moresby to file more stories. It would be difficult for anyone who was not there to understand the devastation and difficulties. It also must have been frustrating for Sean to see the commercial networks arriving with their virtual million-dollar operations and being able to set themselves up and take all the kudos and offer all the deals. Did he suffer? Of course he did.

Let me move on to what is known in the trade as the infamous “death knock”. The death knock involves fronting up to the family or victims or friends and asking the “how do you feel?” question. Death knocks most commonly occur when a reporter and/or photographer has to approach a bereaved family or a friend following an unexpected and sudden death or serious injury to a friend or family member. It is sometimes referred to as getting the ‘weeping widow’ story. Every time I have raised the trauma-in-the-newsroom topic with fellow journalists, the issue
of death knocks has come up. It is the one aspect that appears to singularly cause most distress among journalists.

Many know about the journalist’s Code of Ethics, but some journalists display ignorance of how it should apply. No journalist should be unaware of point 11 of the new Australian Code, which is similar to the previous point 9, stating: “Respect private grief and personal privacy. Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude.” Journalists have the right to resist some requests from their editors to undertake the death knock. My research has shown that some journalists do resist. I would point to a recent incident in the Brisbane ABC radio newsroom where the reporters were asked whether they would do a particular death knock. They all declined and that was respected by management.

The death knock is not always bad. There may be cases where a death knock is justified and the people suffering are keen to speak to the media. Many journalists have undertaken worthwhile interviews where proper consent was given. There are documented occasions where the family, the friends and even the victims have gone public. It can sometimes be therapeutic. Occasionally it is critical to solving a crime to have the victim or victim’s family ask for the public’s help, for example, with an abduction, murder or serious assault. After a tragedy, it can be helpful to warn others of potential danger, such as of the need for safety fences to prevent a backyard pool drowning or for a smoke alarm to prevent fire.

Most journalists have avoided the death knock by subterfuge, by telling their editors that the source was not at home to be interviewed or would not respond. That’s avoiding the issue. My study indicates that there may be a change in newsroom policy away from the death knock as many knew it in the past. The Brisbane Channel 9 news director, Lee Anderson, assured me that his station no longer pressured its journalists to do the death knock. This was partly a response to journalist’s concerns, but he also felt viewers were not keen on that type of story either. He said if journalists were uncomfortable about doing a death knock, then there was no adverse reflection on them.

New journalist trainees are often blooded by being sent to cover a traumatic event, particularly the death knock. It is awful for such an inexperienced person to attempt do this with little training. On occasions, a more senior journalist has to take over or support these trainees, because the task is beyond them. In contrast, the police provide extensive training on grief notification and how to deal with trauma. Journalists should undergo similar training.

An exciting, positive development is the use of the intermediary. This is where a spokesperson or representative of
the family or victim is provided to respond to the media. The
competitive nature of journalism in Australia is well known and
often exemplified in Sydney. However, it is in Sydney that this
has been adopted first. The Sydney media agreed with the New
South Wales Police that in stories which involve victims, journalists
will go through an intermediary determined by the police
chaplaincy, headed by Salvation Army Officer Don Woodland.
The Sydney media have found the intermediary works well for
the whole spectrum of people involved in the trauma. It works
for the victims, the police and the media, and it certainly works
for people who are not media savvy. Channel 7 reporter Chris
Reason told me: “We love it, it works for us, and we don’t want
anyone to come in and bugger it up.” This system is also working
on a de facto basis in Queensland, and a similar system is used in
Tasmania. I visited the UK, the US and Canada in mid 1999 and
mentioned the intermediary approach in discussions with
journalists, their managements and some academics. They were
very interested and considered it a workable model that they could
adopt.

The intermediary system works best where there is an
articulate person to speak to the media and realistically represent
the victim. It can help especially with a big story involving a tough
media pack. Some sources may be daunted by the prospect of a
media pack, and they have good reason to be cautious. Richard
Lower (see pages ___ ) has mentioned the “

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media pack” outside the main hospital in Hobart to cover
the aftermath of the 1996 Port Arthur massacre. I have also
experienced the pack from both sides. I have sought major stories
and, during my time with the Australian Federal Police, have
responded to major stories. Following the murder of Assistant
Commissioner Colin Winchester in January 1989 in Canberra, we
had the media pack hanging around for days. It was quite
daunting, particularly for people not accustomed to it.

The intermediary approach gives some protection against
another unsavoury journalistic practice the often accompanies a
big story; the visit of the out-of-towners. This occurs when an
outside group muscles in and often spoils it for the local media.
They appear not to care how they trample around and who they
upset, because they don’t have to stay long. This was illustrated
in the 1993 Cangai siege in northern New South Wales, the 1987
and 1994 Moura mine disasters and, I understand, at Port Arthur.
Some journalists who come in from outside are more callous and
less caring about how they get their stories.

The intermediary approach can also be adapted and
extended for pooling; to nominate one journalist and
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photographer to deal with the spokesperson, which relieves pressure. This is done on an honour-sharing basis where the footage and full interview is provided to all journalists.

For a touch of humour, I will add that the Australian Federal Police adopted a single-journalist interview approach for completely different reasons. Before I had joined, a press conference was held about the seizure of a considerable amount of illegal drugs, which were on display. At the end of the press conference, a small portion of the drugs was missing. This caused great embarrassment. The police blamed the media, and the media blamed the police for the loss. For security, the whole press conference arrangement was changed to a system of having a one-on-one nominated media representative to film the exhibits.

I will also suggest that the peer-support system adopted by the Queensland Ambulance Service may be a good model for journalism. The practice is to have pre-trained counsellors who are also colleagues. The Queensland Ambulance Service trains its own staff over a short period to be available for their colleagues or to seek outside expert support if needed. Some research has shown that people troubled by work trauma feel uncomfortable talking about PTSD to people they hardly know. Most talk with their friends, families and colleagues.

Respected colleagues are perhaps the best to offer support to journalists. In the newsroom this would most likely be journalists with at least five years experience who would volunteer to be trained as counsellors to support their colleagues if an incident occurred. If it was beyond their scope or ability to cope with a particular problem, then an outside umbrella of support would be made available. Staff would need to have some choice about who they used as a colleague-counsellor. The mentor arrangement works well already for other journalist practices, particularly for the new journalist, so the peer-counsellor concept has promise.

Some media managements have expressed concern that by raising the issue of PTSD support with their staff, they may become re-traumatised or think they should have a problem when they don’t. While care must be exercised in dealing with past trauma, there is enough evidence in other areas of industry to suggest that ignoring the concerns of journalists who experience trauma is not good management practice. The overpowering argument for a support system, and the lawyers would agree, is the threat of litigation. Litigation could succeed if journalists argued that they were no longer able to work because their management provided no real support after they had reported or dealt with a trauma. This legal protection argument should be compelling enough, if not the humane reasons, for media employers to provide some
During my visit last year to News Limited in Wapping, London, I found management had partly solved this issue by providing all employees with full medical cover, including counselling and psychiatric support, as part of their packages. News Limited also provides an in-house counselling service, which has a staff welfare role, but is perceived as being part of management and not independent. That raises the issue that employers see some support systems as being too close to management, and that they wish to retain confidentiality without a fear of leaks to management. This concern was raised by the 12 journalists I interviewed, who said that if support was provided then it had to be divorced from their employers and confidentiality had to be fully guaranteed.

The Queensland University of Technology’s School of Media and Journalism has an opportunity to train students in this very important area. It is proposed that undergraduate students be offered trauma-interview training. In mid March-2000, Melbourne is hosting the Third World Conference for the International Society of Trauma Stress Studies. At the end of that conference, some of the journalism educators have agreed to come to QUT to conduct a short teaching program based on what they have done at the University of Washington in Seattle. This includes Dr Frank Ochberg, who is a leader in the field, supported by Ms Migael Sherer, who was attacked and almost killed by a rapist and who has written a book describing her recovery. Both conduct training programs using simulated interviews in which student journalists interview actors, who portray a person suffering from trauma. The actors are then asked to discuss the interviews and provide feedback.

Dr Ochburg’s programs are funded by a philanthropic US organisation, the DART Foundation, which addresses concerns for journalists and their reactions to traumatic incidents. Another initiative promoted by DART is to establish worldwide, at least for the Western media, a group of journalists to act as a first-in, “parachute response” response team, flying in soon after a major disaster or trauma to support their colleagues covering the event. This might be even a week after the event. It is obvious that after incidents like the 1995 Oklahoma bombing, the journalists directly concerned often want support, but later rather than earlier, as they often have to get their stories out as the first priority. It was interesting to hear from Richard Lower that the journalists covering the Port Arthur massacre almost had to be forced to stop several days after the event to take time out, which they then found worthwhile.

Public-relations personnel could help by documenting
which the media attended a traumatic incident and who needed or wanted to discuss what had occurred. This process is being set up on an international basis, and I have been asked to be part of its board. There is another PTSD aspect that relates to public relations people. Little, if any, PTSD support is provided to the many people who work in PR for the emergency services, police, military, government, corporations, etc. There is a place for PR people to be covered in this too.

Finally, closer to home, it was sobering, having considered all the theory to find a traumatic incident suddenly happening to someone you know, with the recent suicide of a colleague at QUT. A telling point, and one that we have tried to make for our journalists and trainee journalists, is that journalists should never forget there are always people just like us who are hurting, feeling and experiencing sadness and trauma. If we can deliver that message in a positive way to students and provide the sorts of programs that show that journalist can suffer too, then we will have a better industry, we will have better quality stories and we will avoid some of the pitfalls I have alluded to.

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