

Conference 2000: Reporting Death

Death Week: Pre-empting the process of brutalisation among journalism trainees.

A paper presented at the annual conference of the Journalism Tutors Association of New Zealand at Canterbury University Graduate School of Journalism on Thursday, November 30, 2000.

The idea of conducting "Death Week" as part of the National Diploma of Journalism teaching programme at Taranaki Polytechnic this year was borrowed from the journalism department at the University of South Australia in Adelaide, which first experimented with a one-day death awareness seminar in 1993. Ian Richards, Senior Journalism Lecturer at Adelaide, wrote in the Australian Journalism review a year later: "The thing students dread most - apart from not getting a job - is being asked by an editor or chief of staff to carry out a 'death-knock'.

Part of their dread stems from the fact that few of them have had first-hand experience with death because, like most Australians, they have been sheltered from the subject for much of their lives."¹¹ Richards I. "Encountering Death for the First Time", in Australian Journalism Review, Vol 16 (No 1) January-June 1994, pp 117.

The author has no reason to believe New Zealand journalism students are any different. Research for a 1998 master's thesis on the topic of how journalism trainees handle ethical decision-making showed similar reservations among New Zealand students, although responses varied according to a wide range of influences, including upbringing, religious beliefs, experience and ethical training.²² Tucker J 1998. Growing Up In Journalism: Ethical decision-making strategies used by trainee journalists in New Zealand. Melbourne; RMIT. Workplace pressures also tended to dictate inexperienced journalists' responses to supervisor requests to report stories involving death and grief. Richards followed his 1994 report with another in 1996, which urged other journalism courses to follow the South Australian example - referred to as Death Awareness Day - and develop initiatives to augment the limited help available to journalists from philosophical theories and codes of ethics.³³ Richards. "Dealing With Death: Intrusion into grief and journalism education", in Australian Journalism Review, Vol 18(1) December 1996, pp 103.

Taranaki Polytechnic decided to offer its 1999-2000 journalism course a pilot programme which expanded the SA single day to a week of death-related lectures and workshops.⁴⁴ The journalism course runs mid-year to mid-year. The aim was to sensitise students to issues likely to arise in journalism that intrudes on grief, and to help them develop strategies for handling such stories in a way that minimises harm to news sources and to themselves. This accords with a trend in US journalism codes of ethics which in the last decade have abandoned unrealistic expectations of eliminating the harm that journalism can do and now adhere to a tenet of "minimising" harm.

The programme was devised by the author and a colleague, Virginia Winder, who agreed, after canvassing the topic range to be covered, that rather than just a day it would need a full week. Some interesting issues arose over the timing of Death Week.

A date later in the 36-week course rather than earlier was considered appropriate because by then students would be advanced in their skills and receptive to an examination of problems encountered in hard news reporting involving death and tragedy. The first choice coincided with the anniversary of the road accident death of one tutor's parents a year before, so a new date was chosen. This one then coincided with the death of the other tutor's mother. It was decided not to change again, so the first day of the week involved both tutors and the class of 16 attending the funeral!

That raised some debate, naturally, about the effects of a death week on the teachers, a discussion which extended to the possible effects of the programme on students who had suffered recent personal bereavement. It was decided to enlist the help of polytechnic counselling staff, one of whom spoke to students the week before Death Week and offered assistance to anyone needing it. As it turned out, although one student had lost her father to cancer the previous year and another was on leave coping with her father's terminal cancer, nobody in the class (students or tutors) availed themselves of the counselling offer.

Death Week programme

Topics to be covered were identified by looking for death-related sessions already existing in the year-long

programme. These included obituary writing, Coroner's Court, suicide, murder/homicide reporting, photography, and media ethics (intruding on privacy and grief). Such topics would be mostly held over for Death Week.

However, it was felt other dimensions should be added: students should hear from professionals whose routine work included dealing with death in the community: undertakers, mortuary workers, hospice nurses, the Coroner, the crematorium manager. It was also important to add the perspective of those on the receiving end of media coverage; and that of journalists experienced at handling death-related stories. Thus was the mix determined. The programme was scheduled for Week 32 (of 36) and would be a mixture of lectures, tutorials and field trips. There would be no assessment specifically covering all the topics, because some, like Coroner's Court and suicide, and media ethics generally, were already included in other assessments during the course. For example, the media ethics assessment consists of students analysing an ethical dilemma they faced during news gathering; Coroner's Court and the rules of suicide coverage are assessed as part of a Public Affairs Reporting examination.

The various learning sessions covered about 14 hours of the week's teaching time and were delivered mostly by guest speakers. The programme is attached. The programme was introduced by a preparatory session the week prior to Death Week.

This included offering counselling services, as well as outlining the programme to come.

The first teaching session was a broad lecture by a journalism tutor. Entitled "Handling Death", it included pointers on how journalists should approach stories involving death, tragedy, grief, trauma, etc.

The second session was on Coroner's Court, the third on how to write obituaries. Students were asked to attempt writing their own obituaries, a exercise which drew a mixed reaction. Younger students found this difficult, some saying there was "nothing to write about". On the second day, an experienced former police reporter delivered a session on covering homicides, with tips about how to gather information, work with police and deal with grieving family and friends.

The New Plymouth coroner was a guest speaker for the next session. He is controversial for ruling that the Taranaki news media is not allowed to run any coverage of suicides, except when he might make an exception (if there was widespread speculation about a well known person's suicide, for example). He outlined his role.

The afternoon of the second day turned out to be the most gruelling part of the programme. The students visited the New Plymouth mortuary (where a mortuary attendant explained post mortems), a funeral home, and the city crematorium. Although they were spared the sight of a dead body, most of the students found such a concentrated experience overwhelming, although most agreed it was interesting and provided insight.

The third day began with an experienced local journalist taking the class through his coverage of a recent suicide involving a rugby player, the son of a well-known New Plymouth horse trainer. The case occurred in Sydney, so was not subject to the local coroner's usual ban. However, it needed particularly sensitive reporting because of the young man's prominence and the high regard enjoyed by the family. In other words, the story needed more than a few paragraphs to tell.

That session was followed by a class debate on the merits or otherwise of a controversial article about suicide that had recently appeared in the Auckland University magazine, Craccum.

The afternoon session was conducted by a nurse who works in the city's hospice. She covered a range of information about how families cope with the death of a relative. The last morning's session was presented by a woman whose close friend was killed in a road accident that made headlines throughout the country. The friend was the partner of a motorcyclist who rode around with his cat, Rastus, perched on his handlebar, complete with crash helmet. Max and Rastus were well known for their appearance in a television advertisement, as well as campaigning for road safety around Taranaki schools. Max, Rastus and Max's partner all died when the bike was hit head-on by a van. The friend had to deal with a disproportionately high level of news media interest. She'd kept extensive files of the coverage and gave a frank outline of how intrusive journalists became as they pursued angles to the story.

Feedback from students

The students were surveyed the following week to get their reactions to Death Week (questionnaire attached).

In response to the first question seeking their overall view of the programme, all 12 respondents (four were absent for various reasons) considered the week worthwhile; two said it was "very good", 10 that it was

good.

In response to the second question asking for comment on the programme arrangements, responses were mostly favourable, although five felt the field trips to the mortuary, funeral home and crematorium should not all be run on the same afternoon because that was too stressful.

One student suggested the classroom seating ^ the classic u-shape ^ needed to be changed "so students don't have to look at one another holding back tears".

The best guest speakers were local reporter Gordon Brown for his account of the rugby player suicide (7), the motorcyclist's friend (6), the hospice nurse (3), all speakers (3) and the mortuary manager (2). Only the coroner (6 votes) was mentioned as a poor guest speaker. He was considered patriarchal and patronising.

In response to the question about whether they now felt prepared to face death stories, 10 of the students said they did and one did not know. Several said they could not be sure until they experienced such a story for the first time. Other comments included: "should be spread over several weeks" (4); "still has to sink in" (3); "draining" (4); "depressing" (2); "shattering"; "gruelling and difficult"; "more journalism speakers needed"; "should be retained as a regular part of the course"; "every part helped"; "very beneficial learning"; "hold it earlier in the course"; "enjoyed it ^ eye-opening"; "good to see behind the scenes"; "important to face the reality of death" and "it was the first time I dreaded coming to the course".

Subsequent experience

A better test of the programme's effectiveness was expected to come from talking to students after they had graduated and worked in the news media industry for a while. A survey of 10 such graduates was conducted in October this year, about six months after most had started work.⁵⁵ The survey was restricted to 10 because, of the 16 who undertook Death Week, four did not pass the course, one went into public relations and one did not immediately seek fulltime journalism work because she and her family planned to go overseas.

The respondents were interviewed by phone and were asked if they had covered any stories involving death; if so, could they describe what happened. The third question sought an opinion on whether they thought Death Week was useful to them; the last question asked for suggestions on how the programme might be improved.

Of the sample, only four had so far faced stories involving death. One graduate working on a small community paper (Graduate A) covered a murder and a triple fatality car accident on the same day; a second working for radio in a provincial city (Graduate B) covered a prominent murder case involving the death of a woman and her young daughter, as well as other death stories at an average of one a month; the third working for a rural town community paper (Graduate C) covered a fatal accident in which a man was run over by a truck; the fourth working for a North Island provincial daily paper (Graduate D) interviewed the wife and daughter of a drowned fisherman a year after his death..

Graduate A: (sole charge reporter in branch office for a North Island rural community newspaper): "I had a murder and a triple car fatality in the same day. A 17-year-old died at a party. It was not drugs or alcohol. I had to sit down with the whole family. They were very nice people, but having to go into someone's home it was very scary. With the car crash, I took my camera out and took pictures. I was unsure about doing it at the time, but as it turned out later the husband of one of the victims approached me for copies of the pictures and I was able to supply them". "I think Death Week did help prepare me, although it seems such a long time ago. Yes, it was good. The problem I faced was separating the fact that this was a legitimate news story and at the same time it was a tragedy for the people concerned. It was difficult to separate the two, not to be insensitive. I had to keep reminding myself it was not just a job. „A lot of the deaths you cover involve young people. I think looking back at Death Week I would have liked a parent and a young person along to talk to us."

Graduate B: (sole reporter for NewstalkZB in a medium-sized North Island provincial city): "I covered the Lundy double murder. Death Week definitely helped. The residents marched and there was a karakia and it was very apparent I had to stay back, tread lightly. What we did was very helpful. The family members came to the cops, cafeteria and gave details of their feelings, and having done Death Week Ÿ „It made me consider the feelings of the people listening when I was writing my stories Ÿ not to use too many details. „I think I've had about one death a month since I started here. There's just me. I don't get too involved. There's no call for it. „There are no improvements to the way you do Death Week that I can think of. It's good preparation."

Graduate C: (works with one other journalist on a small North Island rural community newspaper): "A young guy had run in front of a truck. I didn't know it was a fatality when we heard. I was taken to the scene by the cops. The body was covered. I left my notepad and camera in the car. I spoke to the cop there and then rang

them later for more details." "I think it (Death Week) did help. I looked at the notes that night. The witnesses were still at the scene. I wondered how the family would feel. On our paper we always ring the family and warn them if something is going to be in the paper. I thought it best to leave the scene in this case. „Death Week was good preparation for what we might come across, for hearing about the need for sensitivity, making judgements on photos and reports. „I do think there was too much in one week."

Graduate D: (reporter on a North Island provincial daily): "I spoke to a girl who survived a fishing boat tragedy in which her father and his mates all died. This was a year on and it had a lot of publicity at the time. She was on Holmes. I spoke to her and her mum. The girl was used to it and was okay, but her mum had never spoken to the media before. „You know in yourself to be considerate, but Death Week helped bring it home. Yeah. „You could include more on what families go through when the police and search and rescue are involved, what it might involve, to help reporters relate to what they went through."

Other comments: All of the other six graduates interviewed still thought Death Week had been useful. One graduate working for an Auckland community paper said he had not done any stories involving a person,s death, but "I had a horse that died". The horse belonged to champion equestrian Blythe Tait and it died suddenly prior to the Sydney Olympics. The graduate said his Death Week training led him to wait a couple of weeks before approaching Tait for a story: "He was grieving and upset, I imagined. I didn,t want to hound him. I think you need to give people time to get over a tragedy, even if it means the story is a bit late." Another graduate working for a South Island daily paper said she had not covered a death story personally, but had observed colleagues. This had reinforced her positive attitude to the Death Week programme. Another graduate concluded her thoughts by saying: "I don,t think anything can quite prepare you. There,s death and then there,s tragic death, for example involving children. Until you experience it"

Discussion It seems clear from the above qualitative data that Death Week successfully achieved its objective of helping students to be aware of issues they might have to confront when they cover their first death- related stories.

The only major change needed is to spread out the field trips so students are not confronted with too many raw experiences at once.

More victim-related input may also be helpful.

A further survey would be useful when more time has elapsed to see if views change as greater experience is accumulated.

Although students approached death Week with some apprehension (especially those who had experienced recent family bereavement), all coped well. It is advisable for them to have an opportunity to express concerns to tutors prior to the week; the survey and debriefing that followed the week also provided a relief valve for those feeling stressed.

The week will be a permanent fixture in the Taranaki Polytechnic journalism course from now on. However, staging a real funeral to launch the week is not considered essential-or even advisable.