Conference 2004: Trauma, Journalists and the DART

Looking after reporters in a "macho" environment.

By Philip Castle, lecturer at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia and communications director of the Dart Centre for News Media and Trauma - Australasia .

Journalism in Australia and similar western cultures has traditionally been a “macho” environment when after covering difficult and traumatising stories the antidote has been self-anaesthesia at the local pub or to wipe yourself out at home.

Recent studies, including his own, have shown nearly all journalists, who have covered traumatic stories, have felt isolated, un-cared for and vulnerable with few finding constructive ways to cope. Some have developed what is known classically as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, others have become so unwell they cannot work, some good journalists have left the industry, a few have committed suicide and most have felt let down by an unsympathetic and inept media management.

This is changing and many journalists have taken it on themselves to seek out colleagues (often done in the past informally), adopted better self care and care for colleagues practices and used counselling wisely when offered.

Media managements here and abroad have also begun to realise their obligations to look after staff and, with the added stimulus of potential litigation if they did not adopt better risk management practices. In some newsrooms this has seen a more realistic and humane way of supporting staff than the old “if it's too hot in the kitchen, then get out” philosophy which once prevailed.

There has been much work done, particularly in North America, the UK and some in South Africa and Australia . Media managements, journalists and even story subjects (often victims or victim-related) have combined positively to provide some research and proven practices to help journalists cope better and improve the way they do this work.

It has come as no surprise to many engaged with traumatic events to find journalists (in all forms such as photographers, producers, sound recordists, editors etc) have suffered as much as anyone else and have done so for some considerable time. It is just that considering the journalists' plight compared to other significant people, most importantly the victims, their concerns and needs were sometimes overlooked before there was some acknowledgement of journalists' post traumatic symptoms. Some insightful news industry employers then also realised they too had problems associated with their employees covering traumatic stories. It has been established by some recent studies that the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are just as real for journalists as they are for the first responders such as the police, ambulance, rescuers, medical and military personnel. Some research has found that journalists often feel worse at such incidents because they are not in a direct helping role and are sometimes abused and vilified as “vultures”. It takes some maturity for a journalist to appreciate their role that in many cases it is to bring the news to the community or world which can then prompt an appropriate response.

This has been helped by the world-wide establishment of the Dartcenter.org whose patron is CNN's head Chris Cramer. At the Dart annual conference in New York in May 2003, Cramer said university education and preparation was critical in reducing the damage done to journalists entering this environment.

A decade ago, a US-based philanthropic family in Seattle through contact with a PTSD world expert, Professor Frank Ochberg, established the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma. The

organisation was named after the Dart family and was used to set up a fund to address the needs of journalists, victims and people affected by the stories they covered. This has since spread internationally to incorporate Dart Australasia which was launched last September in Melbourne . (see *Dartcenter.org*and *Dartcentre Australasia*) as well as similar nodes in Europe, Eastern Europe, South America and South Africa.

Part of the difficulty in recognising journalists could also suffer vicarious trauma from the events they covered is the perception both in and outside the industry, and often a very real expectation, that it is a “macho” job where journalists are not expected to feel the pain and suffering as deeply as others. The public's perception has been the news arrives somehow by a robotic process disengaged from people on the ground; ie news is somehow obtained by getting the stories, interviewing victims, survivors, their rescuers and witnesses without the participation of a journalist. It is impossible for a journalist to be totally detached and as one seasoned US journalist said, “You can't fake empathy or compassion”. Both of which are needed to get real stories.

Thankfully this attitude is changing as journalists, trauma specialists, and more significantly the journalists' employers, are realising it is important to encourage journalists to apply self care, care for their colleagues and appreciate the value of skilled counselling during and after their stressful stories. If journalists adopt more enlightened practices they will do better stories, be more effective and do no further harm to their story subjects. Employers likewise will keep their skilled staff, reduce the risk of high staff turnover and mitigate against possible litigation.

My research undertaken of about 40 Australian journalists in 1999 and 2000 and the general agreement amongst them was the stories and issues that troubled them the most are listed:

Vehicle accidents,
Murder and brutality of children
Wars and their impact on innocents
Unsympathetic newsroom practices
Guilt associated with ethical issues
“The dreaded death knock”
Lack of public understanding of journos and the news processes
Lack of time between and for assignments

To summarise, journalists feel neglected, they understood they need to be more empathetic to do stories well, ie “you can't fake compassion”, the traditional response is to “get thoroughly pissed” and continue work (if you can) was not really suitable, the newsroom macho culture mades it difficult to deal and acknowledge their trauma.

In summary, journalists listed the following points:

- They primarily want in first instance to talk with colleagues, then may consider clinicians if vouched for. QAS model works

- Strong link between trauma, guilt and treatment of victims or their close associates

- Sympathetic and genuine management understanding

- Training

- Collegiate support

- Other options other than continuing to report trauma

• Greater acceptance of victims concerns and properly applied “do no further harm” policy (not presently in the AJA Code of Ethics)

Bryan Painter was the features editor for *The Oklahoman* when he was asked to organise the paper's profiles following the Oklahoma bombing on the morning of 19 April 1995 in which 168 were killed and many more wounded and again after the tornado on the evening of 3 May 1999 in which 40 were killed and many injured. His role was to assist and organise the reporters and photographers to prepare and publish the stories of the victims in both tragedies. These became a series loosely titled “Profiles of Life” which ran for some months after the events. The series were so well received the family and friends of victims not covered then asked for their loved ones to eb included. Bryan said he thought all the victims killed were covered and once the stories began no one objected to the participating and it became a significant cathartic series for those who suffered.

At first he undertook the stories on his own, “…because I didn't want the other reporters to have to do it…” but soon realised it was too big a task for him alone. The paper then used other reporters and this too became therapeutic for them as well particularly if they had connections to the victims. (This is an interesting aspect picked during up this study/survey and my earlier thesis which is how often journalists consider their role is actually helpful not only to the victims but to themselves in being able to write or produce the story and so honour the victims. This can become a positive outlet for journalists to relieve their own trauma.)

However Bryan learnt an interesting lesson from his experience with the first series of profiles. He said “I did it all wrong the first time [after the bombing] and I think I got it right the second time [after the tornado]…” While he was satisfied with the paper's reports and considered the reporters dealt with the stories properly, he felt he failed in his own self-care. He learnt from his mistakes after the bombing profiles and applied what he had learnt after the tornado stories.

The six things he did not do after the bombing and decided he would do after the tornado are summarised;

1. It is wise to talk regularly to someone close and trusted about your feelings and events being reported. In his case it was his wife.
2. As much as is possible keep your normal pattern of activities and behaviour going. If you would normally go to a game or meet some friends after work or go to church or scouts or spend time with you family, then keep those patterns.
3. Keep your sense of humour and laugh and joke. Just because you are dealing with sorrow and sadness doesn't mean you can't laugh and enjoy the fun of life.
4. Be open to the idea of counselling and, if you consider it is worthwhile, then take advantage of the opportunities and be positive about their possibilities for you and others.
5. Take pride in your work and accept the stories you are doing are important to many people and to yourself. The work of a reporter was to take the story “…one step closer to the reader…” Many people said afterwards it helped them to come to terms with the tragedy because of the way the stories appeared.
6. For him he used his faith for wisdom and skill and always prayed before he interviewed for each profile, ie he properly prepared in his own way for each interview and obviously treated the opportunity with great respect.

He said the advantage of counselling particularly when it was all over was that his mind kept going on afterwards and he felt not all of his emotions or even the facts came out through the keyboard. He found that the counsellor allowed him to be free of his responsibility to just the reader and to open up to his own feelings.

He had noticed after the bombing that he stopped being a happy, joyful person and others said that he appeared to have lost his ability to laugh and even talk to people socially.

The best a reporter could offer a victim was to display common sense in their approach, show real compassion and be accurate in their reporting. Often the victims were at their lowest point in their lives and it was inappropriate for a reporter to hurt them anymore. He said, “I felt a strong compulsion that I didn't want to cause them anymore hurt…” Sometimes he said reporters sometimes felt “…If I back off now I won't get the story” whereas “that's too much ego and not enough brains…” A reporter should feel at all levels that they don't have to do the story.

He said the approach he used was to contact one of the victim's family or friends and ask if they were willing to help with a story or if they knew if some one would help with the story? His opening comment was along the lines of “I'm sorry to hear of your loss…” and ask if it was convenient or when may it may be convenient to talk and then explain why the stories were significant and how the stories would be used.

The most important factor when dealing with each story was that it wasn't 168 dead or 40 dead, but one dead person, the victim, who was special to those family and friends and everyone associated with the victim felt their loss. He treated each story as a “one-off” and said this principle applied to every story involving a profile; he saw each victim as a single special person.

When journalists are required to report on trauma the research showed they needed to adopt improved practices to allow;

- greater understanding of PTSD and what causes vicarious trauma
- self care and self care and awareness of their colleagues needs
- use of intermediaries
- better preparation and training in dealing with traumatic stories and issues of PTSD particularly at Uni level
- support for and from colleagues and particularly those other journalists working as news editors, sub-editors, producers etc
- effective and confidential counselling (voluntary)
- just plain good journalistic practice, mostly accuracy and getting the story right.

Following my own research and that of a colleague, Trina McLellan, the following guidelines were developed to minimise the negative impacts on the subjects, family, friends and sources for traumatic stories;

- ask if they want to speak about it and allow them interviewee to speak
- acknowledge the significant others
- listen
- ask permission for photos and ask them which they would like used
- check the facts
- give them a time limit for interview and don't overstay your welcome

- establishment of a Dart Centre for Australasia

- self-care and trauma awareness training for all Journalism undergraduates extending to industry

- MEAA to endorse a “do no further harm” clause in AJA Code of Ethics acknowledging journalists can do further harm and should avoid it

- encouragement of the collegiate support model

- the media encourage to see this as a “win-win” approach and simply an endorsement of best journalism practice

- journalists are people like us all who have a very specific job to do. You can and should use their feelings of compassion, empathy and humanity.

- it's the process which is often the most disappointing.

- always prepare for any interview, especially live interviews.

- ensure you do have something worthwhile to say and stick to your message.

- if you have to use jargon, explain it .

- there is an old advertising adage: “To tell the people, you must tell the people who tell the people…”

- you may not get your desired result but simply get “…it on the agenda.”

- is it worth it?

- who benefits?

- if an intermediary or counsellor is involved in negotiating with the story source, they are taking a risk to exposing them to the media, ie some reporter/photographer may simply want them to cry.

- can the interview story be done at another time?

- they can say “no”.

The general public is often unaware of how journalists operate and get their news and particularly if a person is involved with the media or acting as a intermediary or supporter then they need to understand the following;

- Journalists (reporters, photographers, news crews, etc.) work to incredibly tight (often multiple) deadlines & their newsrooms demand a great deal of them from the field

- They want access to ‘talent', authoritative spokespeople who speak in plain English (“Is there anyone here has been raped and speaks English?”)

- They need facts about, reactions to or analysis of the incident, perpetrator and/or victims and they need them fast

- Your expertise is valuable in early news reports, even more so during later, more detailed stories

• Suggest you take a moment to think of three succinct things to say that might be of value to the community (journalists are your conduit to the wider community)

• Give journalists your business card so they can contact you, if needed, for further comment or information

• Few journalists are trained in recognising or dealing with mental illness, trauma, suicide or disabilities.

• Depending on the size and type of the incident, there could be hundreds (even thousands) of journalists working on this story from around the world

• News media work around the clock

• Victims, survivors, witnesses, families, friends, work/school colleagues, neighbours, experts like yourselves, etc., will be approached by news media looking for information, leads, new angles, even ‘exclusives'

• For some, the media attention may be intense and prolonged

• With larger incidents, there are likely to be retrospectives, often unannounced, with anniversaries, awards, similar incidents and other things emerging and graphic images or details are likely to be re-hashed

• Help the affected community understand what happened, when and how as well as how community is responding and/or healing

• Assist others to understand the affected community in its response, grief, recovery and growth

• Educate their own to reduce risk of secondary (or vicarious) trauma

• Recognise any impacts on colleagues

• Reflect on what was experienced, how people felt, what was learned and what to do differently next time

• Integrate what was learned into training & procedures

• Do some thorough research on trauma and its impacts on individuals and communities … incorporate this into their news reports with valuable links/pointers for people to follow up.

There are particular issues for journalist to consider when reporting stories on mental illness or where it is considered ethical and reasonable to report a suicide. The following points are worthwhile considering;

• there have been some important handouts issued in Australia from the Commonwealth Department of Health and the Hunter Institute (Newcastle University) for specific problems about suicide and mental illness relates stories.

• there are often many overarching ethical issues

• how people and source are approached is critical

• then how they are subsequently treated by the journalists and the media were treated

- what is appropriate to publish, how and when
- issues about respect, consideration and compassion
- issues about a lack of empathy for their situations.

As in most areas of our lives in terms of how journalists respond to these difficult and frequently encountered stories there are few better principles than the Judeo/Christian philosophy of “treating others the way we would like to be treated”, ie try to put yourself in their position as much as you possibly can.

Philip Castle, a print journalist with more than 30 years' media experience, including two years in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971, and nine years as head of the Australian Federal Police's public affairs unit, completed his research masters in 2001 on “Who cares for the wounded journalist?”. He will present his findings and share the vision of Dart world wide. He has travelled extensively throughout North America , Europe and South Africa observing and continuing his interest in this topic, particularly its tertiary education application. His aim is simple; to improve the journalist's lot for a profession he loves.