



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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CENTRE FOR
ADVANCED JOURNALISM

In the Media Spotlight: *The Survivor Stories*

Executive Summary

August 2011

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In the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria on 7 February 2009, the Centre for Advanced Journalism at the University of Melbourne embarked on a two-part research project to discover the ethical issues that arose for journalists who covered the fires, and the impact of media exposure on survivors who were the subject of media reporting.

This report is about the second part – the impact of media exposure on survivors.

It is based on qualitative research in the form of in-depth personal interviews with 27 survivors from eight bushfire-affected communities. The interviews were carried out shortly after the second anniversary of Black Saturday.

The research covered six broad areas:

- consent;
- the dynamics of survivor-media interaction in the first 48 hours and beyond;
- media performance in gathering material;
- media performance in publishing or broadcasting material;
- balancing media and survivor interests; and
- what happens after the media have moved on.

Overall, survivors said that media exposure had done them more good than harm. There had been few negative consequences and many positive ones: the vast outpouring of assistance from the public by way of donations; the opportunity to tell families and friends they were alive; the opportunity to call for help; the ability to use the media to exert pressure on the authorities to fix problems. Survivors in the main had very clear reasons for allowing the media into their lives. Given that the interviews took place almost two years after Black Saturday, perhaps some of this clarity was retrospective.

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Consent

It became clear that many survivors felt they were able to give or withhold consent when the media approached them. This consent was not “informed” in the considered sense but was given in the instinctual sense. The survivors’ belief that they were able to give consent needs to be assessed against what many of those interviewed said about being so shocked, traumatised and adrenaline charged that they had no recollection later of what they had said or even where and when the encounter with the media happened.

The critical issue in survivors’ decision-making was whether the journalists recognised and respected their autonomy. They judged this by whether the journalist:

- was honest and transparent in introducing himself;
- seemed genuinely concerned for their wellbeing as people before treating them as subjects for interview;
- approached them in a way that allowed them to say yes or no without feeling pressured;
- began by asking open questions that allowed them to decide what to talk about and how much to say.

Few regretted the decision they made to speak to the media. Few felt railroaded. Looking back, few said they would make a different decision in hindsight.

Many survivors said that they were not really able to give informed consent in the considered sense. Many could not even recall giving interviews or when they happened. This shows that even though they were able to give a degree of consent that they later thought was adequate, the issue of consent in disaster reporting remains a complex and vexed one, and media people need training on this issue from qualified professionals.

Changing dynamics: 48 hours and beyond

Broadly speaking there does seem to be a period within about 48 hours of a disaster during which survivors want to speak to the media and gain definable benefits by doing so. These include telling family and friends they are alive, telling the world what has happened, getting help, venting anger and experiencing the catharsis of talking about what has happened.

During this period, survivors are on an extreme adrenalin high. Some are in a euphoric state. They want to talk about what happened and how they escaped. Media professionals need to understand that this need to talk is not necessarily a need to talk to the media. On the other hand, by talking to the media, some did achieve particular objectives, such as getting word out to their families and friends that they had survived.

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After a day or two, the realisation of what has happened sinks in. The adrenalin levels remain abnormally high for some time, but the grief at what has happened becomes dominant. At this point, survivors no longer want to talk about what happened. If they want to talk at all – and many do not – it is about what is happening now and what is going to happen in the future.

These findings support a hypothesis developed after the first phase of the research, based on the journalists' observations. It has large implications for the way journalists approach the coverage of disasters and is a matter on which they need training and preparation.

Media performance in gathering material

The survivors spoken to in this research had more good experiences than bad with the media in the course of the news-gathering process.

Much of the media questioning seems to have been sensible and sensitive, and survivors generally said they felt their autonomy as human beings had been respected. This was a key test in their assessment of media behaviour.

There were also some bad examples: intrusion by cameras on moments of intense grief; deceit; disregarding a survivor's express wish not to be named.

In addition, there were some bad questions. Aside from the mindless "How do you feel?" question, the type of questions that most offended survivors were those designed to provoke an outrageous response: for example, trying to get survivors to say that arsonists should be lynched.

Another aspect of media performance that attracted criticism from some survivors was what they saw as the relentless negativity from a few sections of the media. This criticism was narrowly directed and was not made of the coverage as a whole, and tended to concern stories being written several weeks after the fires, not in the immediate aftermath. This was a time when survivors were looking with hope to the future and the negativity seemed to them to be against their personal interests and the interests of their communities.

Media performance in publishing or broadcasting material

In the main, Black Saturday survivors said that the media's portrayal of them and what happened to them was fair and accurate. Some said that, while small facts were wrong, the gist of the story was right.

One survivor did have a serious issue with the broadcasting of television footage showing her trying to comfort a deeply distraught neighbour. It was shot without her consent, albeit from a distance, and it has been used repeatedly, including for station promos, to the lasting distress of her and her family.

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The media need to be more careful about the way they repeatedly use arresting images from disasters. The footage of a car being swept backwards in the floods in the Lachlan Valley during the Queensland floods of 2011 is another example. There are people to whom the constant replays cause distress.

One aspect of survivors' views about the coverage is especially revealing. Consistent with their attitudes to consent, when their personal autonomy was central, survivors said that, in publishing and broadcasting stories about them, reporters needed to remember that it was the survivor's story, not the reporter's story.

In other words, survivors were saying that media people should remember they are the agency – the medium – through which survivors tell their own story, and ownership of the story is theirs and not the media's.

Balancing media and survivor interests

Consistent with their strong attachment to the concept of survivor autonomy, survivors say that in general it is a decision for the individual whether or not to speak to the media, and the emergency services should not interpose themselves, especially in the immediate aftermath. After the first 48 hours or so, however, they are glad of the opportunity to be able to avoid the media, through the setting up of media-free zones or media-free meetings. They also appreciate the media advice they receive, especially from the police.

Survivors asserted unequivocally that residents should have been taken back inside the fire ground to see their properties and their towns at first hand before the media were allowed in. It was evident that there was much frustration at how this aspect of the disaster was managed. They acknowledged that the media had a job to do, but said that their interests should have been put first.

Nearly all survivors also stated with some conviction that media people who go into disaster areas should not go onto private property without the prior consent of the owner. This applied regardless of whether the owner was absent or whether the property had been reduced to rubble or ashes. Their advice to the media was: stay on the public roads, or take pictures from the air.

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What happens after the media have moved on

There has been a lot of debate within the journalism profession about what duty, if any, journalists have to stay in touch with survivors after a life-changing disaster like this.

Most of the survivors in this research did not harbour high expectations that the journalists they dealt with would stay in touch. Most expected that the relationship would be fleeting and, except in a few cases, that is how it turned out. On the whole, survivors did not feel abandoned or let down by this.

Conclusion

Many of the issues raised in this research are complex. It was evident from phase one of the research, when media professionals were interviewed, that for the most part journalists were utterly under-prepared for these complexities. Confronted with them in circumstances of great pressure, they made decisions on the run. Many of the choices were good and were beneficial for survivors, some were bad and did harm to survivors.

There is a responsibility on the profession to minimise the risk of doing harm. Educating media professionals in these complexities and in how to make good ethical decisions is an important step in meeting this responsibility.

Editorial executives too need educating in these matters so that they are in a position to set proper guidelines for their staff and to support them in making good ethical decisions. And there does need to be more discussion involving emergency services, media professionals and survivors—who can advise both these groups—on how best to treat people who have been so deeply affected by a natural disaster. This is a discussion that ought to be initiated by media executives and journalists. There is certainly much to discuss.

For copies of the full report, **Black Saturday: *In the Media Spotlight***, please contact:

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