



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

CENTRE FOR  
ADVANCED JOURNALISM

# Black Saturday:

*How the media covered Australia's worst peace-time disaster*

Executive Summary

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*November 2009*

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## Introduction

This report is the result of a research project by the Centre for Advanced Journalism at the University of Melbourne on journalists' experiences covering the "Black Saturday" bushfires in Victoria in February 2009. The researchers are Dr Denis Muller (Responsible Researcher) and Mr Michael Gawenda (Co-Researcher). Emily Bitto, a researcher at the Centre since its inception, helped plan the project, transcribed interviews and edited the report.

The purpose of the research was to discover from journalists their experiences and what they learnt from covering the bushfires. The objective was to provide the profession with an opportunity to reflect on how they managed professionally in the circumstances of covering Australia's worst peacetime disaster, and how they might approach similar challenges in future. There is a strong thread of professional ethics running through the work.

The project's focus was educative. It was neither condemnatory nor laudatory in its purpose or objectives. It was also independent of employers and professional interest groups, and was carried out by two people with extensive experience at the most senior editorial levels of the Australian newspaper industry.<sup>1</sup>

The fieldwork was conducted between May and August 2009, and consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 28 media people who were involved in covering the fires. They all volunteered to participate and came from a broad range of media outlets:

- Commercial television
- Public-sector television
- Metropolitan broadsheet newspapers
- Metropolitan tabloid newspapers
- Local newspapers
- Online platforms
- Commercial radio
- Public-sector radio
- Freelance

They included reporters, photographers, camera operators, video journalists, producers, presenters, news executives, editors and news directors.

We researchers would like to thank the participants most sincerely for their involvement. They gave generously of their time and spoke frankly, sometimes self-critically, often colourfully, and always insightfully. They also gave of themselves emotionally. It was not easy to talk about many of the matters that came up, or to relive their experiences, yet they did so unwaveringly and with great generosity of spirit.

While it cannot be claimed that the respondents are representative of the media professionals who covered the bushfires, they do represent a very wide range and a very considerable proportion of the Victorian-based media professionals who did so.

The interviews were conducted on conditions of anonymity.

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<sup>1</sup> Mr Gawenda was Editor and Editor-in-Chief of *The Age* from 1997 to 2004. Dr Muller was Associate Editor of *The Age* from 1986 to 1993.

The research covers a wide range of ethical and operational issues, and this report is divided into six chapters:

1. Access to the disaster scene.
2. Treatment of survivors and victims.
3. The maelstrom of pressure.
4. To publish or not to publish.
5. Emotional impact of covering the bushfires.
6. Media assessments of media performance.

The paper sets out – mostly in their own words – what media professionals said they did and why. Many of the decisions and actions described here are controversial. Media people responded in a variety of ways to the operational and ethical challenges that arose, and these different approaches show how under-developed are the ethical rules that are meant to guide journalists. To a large extent, individuals are left to rely on their own ethical compasses, and these differ wildly in the directions they give.

It was not just journalists, however, who had to make ethical decisions. The authorities faced them too. While the authorities had the force of law behind them, how they enforced the law was often a matter of discretion. How that discretion was exercised was largely an ethical question. Not infrequently, the ethical decisions made by the authorities collided head-on with those of the journalists.

These collisions affected the relationship between the media and the authorities as well as the way the media responded, and so had consequences for the way the disaster scene was managed.

It is hoped that this research will help the media find better ways to manage the complex issues that they confront under severe pressure in the hour of crisis and will help others to understand the challenges faced by those reporting to the general community on large scale disaster and trauma such as that caused by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.

## **1. Access to the disaster scene**

Media access to a disaster scene as large as Black Saturday's is a complex and unsettled matter. It is complex because it has many elements. It is unsettled because there seems to be no agreed basis of principles on which the media and the authorities can proceed. In addition, there are insufficient consensual ethical standards among journalists on which to build a basis of principles.

So, when a disaster comes, people on both sides make up the rules as they go along, guided by their personal compass. The pressures are acute. In these conditions it is not surprising that errors of judgment are made, inconsistencies abound, blind eyes are turned, ethical lapses occur, compromises are made and, in all this, the interests of the affected public fade into the background.

This is unsatisfactory from every point of view: that of the authorities, the media and, most importantly, the affected public – the survivors and their communities.

It is also unsatisfactory from the standpoints of public policy and professional ethics. The public interest is ill-served when policy appears to be weak or jejune, and when the ethics of a profession as powerful as journalism are left to the unguided judgment of people working under intense pressure.

It is not a matter of good or bad intentions. There was little evidence in this study of people acting in bad faith, and what there was tended to be hearsay. The evidence was that for the most part, the media and the authorities were acting in good faith. Clearly, though, this is not enough to guard against serious lapses of judgment and ethics among both groups.

Key ethical issues arise concerning the reasons for roadblocks, the way the media respond to them, protection of survivors from the media, protection of crime scenes and rights of access to private property.

These are concrete ethical questions to which the media's codes of ethics give only the most abstract – and sometimes ambiguous – attention.

While individuals are responsible for their decisions, the ethical vacuum in which journalists work is primarily a systemic failure that abandons them to a kind of relativist jungle. It has been said that journalists look on ethics “as just the individual journalist's way of doing things”.<sup>2</sup>

This makes a tough job harder. It means that good decisions go unrecognised and bad ones are not named for what they are.

## 2. Treatment of survivors and victims

There was more consensus on how to treat survivors and victims than on questions of access. Broadly speaking, media people in this research set these standards for themselves:

- Prior consent is required for images of an identifiable individual as well as for interviews.
- Refusal of consent for an interview is implicitly also refusal of consent for the use of an image of an identifiable individual.
- People should be asked once only, and a refusal should be accepted. People should not be badgered.
- Close-up intrusion on grief or moments of intimacy can and should be avoided.
- It is a betrayal of survivors and victims not to follow up and keep in touch with them.
- It is necessary to recognise the vulnerability of people who are not used to dealing with media, and treat what they say and do accordingly by applying a fairness test.
- Some degree of intrusion is inevitable but it should be minimised.

The media people who covered the bushfires also learnt some valuable lessons about how to treat survivors and victims:

- Survivor or victim trauma alone does not preclude an approach from the media.
- Traumatized people can, and do, give or withhold consent.
- In the first 48 hours, people are in shock but are often willing to talk and some find it cathartic to do so.
- After 48 hours, people move from shock to grief and begin to close down.
- At this point, a more careful approach is needed, and people may no longer wish to talk about what they experienced.
- Also at this point, survivors and victims may need to be protected from the media.
- Traumatized people may act unpredictably and apparently irrationally.

For the authorities too there are lessons here. Protecting people from the media, especially in the first 48 hours, is probably misguided and may even be preventing some beneficial catharsis. Providing some media-free zones – as was done at the fire grounds after a few days – is perhaps better, since it empowers survivors and victims to go there, and on the whole it seems likely the media will respect those zones and stay away from them.

## 3. The maelstrom of pressure

Not one of the respondents in this research said they had received any kind of briefing on what to expect, how to behave or what was expected of them. They were just told to go. Sometimes they were not even told where to go. Just to go.

Most knew from experience what they had to do, even if that meant going against their conscience or better judgment. No boundaries were set; that was left to the individual.

News desks generate one source of pressure. Senior people, and those who were creative enough to generate their own story ideas, were able to counter this.

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<sup>2</sup> John L. Hulteng, *The Messenger's Motives: Ethical Problems of the News Media*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1985, p.8.

It was pressure from people affected by the fires that really hurt, and has had the most long-lasting impact. This came from negative responses when people were approached, or from errors or misjudgements. It also came from being up close to people in their suffering.

There were times when some media people suspended their professional roles altogether because they believed the needs of the human beings in front of them were more important than their work. The emotional forces induced by close association with traumatised people overwhelm the countervailing forces induced by loyalty to an employer and by subjection to the hierarchical power of news desks.

It is in the nature of these responses that they take place between media person and subject, off-camera, as it were. By definition, they do not make it into the story or on to the image; they are not published or broadcast.

There is a rich irony here. The media create many stereotypes, and by their own hand they have created a stereotype of media behaviour: jostling scrums of voracious bodies thrusting cameras and microphone booms in people's faces, chasing people along the street and shouting inane questions.

But all stereotypes are unjust and so is this one. The media do sometimes behave badly, hysterically and like a primeval herd but, as this research shows, it is a small part of a much bigger and more complicated story.

A particularly acute source of pressure was brought to bear on radio staff taking calls from people in distress on Black Saturday. It is absolutely clear that they did their best in impossible circumstances: vast amounts of conflicting information, thousands of calls, and the need to restrain themselves from giving advice. This has left a serious emotional legacy. Further preparation and training seems necessary in this area.

#### **4. To publish or not to publish**

A lot of material that was in the possession of media people was not published – for excellent reasons: to spare the feelings of survivors; to spare the sensibilities of the public at large; to preserve the dignity of the dead. Some aspects of the story, such as the performance of the authorities and the causes of the disaster, were not pursued by some parts of the media until an editorial judgment had been made that the time was right.

It provides a good example of the difference between editing and censorship.

This is a useful distinction for the media itself to reflect on, because there is a tendency in the media to see censorship or self-censorship where, on any rational application of the term, it does not exist.

A useful way to think about the distinction between editing and censorship, and between disaster scene-management and censorship, is to consider motive: Is this material being withheld because of an intention to deny the public the information they need to know? Are the media being kept out of places because the authorities have something to hide?

Many respondents use the “need to know” test: Can I tell the story without putting in this grisly detail? If yes – as in virtually all cases – then the material was omitted. The public was thus not denied any of the available truth that it needed in order to be informed about what had happened. It is therefore difficult to see how it could be thought of as censorship or self-censorship.

Equally, no respondent accused the authorities of trying to cover anything up, even when asked this question explicitly. It is difficult to reconcile that view with assertions that in keeping the media out, the authorities were attempting censorship. They certainly did seem to be attempting other things – protecting survivors from the media, protecting people's safety, protecting the integrity of a crime scene – and some of these objectives were considered by the media to be wrong, misguided and even meretricious. But that does not make them censorship.

A more careful consideration of this concept, and more careful use of the word, might lead to the finding of more common ground between the media and the authorities. It might also relieve media people of a self-imposed burden they do not need to carry.

Related to this question is the concept of the public interest. Many respondents revealed a thorough appreciation of the difference between the public interest and public curiosity. They were always ready to serve the first; they were selective about serving the second.

A major issue was verification. By journalistic convention, facts are verified before publication. The advent of online journalism appears to have altered this in some cases, so that verification may occur – if it occurs at all – after publication. There was a droll allusion to this by one respondent who, in trying to guard against it, admonished his staff that he did not want published as fact something that turned out 20 minutes later to be fiction.

However, it was clear from people working specifically in the online area that the pressure to be first was much greater than the pressure to be right.

Another serious challenge to verification arose from the sharp contradictions between information available from the authorities and the information pouring in from the public during the crucial hours of Black Saturday. The radio broadcasters at the centre of this vortex were in no position to verify any of it. Their solution – the only conceivable one in the circumstances – was to make some assessment based on the weight of evidence and the apparent credibility of the witnesses, sift out what appeared to be hearsay or hysteria, and present it alongside the official information without preferring one over the other.

It was also clear that selecting what to publish, the media make quite conscious distinctions about what it is right to publish about a disaster “in the back yard” – where the audience and the affected public overlap – and what might be published from a disaster further afield where that overlap does not exist. Mainly this has to do with the need not to break tragic news to people inadvertently, for example by showing police tape on a recognisable property when it is known that the tape signifies a death. It also has to do with a more subtle factor: that the audience is more emotionally affected when it closely identifies with the victims.

It also affected decisions about when to move on to “the blame game”. As a general rule the closer the media outlet was to the community affected, the longer it waited before getting into the “blame game”.

## **5. Emotional impact of covering the bushfires**

While there is some evidence that media companies have come a long way over recent years in recognising trauma among their staff and offering help, the overwhelming evidence is that they still have a long way to go.

Covering the bushfires traumatised a lot of these respondents, but few had enough confidence in the genuineness of their employers’ offers of help to take them up.

Perhaps the remote and impersonal forms that the offers took – sending emails, providing phone numbers – while intended to indicate that management was respecting people’s privacy, was interpreted as a signal that this was something management did not think was important, or was somehow trying to say should not be necessary. If so, there was a dialogue of the deaf taking place between management and staff on a matter of the first importance.

A further finding is that specialised trauma counselling is necessary. In some cases counsellors who were not trauma specialists were used and this was unsuccessful. Evidently trauma counselling is different in its essentials from standard counselling and failure to appreciate that caused some efforts to miscarry.

There are some big lessons about trauma management to be learnt from this experience. They concern the following, as a minimum:

- the way help is offered;
- the way this issue is discussed between management and staff;
- the need to create a healthy culture of acceptance;
- ownership of the process by editorial, as opposed to human resources, management;

- the type of help offered, and
- the separating of de-briefings of a personal nature from those on operational matters.

## 6. Media assessments of media performance

Intrusion and deception emerged as major ethical issues in gathering material, and many respondents saw grounds for criticising the media on those grounds. Once again it demonstrates the effect of having no agreed set of standards for media behaviour, and shows that the codes of ethics need guidance notes to make them operationally useful.

On the positive side, the media coverage is widely credited by practitioners with generating the massive public support that flooded in for the survivors and victims.

The media's performance in publishing material was widely admired. Some instances of poor judgment were mentioned, but generally the view was the media presented the story in a way that told it well for contemporary audiences and for posterity.

There was widespread awareness of the need to "stay on the story", and an acceptance that the media have a moral duty to do so. Many respondents had taken that as a personal responsibility. They had stayed in touch with the communities they dealt with, and had revisited them, often more than once. This helped the some media people too in their own recovery.

One dramatic operational development was the breaking down of the barriers in newspaper offices between the print and online versions of the paper. Each seemed to learn some respect for the other and to recognise the benefits that each can confer. In particular, print journalists learnt the usefulness of instant exposure. They also had to cope with the additional pressures of being expected to file repeatedly during the day, and not just once. The interaction was described by one respondent as "the holy trinity" – online, paper, online again.

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

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