



CENTRE FOR  
ADVANCED JOURNALISM

# Media ethics: *An examination of the experiences of media practitioners and survivors from the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, 7 February 2009.*

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## Methodological notes

This research project was carried out in two parts. Part 1 was carried out among media practitioners who covered the bushfires; Part 2 was carried out among bushfire survivors who had been covered by the media in the course of the bushfire coverage.

These notes describe the methodology used for each part. They are drawn from the full text of the research reports, which have been published as books:

Part 1 only: *Media ethics and disasters: Lessons from the Black Saturday Bushfires*, by Denis Muller, published by Melbourne University Press in 2011.

Parts 1 and 2: *Black Saturday: In the media spotlight*, by Denis Muller & Michael Gawenda, published by Cussonia Press in 2011.

These titles are available by ordering online through Melbourne University Publishing as paperbacks or eBooks.

The ISBNs are:

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## Part 1

### Introduction and methodology

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, organised interview schedules, 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

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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.

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.

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 by the media of survivors and communities.
3. Selecting what to publish.
4. Dealing with competing pressures.
5. The emotional impact of covering the fires.
6. 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.

## **Part 2**

### **Methodology**

A qualitative approach was adopted for this research. The reasons were as follows:

1. This was phase two of a two-phase research project and it was essential to match the methodology of this phase with that of phase one in order to achieve comparability of data.
2. The research objectives required that detailed exploration be made of respondents' experiences and this could be achieved only through qualitative methods.

The objective of the research was to discover from survivors of the bushfires in Victoria in February 2009 the effects on them of being the subject of media coverage of the fires. The purpose was to educate media practitioners in how best to treat victims and survivors of disasters.

In phase one, conducted in 2009, media practitioners were interviewed on the ethical issues that confronted them in covering the fires, on how they responded to those issues, and on their reasons for responding as they did. In this second phase, ordinary citizens affected by the disaster, and who interacted with the media, were interviewed in order to obtain their perspective on the same ethical issues.

The respondents were chosen from the media coverage that occurred in the first week after the fires, 7 to 15 February 2009. This period was chosen because it represented the most acute period of media attention and was closest to the event. Because of the volume of coverage it was also necessary for practical purposes to put a tight time boundary around the data-collection.

It was decided to interview 30 respondents. This approximated the size of the research program in round one, in which 28 media practitioners were interviewed. In the event, 27 survivors were

interviewed, 28 having agreed to participate but then one withdrawing during the fieldwork for reasons unconnected with the research. For reasons of time it was impossible to find a replacement.

To select the respondents, it was considered desirable that the researchers should construct a sample, rather than simply ask for volunteers from among those covered by the media, because of the risk that people with extreme experiences – good or bad – or with axes to grind would come forward and perhaps skew the results.

To construct the sample, the 30 respondent places were divided into two groups of 15 – those who had interacted with media practitioners who had participated in phase one of this research project in 2009, and those who had interacted with media practitioners other than the ones who participated in phase one. Thus, the 30 respondents were split into two equal sub-samples: “matched” and “unmatched”.

It was thought useful to see if the experiences of these two sub-samples differed, because it might be supposed that media practitioners who volunteered to participate in phase one were content to have their performance examined, and that therefore the experiences of those members of the public with whom they dealt might have been more positive than the general experiences of those who dealt with the media.

It was originally intended that the matched sample should cover all media. However, because of the way most television and many radio news items were presented, establishing who the reporter was became problematic. Many items were constructed from pieces of vision and sound, and mixed in such a way as to create a pastiche. This meant that it was impossible to identify the specific media practitioner and therefore to create a reliable matched sub-sample from the electronic media items.

By contrast, virtually all the print items carried bylines, identifying the journalist or journalists who had conducted the interviews and written the items. As a result, the matched sample was drawn entirely from people covered by the print media, items with multiple bylines having been excluded.

Every individual identified in every story about the bushfires published in all three of the main daily newspapers published in Melbourne – *The Age*, *The Herald Sun* and *The Australian* – was listed. The list contained 293 names. Of these, 25 were people who had interacted with the media practitioners interviewed in round one, and 268 were people who had interacted with other media practitioners.

From the list of 25 “matched” names, the matched sample of 15 was chosen deliberately, based on the following variables:

- timing of media encounter in relation to fire experience;
- location;
- type of account (recounting what happened to self or family, or recounting what happened to other people or to places), and
- type of mention (that the story was extensive).

**Timing** was considered relevant because it was hypothesised from the results of phase one and from the literature that there may be qualitative differences in media-subject interaction between those that take place roughly in the first 48 hours of a disaster and those that take place after that time.

**Location** was considered relevant because there were many fire grounds and some received much more media attention than others, a state of affairs which had been shown to have affected people's view of their media experience. Moreover, the disaster and its aftermath unfolded differently in different places, and it was considered essential to cover as broad a range of these circumstances as possible.

**Type of account** was considered relevant because there is an obvious difference between describing what happened to oneself and one's family and describing what happened generally, with implications for people's levels of grief and trauma, and for their privacy interests.

**Type of mention** was considered relevant because an extensive mention indicates that there was a substantial interaction with the media practitioner, and therefore a reasonably substantial basis for an interview.

The unmatched sample was drawn from a combination of print and television. This population also was sampled deliberately, taking into account the same variables as for the matched sample.

The sampling procedure was a mixture of random and deliberative. The population of interest was constructed from the complete coverage of the three main daily newspapers in Victoria – *The Age*, *The Herald Sun* and *The Australian* – the local newspaper serving the fire ground to the north-east of Melbourne – *The Lilydale Leader* – and the complete coverage of the radio and television stations in Victoria. The print records were assembled by the researchers and the electronic records were provided by Media Monitors, a media-tracking organisation.

From the complete records, the names of people covered were arrayed alphabetically by given name, this being the way the data were provided by Media Monitors. The full list was then screened according to the procedure described below.

A total of 16,047 media articles about the 2009 Victorian bushfires were identified for the sampling period of Saturday 7 February 2009 to Sunday 15 February 2009 (inclusive).

The highest number of daily media articles occurred during the weekdays (ie Monday 9 February to Friday 13 February).

The names were first screened on the criterion: "Ordinary people who were covered by the media in the first week after the fires".

Ordinary people were those who survived the fires but lost relatives or property, and who occupied no official position in respect of the fires. They included residents, property owners and community figures, but excluded mayors and councillors, MPs or other elected officials, and people with paid or volunteer positions in the emergency services. There was one deliberate exception: one emergency official (a volunteer, not a paid official) was included in order to verify an account given by a journalist in phase one of a particularly complex set of ethical challenges.

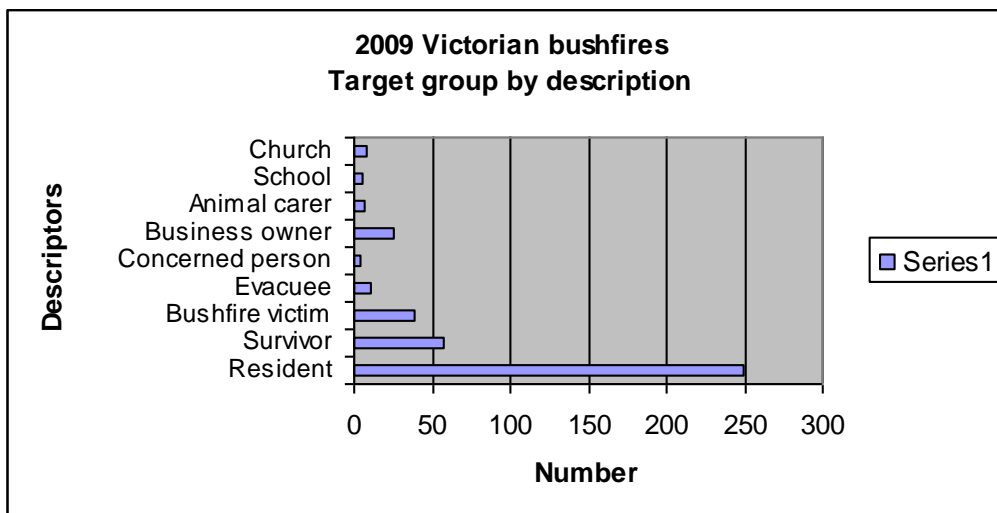
The following key themes or descriptors were considered to fit the definition: Resident; evacuee; survivor; bushfire victim; relative/resident concerned for safety of someone; animal/wildlife carer; local business owner; school representative or church representative.

The full names (first and surname) of people were identified where the person fitted the sampling definition. These were consolidated into one excel sheet containing 670 media article listings. This is 4.2 per cent of the total number of media articles for these fires within the sampling period.

This list was sorted by the name of the person being interviewed. When someone had been interviewed more than once, their name was identified once (with the dates they were interviewed appended next to the name). Removal of multiple interviews reduced the list of full names that fit the sampling definition to 545.

Any entry which did not mention a location for the interview or location where the person resided was removed, further reducing the listing from 545 to 402. This is 2.5 per cent of the total number of media articles for these fires within the sampling period.

The majority of this sample group (ie 89%) were described in the media article as either a concerned relative or resident; evacuee; bushfire victim; survivor or resident. The rest were described as school or church representatives, local business owners or carers of wildlife and other injured or displaced animals.



Names were arrayed alphabetically by surname with their descriptor (resident, evacuee etc), their location, and the date of the item(s) in which they appeared. They were then arrayed by given name and location. Efforts were made to include respondents from as many locations as possible.

Once the potential respondents had been identified, the names were sent to the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) so that the individuals could be approached through VBRRA's community committees, which consisted of members of the bushfire communities. The reason for taking this approach was that the researchers wished to spare the survivors the pressure of a direct approach from the University of Melbourne, and instead receive the initial approach from someone in their own community.

Once each potential respondent had agreed to participate, that person's contact details were forwarded, with the respondent's consent, to the researchers.

From the original 30 names, one person could not be found, one person refused and one withdrew part-way through the fieldwork, leaving a total of 27 interviewees. Because of the time-consuming nature of the indirect approaches, it was impracticable to find substitutes in the time available.

In the event, the characteristics of the 27 interviewees were as follows:

<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Marysville	13
Dixons Creek	2
Flowerdale	2
Kinglake	2
Kinglake West	2
Koornalla	2
Narbethong	2
Strathewen	2

#### Gender

Males: 14

Females: 13

#### Date of first media encounter

Within first 48 hours of the fires: 14

Later than that: 13

Matched sample with phase one journalists: 16

Unmatched with phase one journalists: 11

The interviews were conducted between 18 February and 1 April 2011. The interviews were conducted at locations of the survivors' choosing. They were audio-recorded on the basis that no identifying information about the respondents would be included in the report and nothing they said would be attributed to them.