



CENTRE FOR
ADVANCED JOURNALISM

The Black Saturday Bushfires:
How the media covered Australia's worst peace-time disaster

RESEARCH REPORT

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FOREWORD

On the Sunday morning after Black Saturday, thousands of Victorians—and Australians in other states for that matter—woke to the news that 15 people had died in the bushfires that had consumed much of the state. Many houses had been destroyed—some news reports said hundreds, others suggested the property destruction might be much higher. Like many of those thousands of Australians, having read the Sunday papers, I flicked through the television channels, including Sky News, for more up to date news and then checked out the newspaper websites as I listened to ABC local radio—the official emergency services broadcaster.

There was so much information to absorb and it was impossible to know what had been verified, what was informed speculation—informed by reporters on the ground – what was rumor and what was coming from social networking sites like Facebook and from so-called citizen journalists. Here was further evidence—if such evidence was needed—that the media world was going through a revolution that was, in many ways, just beginning, and that the results of that revolution would be far-reaching.

My first response to the news that morning was, I assume no different than the response of most people: horror at the disaster unfolding in Victoria, a desire to know more about what had happened and what was still happening, and a need to somehow order the chaos of the flood of information that was washing over me. At the same, given that I had been a journalist and editor for many years, I wondered how the coverage of the fires was being organised, how the journalists and photographers and camera people felt and prepared as they headed out to report this story and yes, for a moment or two, I thought it would be good if I were still a reporter about to cover perhaps the biggest story, the worst natural disaster, in Australia for decades, if not ever. As it became clear on Sunday that far more than 15 people had died in the fires and that thousands of houses had been destroyed, I thought that, for the journalists covering this disaster and for the editors and news directors overseeing the coverage, the days and weeks ahead would test them personally and professionally and would test them in ways that many of them had not been tested.

They would be confronted with all sorts of challenges and questions and they would be changed by the experience of covering the fires. This was especially true for the more junior journalists assigned to the coverage, though even senior people, given the chaotic conditions in which they would inevitably have to work, and given the fact that this disaster— with the large loss of life, the widespread trauma of the survivors whose lives had been ruined by the fires—was local, in their community, would be professionally stretched and personally, deeply affected by what they experienced and witnessed.

It was in this context that we decided that the Centre for Advanced Journalism’s first major research project would look at the experiences of those people who reported on –and organised the coverage of—the Black Saturday fires. One of the Centre’s goals is to improve the practice of journalism. Another is to give journalists and other media people a chance to reflect on their work and to explain to the communities they serve what they do and why. This research project was designed to meet those goals.

In my experience, journalists hardly ever get the time to think about their work, to reflect on the issues they encountered in covering a ‘big’ story, in this case to think about how they related to news desks, to the authorities and to the victims and survivors, or to talk about how covering a story like the Black Saturday fires affected them personally. This research project gave the journalists who participated in the interviews we conducted the chance to talk about all these issues. It gave them the chance to think about

the ethical questions they faced, to consider what the purpose and goals of the coverage were and, in that context, what they did well and less well and what they learnt from the days and weeks they spent covering Black Saturday and its aftermath. I believe those who participated in the interviews found the experience personally rewarding and professionally valuable. This report is designed to set out what we have learnt from these interviews about the way journalists, photographers, camera people and editors and producers do their work, and to be a trigger for debate and discussion that will include the people who were reported on and the community in general.

In my experience, the media also hardly ever takes the time to reflect on—and examine—how their coverage of an event like Black Saturday affected the people they reported on. Individual journalists and editors and news producers do think about this, I know, but we do not investigate the impact we have on people and their lives in any systematic way. This, in my view, is a mistake and goes to the question of just how accountable journalists are for the work they do.

I believe the more accountable we are, the more we will be trusted by the communities we serve. We intend to follow up this project with one next year that will use the same methodology as this study, to give people in the communities that felt the full brunt of the Black Saturday fires and who had extensive contact with the media after the fires, the chance to talk about and reflect on how they considered the media's performance, their experiences with journalists and photographers and camera crews, what they learnt—good and bad—about the media from their experiences and how they think journalists might do a better job of covering a disaster like Black Saturday.

I want to thank the journalists, photographers, camera people, radio hosts, editors and news directors who agreed to participate in this project. Without their co-operation, this research project would not have been possible.

Michael Gawenda

Director

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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.¹

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

¹ 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.

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 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”.²

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.

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

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.

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 misjudgments. 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 primaeval 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.

CHAPTER 1

ACCESS TO THE DISASTER SCENE

Access by the media to the places destroyed in the Black Saturday bushfires is a complex issue with five main elements, all of which involve interactions between the media and the authorities:

1. General day-to-day management of access.
2. Deception by media.
3. Balancing the media's and survivors' interests.
4. Management of a crime scene.
5. Protection of survivors from media.

1. GENERAL DAY-TO-DAY MANAGEMENT OF ACCESS

The main instrument used by the authorities to manage day-to-day access was the roadblock. Some of these were in place quickly. According to Robert Manne in an article in *The Monthly* (July 2009) some had been set up during Black Saturday itself in areas that were in the line of fire, well before the fire arrived. These appear to have been erected in anticipation of danger. From this research, it also became evident that other roadblocks were also in place quickly. For example, respondents working in the Yarra Valley said there was a roadblock on the Melba Highway at Macintyres Lane, near Yarra Glen, during the afternoon of Black Saturday to prevent people going into a threatened area. They noted later that it had been removed, but that it was back in the early hours of Sunday morning to keep people out after the fire had gone through. Roadblocks were also erected around Kinglake and Marysville early on Sunday morning (8 February), and respondents who got into those places that day did so by helicopter before the air-exclusion zone was imposed.

Manne has suggested that roadblocks on the Kinglake-Whittlesea road on Black Saturday hemmed some people in and condemned them to death. He raised questions about the purpose of the roadblocks and the quality of the official knowledge on which they were based. These are issues for the Bushfire Royal Commission to determine. However, they raise questions about the intent and purpose behind the use of roadblocks, which are relevant to this research.

For many media people, the existence of a roadblock was perceived as a challenge, thrown down by the authorities, to test their mettle and ingenuity. For these media people, finding a way to circumvent a roadblock was "fair game". However, there was a wide range of responses to the ethical issues that arose in this "game":

- For some, directly attempting to run through a roadblock was considered going too far, and was certain to end in arrest. So on pragmatic if not ethical grounds, running a roadblock was out.
- For many, finding a way in that was not blocked was considered not only ethically justifiable but positively required by the countervailing ethical consideration of doing one's duty to the public. Some media people went to extraordinary lengths to do this, walking long distances through fire-blackened terrain; driving for hours on forest tracks and back roads, often in vain.
- Getting past a roadblock by being mistaken for someone else -- a fire-fighter, for example -- without deliberately attempting to disguise oneself, was considered to be ethically justified by those who chanced to have done it.
- Getting past by deliberately disguising oneself -- as a resident or volunteer, for example -- was also ethically justifiable for some.
- For others, any form of deliberate --as opposed to fortuitous -- deception was utterly unjustified, even when friendly residents with right of access were willing to help.
- For a few, a roadblock was a lawful sign that the area closed off was not to be entered. As such, it was to be respected and any attempt to circumvent it was unethical.

This wide range of attitudes demonstrates that there is no consensus among media people about the correct ethical response to roadblocks at a disaster scene.

In general, though, media people tended to place a higher value on successfully meeting the competitive pressures under which they work, and on carrying out what they saw as their duty to inform the public, than on the countervailing ethical duty to respect the law.

Their resolve was strengthened as their perceptions that the roadblocks were being managed in an inconsistent and arbitrary way grew, and that the authorities had ulterior motives for keeping the media out.

Many media people came to disbelieve the authorities' assessments about safety, because they saw emergency services personnel and other people going in and out. Media people -- especially those who had done the CFA training -- said that if it was safe enough for those people, it was safe enough for them.

Some also came to disbelieve that the authorities were serious about preserving the integrity of a crime scene, again because they saw people -- including celebrities and politicians -- coming and going frequently. When the politicians and celebrities turned up, suddenly the authorities allowed the media to go in too. At this point, the "crime scene" line lost all credibility.

So the media became sceptical, not to say cynical, about two of the most important reasons for erecting roadblocks in the first place -- safety, and preservation of a crime scene. Instead, they came to see the roadblocks as a way of controlling the flow of information, and as part of a misguided attempt to protect the survivors from the media. They regarded these motives as wrong in principle.

This perception created an ethical dilemma for the journalists: should they obey the roadblock, respecting not just its legal standing in the place where it had been set up but its symbolic legitimacy, or should they try to circumvent it in the interests of fulfilling their mission to the public?

It was instructive that the second journalist quoted above, in importing the ethical dimension into the discussion, proceeded from the assumption that he would be acting professionally and producing honest material, and it was this that justified him in circumventing the roadblock. He took it for granted that in doing so he was acting professionally, and that in being an agent through which information came out, he was fulfilling his ethical duty and contributing to the public good.

This is a vivid illustration of the state of mind many journalists bring to their work. They genuinely believe that they are acting honourably and for the greater good. For a person in this state of mind, those who seek to hinder them are hindering the greater good. It is important to understand the sincerity with which this attitude is held, and its importance as a driver in some of the best journalistic work.

Good journalists do have a strong public service ethic. What this research suggests is that they sometimes lack is the training and capacity to weigh it against other considerations.

However, the media drew the line at attempting to run through a roadblock:

It wasn't like if the police are not looking I want you to run as fast as you can and get through. It was, they've blocked this road off: let's find another road to tell the story, to find what's going on.

*

We tried to get into Marysville the long way through Mt Donna Buang but there was an unmanned roadblock saying "road closed". We drove round that but eventually there was a police car, and you can try to run round that but they'll give chase and collar you and then you're in deep crap.

For some, the very existence of a roadblock was a challenge to be confronted:

Marysville had been closed down fairly well by the Monday. As soon as the police had closed it down, there was the challenge, there's the gauntlet: get into Marysville.

Inconsistency and apparent arbitrariness in the way the authorities enforced the roadblocks provided another ground for circumvention, particularly when it looked as if safety was being used as an excuse to keep the media out: For some, the very existence of a roadblock was a challenge to be confronted:

Q: Were the authorities reasonable in giving you access to those areas, or were they not reasonable?

Some were and some weren't. It depended on the areas. We had trouble down in Gippsland getting access to fires. Other stations seemed to be able to do it without too much trouble.

Q: Where you ran into trouble, what was your position?

If we could find a way in, we should take it.

*

There were places where the CFA controller said the media can go in, and the police said no; and vice-versa. The police have admitted there was a problem.

*

When you've got people going through – locals and so forth -- because the police believe it's safe for them to through, but not safe for you, then you do have to question it.

*

And Channel Nine were flying in once a day. They were landing their helicopter at Kinglake every day. I don't know how that happened.

*

We've had discussions with the authorities afterwards and I have attacked them for the way they went about their business. My view is that the reaction by the police and the other authorities in the roadblocks were not necessarily about safety. I think the police and the authorities, once the fires had gone through, were operating in those areas quite safely, and we could have too.

*

CFA and SES almost always were helpful. Police were very obstructionist – didn't want us anywhere; didn't want us to do our job; didn't see us as being an important part of what was being done. The coroner imposed these no-go zones, and if you operated in there you were in danger of being arrested, so that caused tremendous issues for the coverage.

I didn't want to get arrested because, to be completely truthful, it's a bad look for the paper, because people always assume you're doing the wrong thing. So I worked pretty hard to not get arrested, but that doesn't mean I didn't go in places that police probably would have preferred I wasn't there – but there are ways and means of doing things, and if it meant walking in then that's what we did.

Some media people came to the bushfires with a scepticism born of previous experiences with the authorities:

We did the fires up in Bright about six years ago. It was an absolutely circus for the media. They were corralled. They were taken out to a special plantation where a burn-off was conducted for them to get their pictures, and it was just a circus. They just did a back-burn, said, "You can shoot this stuff, you can't go any further."

The roadblocks also gave rise to some scepticism about the value of doing the CFA media accreditation course:

At times the CFA were quite obstructive. We have CFA accreditation and have had training to go to a fire ground, and they were telling us we couldn't. So we felt angry, because what was the point of all this training?

*

You have to report to a reporting station, and they round you up like a bunch of sheep and lock you away, whereas in the past we'd go and get our own stuff. They consider that to be too dangerous, despite the fact that we have training. We've gone through the CFA protocols.

Q: Does that mean you go looking for ways to circumvent it?

Yes we do, because we're frustrated. We went round the back of a fire at Ballarat. We weren't stopped at roadblocks. We were possibly identified as CFA people with our overalls and everything, and they just waved us through. The fire had been through, and it wasn't dangerous.

Wearing the CFA turn-out gear, consisting of yellow trousers, yellow jacket with "media" on the back, and a blue helmet, proved an unexpected boon at roadblocks for a few media people, where the overworked police saw the yellow jacket and simply waved them through, sometimes in mildly comical circumstances:

I had my yellow turn-out gear on, including the jacket with “media” across the back, but you can’t see that when you’re sitting in a car. I approached the roadblock and they just waved me straight through.

As I drove by, one of the policemen yelled out to me: “Someone steal your effing fire truck?” because I was in my Land Rover. I just kept going.

*

We happened to fall in behind a convoy of about 25 CFA vehicles and because we had our yellow fire clothing on, the police waved us through their roadblock and we just followed them all the way up to the fire.

Some media people, however, accepted that a roadblock was a symbolic as well as a physical expression of closure, applying with equal legitimacy on all routes in, even where there was no physical barrier.

Media people who took this approach tried to see the matter from the authorities’ standpoint as well as their own, and respected the fact that the authorities had a job to do. They were inclined to accept that there were risks to personal safety in going into the fire grounds and that the roadblocks were there to prevent unnecessary casualties. They also tended to take the view that no cover-up was being attempted. In arriving at this assessment, they took into account the availability of information from the authorities and their general demeanour towards the media, which they considered reasonable in the circumstances.

Some media people who said that they had been critical of the authorities at the time, were later prepared to concede that they were probably just doing their job. A senior news executive said that instructions were given to those in the field on how to deal with the authorities:

One thing I did say was, “Follow all directives. And if you think somebody is being officious and not letting you into an area for no good reason, refer up.” I don’t remember there being any particular issue with the way the authorities handled it. There was no sense that they were trying to cover up or be overly zealous in keeping media out of areas.

*

The instructions were to get into where they could. Roadblocks made things difficult. A few times you’d get stuff from the radio an hour or two before you’d get it from the CFA or DSE. I never got to the stage where information coming from the CFA or DSE pissed me off. I was always appreciative of the fact that they were under enormous strain, and I thought that generally the information they gave us was pretty good.

I don’t think anybody did breach any roadblocks. A few of them tried alternative routes but found pretty quickly they weren’t going to get anywhere. And [the instruction was] pretty much do as the CFA and DSE asked us. They were running the show. We couldn’t impede their job.

*

A lot of us would have liked earlier access and more access. I think it was getting towards Sunday or Monday of the following week before we were getting anywhere near Marysville. But how can you argue? They could have maybe been a bit more open in their access, quicker in their access. But who am I to comment? They’ve got a job to do.

*

Probably in hindsight they had a job to do and that’s what they were doing. In the heat of the moment it can seem not fair.

*

Some were appreciative of the efforts, especially by the police, to assist the media where they could, and believed the authorities to have been pragmatic about media presence in fire-affected areas in the immediate aftermath:

I found if you engaged with the police liaison officers at the staging posts, buttered up to them, really, you were likely to get a favourable response and be taken up in their car or in a small controlled convoy or at least get something from them that would help you.

In the early couple of days, I got the sense that had I been caught on private land or somewhere I shouldn't have been, the police would have only escorted me back out again. There was none of this being arrested, cautioned and detained for several hours, which did start to happen as the week progressed.

Those media who choose to, or had to, or were ordered to stick to the official channels still needed something. And the police finally came to realise that. So they began to engineer convoys and set-ups for us to get pictures in circumstances where they could control us.

*

The furthest I remember us pushing anything was one particular area that was affected by the bushfires and a cluster of two or three towns -- not Marysville -- that was constantly roadblocked, and to be honest we thought unreasonably so, and there were one or two tracks that we knew of that we could get up and get into. And the worst thing that happened was that a police patrol discovered a crew of ours in there and escorted us out. And once they'd done that, we didn't go back.

*

The police had passed us once and said, "Get what you can and get out of here." They were unsure what was going on. It was first thing Sunday morning. We were the first people to witness all this stuff [in Marysville].

Many journalists were conscious of the competitive pressures under which they and their colleagues worked, and one reflected on the different ways in which individual journalists responded to those pressures, especially when they were being denied access. One respondent also noted the absence of agreed ethical standards, and expressed support for police-supervised tours, implying that their presence might have prevented any untoward behaviour by the media:

At all times there was this driving sense of competition that others were doing it themselves, either by helicopter and getting away with it, or individual photographers or journos risking their lives going to a fire area having gone through private land.

Q: Is there a better way of managing this?

Not really. And I'd say to any journalist, "Do what you have to do." We can't possibly wait for the authorities to say, "Here's your hourly update".

You can't expect the police or CFA media liaison officers to have all the answers on day one, which fuelled the need for you to go and do your own thing, to find your own story.

*

[The] journos and photographers converged for a night at the pub. A lot of them had spent a lot of time trying to get into places they weren't supposed to be, which is something I would not have done. I realised there was no cohesive policy about what you do and don't do. It's very much left to the journalist with their own set of morals and their own set of ethics and their own compass.

There are times when it might be legitimate to get into places where you're not supposed to be, but in this case it was more just a sort of competition thing.

There was one day when we went into Flowerdale as part of a police media tour. We got put on a bus and taken around, because they were aware that we were under pressure to get images and stories, so they tried to facilitate that, which I think was actually good. People could go in for an hour or two, get what they needed, come out, and the police were there keeping an eye on what everyone was doing, which in some situations was probably quite good.

Another respondent spoke of the pressure the media placed on CFA personnel during the tours:

I felt a few times, especially on convoys, people were putting unnecessary pressure on the CFA, who had a whole world of pressure on them already, just to get what they needed. There's a balance there, but some of them went too far. And I guess you're implicated in that because you're all in the same car.

It was normally trying to persuade whoever was driving you to go in a certain direction or follow that piece of smoke or go where that helicopter is. And they [the CFA] have to make a decision about safety and that kind of stuff.

Q: How did the CFA people react?

Pretty good. Most of them were fairly stern, weathered, well-experienced people who just said, "No. Shut up. No chance." It was just a safety thing. They were very onto it with their safety procedures, which was good.

2. DECEPTION BY MEDIA

The familiar combination of competitive pressures and lack of agreed ethical standards was also illustrated by the fact that, while some media people absolutely refused to indulge in deception in order to obtain access, others actively engaged in it or attempted it.

Some media people benefited from being dressed in CFA turn-out gear and were waved through police roadblocks in scenes reminiscent of the ABC TV satirical show *The Chaser*. These media people made no overt attempt to deceive the police; neither did they go out of their way to let the police know who they were. No respondent considered this to be a breach of ethics: it was purely fortuitous.

However, on the question of whether journalists should deliberately conceal their identity or masquerade as someone other than a journalist, there was a range of attitudes:

- Some took the view that deception was wrong, and refused to attempt it even when they were offered help to do so by residents.
- Others tried to get the help of residents by asking to ride into the scene in the back of their cars. Some succeeded in this; others failed.
- Some journalists attempted to obtain access by pretending to be volunteers.
- Once inside, some concealed from the authorities the fact that they were journalists.

Part of the justification given for this behaviour was that the bolder elements of the media, notably television crews in helicopters, seemed to be getting away with fly-in, fly-out incursions, placing other journalists at a competitive disadvantage. So again, inconsistency of enforcement provided a justification for some media people to do whatever it took to get in.

Another justification was based on the view that the duty to get information overrode all other considerations. Quite where this “duty” shaded into the competitive ethos was not easy to discern, but the sense of duty should not be lightly set aside.

Some were offered the opportunity to masquerade as residents in order to obtain access, particularly to Kinglake and Marysville, but immediately declined:

I had met somebody who lived in Kinglake and liked my reports [generally, not about the fires] and he had been going to get me up to Kinglake earlier in the day away from the police. That was the day they were giving out the residents' wrist bands so they could get up and back. And he was going to lie and get us bands, and as soon as I realised what was happening, I said no, no. We're not doing that. I'm not claiming that I'm a member of the public.

I don't mind attempting to get up the back way. That's fair game. If we get stopped, that's fine. But I'm not going to cross that line and pretend to be somebody that I'm not.

Others did masquerade as residents, or tried to:

Q: You didn't attempt to get in other than with police escorts?

Yes, I did. But I didn't really succeed. The police basically had every road and track sealed off. It was in part driven just by the classic competition among the media.

I heard of one journalist getting into Marysville on the Monday by persuading a resident to take them and pretend he was a relative, and I think that's a pretty fair thing to do. A lot of journalists were doing it. I was asking the question of people in Whittlesea: “Can we jump in your car to go up the hill?” Residents had the right to go up the hill regardless of the police action.

Q: What was their reaction?

The first couple were just so frazzled they didn't know whether they were going to go back up the hill. Others were very welcoming, saying, “Sure, jump in.”

Q: Did you get a ride with a resident?

No, not in the end, largely because the numbers were overwhelming and the police were just not letting anybody up, even residents.

I tried to get into one of the convoys taking supplies up knowing I would have to masquerade as a volunteer, but they wouldn't let me on.

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The pressure I felt was from the authorities up there, from the cops mainly. You had to have a wrist band to prove you were a resident, to get up the mountain. We obviously didn't and a couple of times we concealed from the cops who we were.

There was one time we were on someone's property, with their permission, talking about what had happened to them. We were standing in their farm shed, and a couple of police vehicles came up the driveway with the forensic people, and we just hid the cameras and pretended we were someone other than who we were. But that was okay because I wasn't getting any information from them.

They would have kicked us out. We certainly weren't supposed to be up the mountain.

Note that this journalist took into consideration the fact that information was not being obtained from the deceived people (the police) and that that made a difference to the ethical position.

Deception by some journalists rebounded on their colleagues:

On one escorted trip down to Narbathong, we got halfway down with the CFA and we got to a police roadblock and he was furious with the whole thing because someone from the media earlier in the day had got in with fake passes. That's a great example of where different people choose to draw their lines, the lengths people would go to. So no one else was allowed through for a couple of hours.

3. BALANCING MEDIA'S AND SURVIVORS' INTERESTS

One issue to arise during the aftermath of the fires was the priority to be accorded to the media and to survivors in obtaining access to the places that had been damaged or destroyed.

Faced with this question, some media people stated that the survivors had a prior right because it was, after all, their property and their community. Some in the media who took this view drew an analogy with the right of people to hear first from the authorities about the death of someone close: if people had a right to hear this first, they also had a right to go back to their property first.

Others asserted that the media were serving a wider public interest by telling the story to the world and that they were therefore justified in getting in first. Some who initially took this view came to revise it in the course of the interview as they thought more about the feelings of the survivors.

Others pointed out the difference, from the authorities' point of view, between managing media access and survivor access. These people said that the media could be escorted in, given a relatively short period to get their material, and then be escorted out, whereas it would be difficult to do this with survivors, who might want to spend quite a long time in the ruins of their homes, grieving and trying to retrieve mementoes. On this basis, these people said it was justifiable to take the media in first, since they could get the story out to the wider world after obtaining access in a managed and contained way.

One view was that access was an all-or-nothing question. If the place was unsafe or a crime scene, no one but the authorities should be allowed in. If it was neither, everyone should be allowed in, with the police there to keep order in the usual way.

Further ethical issues arose about the use of private property as a venue to allow media to report on the authorities at work. This was seen by some media as compromising the rights of the survivors.

Yet more ethical issues arose for journalists in deciding whether to go on to private property once they were inside the scene. Again there was a range of positions:

- Some stayed out of private property altogether. They confined themselves to the streets or to the ruins of public buildings such as schools.
- Some went inside the boundaries of private property but not near the ruins of houses.
- Some went up to the ruins but did not go into them or touch them or look closely into them.
- Some went into the front yard but not around the back.
- There was one view that in a practical sense private property had temporarily ceased to exist because there was no way of distinguishing one thing from another, and nothing of substance remained.
- Others applied the standard rule of trespass: you go on private property until asked by the occupant to leave. The fact that there was no occupant was not perceived to invalidate this rule nor render it irrelevant.
- Some who were taken into the scene by a resident regarded it as proxy permission, as it were, when the resident took them up someone else's driveway, on the basis that the resident knew the occupant.

I think they [the residents] should [be there first]. It's their property; it's their livelihood. I'd like to be there while it's happening or shortly after. There probably are times when the media have gone on the bus into the areas before the residents have got back. I don't subscribe to it.

I have no problem with the media being there with the residents, but if residents are being refused access . . . I suppose for the police or controlling authorities, you have many hundreds of affected people. How could they let them back in, in a controlled manner? I think in Marysville they took them on bus tours, and they did get in before the media did.

I don't think the media have a right to access somebody else's property or to trawl over someone else's pain at a site like that before the people involved are.

Some respondents initially stated that the media had a prior right of access, based on the premise that they had a job to do that was serving the wider public interest. However, it was not uncommon for them to change their view as the conversation proceeded and they considered more deeply the feelings of the residents:

I think if you're a member of the public and you want to go back, you're going to want to be there for a lot longer. Whereas the media: you could let them in for maybe half an hour and get them back out, and you can control them. You can't really control grieving people. So there are different considerations.

But of course it doesn't look right that the media get to look around before these people do. On a straightforward ethical point, I suppose, no. I suppose you should let the people go back. Nobody likes to hear about a death through the media. So should you really be learning of the level of destruction of your property through the media? Shouldn't you get a bit of a chance to come to terms with that first?

A second aspect of the question concerning the rights of media and residents arose in relation to the information being given out. One respondent stated that it became clear that the authorities were not being completely frank with the displaced survivors about what had happened to their town, yet were briefing the media on the true state of affairs. As a result, people were getting information through the media that they expected to get from the authorities:

There were community meetings being held every day to brief the locals on what was happening, and I was attending those meetings. People were obviously very upset and distressed and they were questioning the CFA and department and the police about “is there anything left?” And there was a reluctance, I guess, in those first 24 to 36 hours, for them to say, “It’s all gone, there’s nothing left”, and people were getting very frustrated and angry because they wanted to know.

And then what was happening was that after the meetings they [the authorities] were telling me and other journalists that in fact that was the case – so there was a bit of a disconnect between what people were being told in community meetings and then what they were reading in the paper the next day, or what they were hearing on the ABC, and that certainly created a lot of upset.

Some members of the media perceived that although their job was to feed information to the general public, the survivors had a right to be given this information earlier than others.

A third aspect concerned the use by the police of a destroyed home site as the venue for demonstrating to the media the work of the Disaster Victim Identification unit. It was obvious from the respondent’s description of the police briefing that this was being done without the knowledge or consent of the surviving owners, and indeed that has been independently verified by the researchers.

We were escorted into Steels Creek with the Disaster Victim Identification team. It was just a media pool: one photographer, one reporter, one TV, one wire service, and so on. The police arranged it and escorted us. It was a very well-contained scenario. At this house we were taken to, we were given boundaries within which to act and to operate: distance from the house; certain perspectives of the house that we were not allowed to film.

The police on site said that the surviving family members did not yet know that their relatives may have died, and by publishing anything that would identify their property we would have pre-empted the appropriate police action in informing them.

The photos we took didn’t breach the guidelines we’d been given, [but] we couldn’t actually do the job completely without getting at least some images and perspectives of the house that would have identified it. You’d have known it was your property if you’d seen the photos.

The family found out when they saw the images on the internet.

A fourth question arose over reporters going onto private property without the knowledge or consent of the owners:

Q: Say you got access. Say that next time the authorities say you can go in but you have to stay on public ground, as if the properties were still standing.

Unless you’re invited in by the owners? I’d wear that.

Media people who got past police roadblocks had to make their own decisions about whether to step onto private property in the absence of the owners. Some did, invoking the rule-of-thumb that you are not trespassing until you are asked by a property owner to leave. The absence of the owner did not invalidate this rule-of-thumb.

There was some unease over this, a recognition that it was a difficult distinction, and the respondents who did go onto private property stated that they did not go looking into the burnt buildings and contented themselves with external

observations of the general scene. They did so partly to minimise the intrusion and partly to spare themselves the risk of seeing something horrible:

Most of the other shots I had been able to get from the roadside. The farmhouse with the two big chimneys was private property. If there's a house in suburbia and I attend, you're on somebody's property until requested otherwise.

*

I remember, for example, when it was thought Brian Naylor might have died at his property. We had issues when we got some vision back from his property and there was the police tape, and issues about where we could film. We concerned ourselves about whether we would only film properties from the road or whether we could walk in.

Q; What was your decision about that?

The law says it's not trespass until you're asked to leave. So legally we could walk in until someone asked us to leave. Clearly a lot of people weren't in any position to ask us to leave because they'd fled, or worse. But our theory was, we could accurately portray the devastation from public areas like roads and footpaths and the air, and so we confined ourselves to that, for reasons of decency more than anything else.

The type of property and its pre-existing state were relevant considerations for one reporter, who went into the grounds of the Murrindindi mill, where one of the fires started, on the basis that it was an industrial, not a residential, property and was understood by the respondent to have been closed for some time. It was therefore not likely to harbour people's private material.

Others made a conscious decision not to go on private property, although exactly where to draw the line was still not quite clear:

If people were on the property, I would ask them. If they weren't, I would go on and take the photos but not go through their things. Generally from the gate.

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We wandered around the school and then down the main street. We certainly would not have gone on to someone's property – or step into their house, I guess. The rule is that you can go and knock on someone's door and if they invite you to stay, you stay, and if not you go back on to the footpath. If someone's house is on fire, you don't go round to the back yard without their consent. At Marysville the vision was so confronting from wherever you stood, there was no need to go there [on private property].

But whether it was or it wasn't, I would not have gone there anyway. I would have done it from the footpath.

So this respondent drew a distinction between being inside the boundary of a property and being in the house or what was left of it, even though, as it happened, he remained on the footpath.

Another stated that he was accompanied by a person who in turn knew the property owners, which he indicated he took as a kind of surrogate permission; and in any case the sense of property had itself been consumed:

It didn't ever strike me as an issue, because I was being chaperoned by a local who generally knew whose driveway he was driving up. And really in the town itself there were no driveways. There was no sense of anything belonging to anyone.

Another respondent applied a simple rule:

I didn't go onto anybody's property without asking them.

Where occupants were present, the normal rules applied:

I noticed this house a few hundred metres away unburnt. And I said, "We have to get there. There might be people we can interview."

We had a discussion about how to get there and I said, "Look, we have to go down the road and come up the driveway. Go in the front door rather than the back door." It was closer to cut across the paddock but I said we had to do it this way because we can get there safely and it's going to go down better with them if we do it this way.

It was also the right thing to do professionally, given we weren't cops or emergency people, to go up the driveway.

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They [the CFA] drove on to this farmer's property and we followed, approached the farmer, identified ourselves, said what we wanted to do, got his perspective and he gave us free rein on their land to get as close as we wanted.

4. MANAGEMENT OF A CRIME SCENE

Large areas affected by the fires were declared to be crime scenes, the purpose of which was to preserve their integrity in the interests of the administration of justice.

More or less all media people expressed respect for this notion in principle, but many also expressed scepticism bordering on cynicism about what they came to see as the use of this by the police as a tactic to keep the media out.

Their criticism of this was allied to their criticism of the authorities for inconsistency in the way the roadblocks were managed, only on this subject they went further and accused the authorities of double standards: one for celebrities, politicians and residents, and another for the media.

One consequence was a dilution among the media of respect for the principle of protecting the integrity of crime scenes, unless they were convinced that it genuinely was a crime scene and that access rules were enforced alike upon all who wanted to go in.

At the same time, no media person interviewed suspected that the authorities were attempting to cover up anything, and some expressed an understanding that, like everyone else, the authorities were confronting a situation for which no one was fully prepared.

What they did suspect was that the authorities were using the “crime scene” line to control the flow of information and access to people, and they lost faith in it completely when politicians and celebrities were allowed in – with large teams of media who, to that point, had been kept out.

This created an acute ethical dilemma for the media. Should they continue to respect the integrity of a crime scene, or should they make their own assessment of its genuineness and then act on that assessment? The dilemma was acute because many media people fundamentally did not want to disturb a genuine crime scene, and they had insufficient knowledge to make an informed assessment. On the other hand, people were coming and going, handing over boxes of provisions at the roadblock to people encamped in the crime scene. Why should they not go in and report what was happening?

They said Gippsland and Marysville were crime scenes and they needed to protect crime-scene integrity. But people who survived at Marysville, who’d never left, were living in the crime scene.

And we have pictures of relatives of people at Marysville coming to the roadblocks, handing over boxes of provisions to the people still living in the crime scene.

Secondly, politicians troop through. We had to go with Brumby. We just couldn’t go in and do our own thing, which is an impediment. High-profile sportsmen went into the crime scene.

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Of course the body-recovery had to go on, so the Coroner’s Act kicks in. And I accept that the Coroner’s Act gives the police, acting for the Coroner, fairly wide-sweeping powers.

But I think it was wrong that they kept us out so long, particularly when they walked politicians and sportsmen and -women through. There’s a double standard.

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The police were trying to claim it as a crime scene. That was a tactic of theirs to manage the situation.

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Q: What was motivating the police?

Part of it was the fear that it was arson and they wanted to treat it all as a crime scene.

Q: There was no covering up going on here?

No. The authorities were very generous with information. At the same time, the emergency authorities didn’t know how to handle the situation either. We were all being confronted with something we’d never seen before.

5. PROTECTING SURVIVORS FROM THE MEDIA

Some of the media people interviewed stated that the authorities took it on themselves to protect survivors from the media. The general view among these media people was that in taking on this protective function, the authorities were both wrong and misguided: wrong because it was not their place to make decisions on behalf of survivors

regarding whether they should talk to the media; misguided because in fact many survivors – especially in the first 48 hours – wanted to tell their story and appeared to find it cathartic to do so.

Media people generally stated that even in the first 48 hours, when they were in shock, survivors were able to say yes or no to media approaches. Media people also said that they respected the survivors' wishes and did not press them.

Many media people said that most of the intrusiveness that they saw occurred at relief centres, and not inside the disaster scenes.

Some complained that relief-centre staff were over-zealous, even rude and unreasonable, in trying to protect survivors.

One way in which media people thought it was constructive and legitimate to assist survivors who wanted protection from the media was to set up media-free zones, as was done after a couple of days. Individuals could then make a choice and avail themselves of the media-free zones if they did not wish to be approached.

In places where these were eventually set up, media people said they respected them because they took the view that by going into these areas, people were declaring that they did not wish to be approached.

Otherwise, the general approach was to ask a survivor if they wanted to talk, and if they said no, that was the end of the matter.

There are certain people in these circumstances who feel the need to speak, who want to speak. I think there's a cathartic thing in it. Some people approach it from the point of view that others need to know. And they're looking to you to tell everybody how bad it is here. You've got to tell them we need water. So they look to you as a means to get their message out.

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We identified ourselves quite clearly. We said there is no pressure. If you don't want us, we will go away and that's fine. And they said, "No, no. We want to tell you what happened." They wanted to have someone to talk to. No one else had really spoken to them. They just wanted to blurt out to us. I only asked about three questions.

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I've come across situations where people find it cathartic and they want to tell their story. In the bushfires our reporters came across people who wanted to get their story out. The assumption is they don't want to, but that's not true. The assumption is that the media are intrusive, but human nature being what it is, it's not.

One or two journalists went so far as to liken the authorities' actions to censorship:

The police were dealing with these communities, and I accept that they were damaged communities, and fragile. And we had people at Kinglake and so on saying, "We don't want the media in". But behind the scenes we were taking calls from these people saying, "Can we get the roadblocks released? We want to get [the media] in".

As long as the media are not committing a crime, I don't believe the police should have kept the media out, just to serve the ends of those fragile communities.

Q: What do you think the interests of the fragile communities were that the police thought they were protecting?

Media voyeurism.

Q: And would it be your view that the media were not being voyeuristic?

No. [They were not.]

Q: Were the police under pressure, do you think, from the communities, to keep the media out?

Probably. Or they just made the decision.

What annoys me about government and authority and the media is that everybody wants to control the media. It's about controlling the information. We have an inferred power. They don't like it. I don't think they understand what a robust media means.

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I think the truth is, they had decided they would play a role in keeping the media out of areas where they believed there were traumatised people who didn't want to talk to the media.

I've heard people within emergency services say this. It was said at a conference I attended. And that's not their decision to make. That's a decision for the people who were impacted on by the fires, and they were making that decision when we asked them every day. Some were saying yes and some were saying no.

Q: So you've spoken your piece at this conference. What was the reaction?

Oh, they don't see it. I think there's still an element of people in the emergency services who feel that part of their role is to protect victims from the media, as well as from whatever happened. I guess that's okay in some respects, but I just don't think it's the right thing to do. I think it's a form of censorship.

However, journalists appeared to believe that it was constructive and legitimate to assist survivors who wanted protection from the media by setting up media-free zones, as was done after a couple of days:

After a couple of days they had an area that was media-free. So if people were feeling a bit harangued, they could go in there. That made a lot of sense and probably should have been there from day one.

And they had the head of the Salvation Army or someone come and talk to you, so you didn't have to go and pester everybody.

CONCLUSIONS

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: the media operate under competitive pressures and under pressures induced by the necessity to perform their function of informing the public; the authorities operate under the multifarious pressures of responding to the harm and damage caused by disaster, and of managing the incessant demands of the media.

In these conditions it is not surprising that compromises and errors of judgment are made, inconsistencies abound, blind eyes are turned, ethical lapses occur 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.

In addition to the pressures induced by the disaster itself, there are pre-existing pressures built in to the relationship between the media and the authorities. In a mature democracy such as Australia, where the institutional roles of media and executive government are well-established, tensions between the two are also well-established.

The media, in fulfilling two of its core functions – informing the public and being a watchdog on power – is acculturated to suspecting that the executive always wants to obstruct and censor the flow of information. The executive is acculturated to controlling information and to suspecting the media of being unreliable in the ways in which it uses access. In the case of the bushfires, there evidently was another suspicion: that the media would harm survivors by exploiting them at a time when they were highly vulnerable.

These tensions were evident in the relations between the media and the authorities at the fire ground. The way they played out came up many times in the course of this research. To complicate matters, journalists presented a wide range of attitudes to the many ethical questions that arose over access, indicating a disquieting lack of professional consensus about the norms of media behaviour in situations like this. These absences of agreed principles, both within the profession and between the profession and the authorities, represent a significant challenge if the mistakes and frustrations generated at the bushfire scenes are to be minimised in the future.

One purpose of this paper is to help bring about a more open and settled decision-making environment for the handling of media access to future disasters.

Concerning media access, the key ethical issues to be resolved would seem to be these:

1. For what purposes should roadblocks be established?
2. Given these purposes, what should be the norms of journalistic behaviour in response to the creation of roadblocks?
3. What are the relevant considerations for journalists to take into account when striking a balance between complying with roadblocks and discharging their duties to the public?
4. Is there any justification for authorities to use roadblocks to “protect” survivors from the media?
5. What measures, if any, ought the authorities take in order to offer survivors the opportunity to be shielded from the media?
6. What should be the norms of journalistic behaviour in response to these measures?
7. What are the relevant considerations for journalists to take into account when striking a balance between respecting agreed protective measures offered to survivors to be shielded from the media, and discharging their duties to the public?
8. What are the relevant considerations for journalists and authorities to take into account when balancing the interests of the survivors against the interests of the media in obtaining access to the disaster scene?
9. Once inside the roadblocks, what should be the norms of journalistic behaviour concerning access to private property?
10. What prior consents, if any, should be obtained from property owners before media are allowed on to their property?
11. What should be the norms of journalistic behaviour concerning deception in getting past roadblocks and in concealing their identity from the authorities once inside?
12. What should be the norms of journalistic behaviour in response to the designation of an area as a crime scene? Do the norms change if the integrity of the crime scene appears to have been breached? On what basis might this assessment be made?

These are concrete ethical questions to which the media’s codes of ethics give only the most abstract – and sometimes ambiguous – attention. In-house codes, such as the ABC’s Editorial Policies, state that fairness and honesty are core values that should inform all editorial practice. There are similar sentiments in News Ltd’s code.

The Australian Press Council’s Statement of Principles states that there should be respect for the privacy and sensibilities of individuals, and that news obtained by dishonest or unfair means should not be published unless there is an over-riding public interest. There is no guidance about what this might look like.

The most widely recognised code, that of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, states that media people should use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material, including identifying oneself and one's employer, and not exploiting a person's vulnerability. It also states that private grief and personal privacy should be respected.

These are common to codes of ethics around the Western world. A major difficulty, however, is in translating their abstractions into concrete guidance rules so that a broadly consensual set of standards is adopted by media people generally.

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".³

This relativistic setting does an injustice to those journalists who make principled ethical decisions in good faith, sometimes under severe pressure. Many of the journalists who covered the 2009 Victorian bushfires did make principled ethical decisions, sometimes in the face of pressure from their competitors and sometimes in the face of pressure from their superiors. Leaving journalists in this relativist jungle without a better professional compass ill-serves them. It makes a tough job harder. It means that good decisions go unrecognised and bad ones are not named for what they are.

³ John L. Hulteng, *The Messenger's Motives: Ethical Problems of the News Media*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1985, p.8.

CHAPTER 2

TREATMENT OF SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS

Journalists who went to the fire ground and relief centres in the aftermath of the fires confronted myriad operational and ethical challenges for which they had received no formal preparation. They received no guidance from their employers about what was expected of them either by way of behaviour or of output. In this vacuum, they fell back on their humanity, their professional judgment and their own moral compasses.

The more experienced among them did this with the confidence born of long practice and hierarchical seniority. These journalists were able to absorb the psychological shock that comes of seeing devastated people and appalling destruction, leaving their minds clear to focus on the difficult decisions at hand. Their minds also were uncluttered by concerns about what their news desks would say or think. Their seniority gave them a kind of immunity. They had delivered in the past, and they were trusted to deliver now. If they decided not to do an interview, not to take an image or not to position themselves near vulnerable people, that was that.

However, the story was so big it could not be covered only by journalists with this kind of experience. Many reporters, photographers, camera operators and other media people who were sent to the scene had no experience of large-scale disasters. Most had been to road accidents or violent crime scenes, but some had not had even that much exposure to trauma. 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.

Many of these journalists spoke with a mixture of self-consciousness and quiet pride about how, with little experience and no instruction, they had treated the people with whom they dealt. There were times when some had suspended their professional roles altogether because they believed the needs of the human beings in front of them were more important than their work.

This has long been a difficult ethical issue for media people covering wars and disasters: do you put down the camera or the notebook and go to the aid of a person in distress, even if it means the event goes unreported? Or do you hew to your professional duty to report the news, even if it means the distressed person goes unaided? For some of these young journalists, it was – to borrow the phrase used by one of them – a “no-brainer”. Humanity came first; journalism second.

Allied to this was a phenomenon not unlike Stockholm Syndrome in which the media person, though not physically captive, places the interests of survivors and victims ahead of the interests of the media organisation. At the fire ground, this was not uncommon. 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.

Many respondents made decisions in the name of decency and humanity that trumped the imperatives of news-gathering. They said they had not shot that image, not stood next to that group of grieving people, not filed that particularly outrageous statement, because for one reason or another they judged it the right thing to do.

They were empowered to do so because they enjoyed the autonomy that comes from being on the ground and knowing what is really happening here and now. To this extent, news desks were in their hands, and over the long haul there was a kind of trade-off: you deliver us good copy and we will leave you alone. This is a double-edged sword, of course. Put another way, it could say: you deliver us good copy and we won't be too squeamish about how you got it. How this autonomy is used, therefore, is ultimately a matter for the individual on the ground. The evidence from this research is that, at the bushfires, the autonomy was more often exercised for good than for ill.

It is in the nature of these interactions 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 – of asylum-seekers, of wayward footballers, of people from certain faiths. By their own hand, they have also 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.

Of course there were scenes like this from the fire ground, especially when the politicians and celebrities turned up. There were also instances of gross on-camera intrusion, on one particular occasion when a couple, just re-united, were imprisoned during their moment of intimacy by a glinting ring of cameras. But all stereotypes are unjust and so is this one. The media do sometimes behave badly, hysterically and like a primaeval herd but, as this research shows, it is a small part of a much bigger and more complicated story in which media people often behave as one human being to another.

This chapter of the report examines five major aspects of the interaction between media people and survivors and victims:

1. The first approach
2. The first 48 hours, and afterwards
3. Intrusion
4. Vulnerability
5. The risk of betrayal

It also contains four case studies that illustrate:

- how media people sometimes put humanity ahead of journalism;
- how unpredictable traumatised people can be; and
- how ridiculous and misleading some media behaviour can be, and
- what it is like to be a journalist on the receiving end of media attention.

1. THE FIRST APPROACH

An issue that confronted every media person who went to the fire ground, as well as those back in the office responsible for the coverage, was how to approach survivors or victims, especially when it was obvious they were traumatised or in a state of shock.

The fact that the people were traumatised or in shock did not, on the whole, prevent media people from approaching them, although all respondents said they took a low-key approach, identifying themselves and then just asking in a general way if people wanted to tell them what had happened.

Sometimes they did not get even that far if it was obvious, from the atmosphere or the circumstances, that people were prepared to talk but not be interviewed. In these cases the encounter was considered by the media people to be of a social nature and not to be specifically reported, although a general description of the encounter might be included in a larger piece describing the community or the town.

The television respondents all said they did not approach a prospective interviewee with the cameras rolling, but sought consent first for an interview. If the interview was refused, it was considered that filming was also refused.

Some reporters and photographers said they left their notebooks and cameras in their vehicles and approached empty-handed to obtain consent. Others kept their equipment with them but did not use it until consent had been obtained.

A small number of respondents said they deliberately did not approach anyone who they thought looked severely traumatised when it seemed unnecessary to the story.

One reporter said that a lot of people changed their minds and withdrew consent part-way through the interview, in which case she had destroyed the notes and used nothing from that person. Changes of mind like this did not appear to have been common, however, among respondents as a whole.

For many of the media people who went to the fire ground, their common humanity exerted a significant influence on their behaviour and on the way in which they looked upon the people about whom they were reporting. Often this meant trying to give people a bit of time:

We only had an hour to garner all this stuff and try to do it sensitively as well: not running away the minute you have got the grab, but treating people with a little bit of respect. So you do a proper interview with them, and thank them.

*

I certainly didn't have my notebook out because I didn't think it was appropriate. It was more about just talking to people about how they were going, obviously introducing myself as a journalist first but not displaying any of the behaviour of one. Sometimes I didn't even ask for stuff.

For some people it became clear that it was more appropriate just to sit down and have a cup of tea or just do other things.

One of the most confronting things was a bloke who was living in a tent in the middle of the bush in the middle of all these burnt out trees. He was someone trying to get away from the world. When the fires came, he shot through, but he remade his tent campsite further into the bush, in amongst all this black.

They were the really fragile ones who you had to be really careful with. It was incredible to meet them and amazing to talk to them. They were lonely people and hiding out, so no one knew them, so it was just walking up and talking to them. I didn't get anything of use from them because they were the kind of people who are there because they want to escape.

*

We interviewed this couple who were digging through their house, and they were looking for their wedding rings.

[Another media organisation] was there too. We were asking them questions, and after a while the woman started to cry. I didn't think she was very well, but her husband kept answering questions and did not seem concerned that his partner was getting very upset. He seemed almost to enjoy being in the spotlight. And at a certain point I said, "I think they've had enough. I don't think we should be interviewing them any more", and [the other reporter] said, "Oh yeah, good call".

*

I certainly got increasing empathy with the people we were dealing with.

There is a lot of professional pride in covering something like that, and I suppose there is a sort of professional excitement about it. It's such a big event. If you work in news, you are drawn to that. But you have to remind yourself of the humanity. I've never really subscribed to the idea that there is a complete barrier, especially with the camera, that you are behind the lens.

As long as you maintain that empathy and humanity, there is nothing wrong with feeling pride in your work in the context of such horror.

*

I'm proud of how I dealt with people. I didn't take one photograph without permission of the people.

*

A lot of people, half way through the interview, would say, "I don't want to talk about it." And I would say, "Okay, fine." And I would scribble over my notes and screw them up and put them in the bin. I just felt it would have been wrong to use it. I didn't want to be a person who took advantage of somebody else.

And if at the end of the interview I felt they were sorry they had said something, I would say: "Are you happy with this? Is there anything you want to change?"

*

We were talking to a couple who, about six hours earlier, had watched their house burn to the ground. They were in an obvious state of shock. Obviously they were traumatised but we approached it along the lines of, "If you don't want to, you don't have to". And they, without any prompting, told us their story.

I met the couple at the royal commission hearing about three months later, and as we chatted they said, "Thanks for doing that article because it meant all our friends knew we were okay".

*

Some people would hold their hands up or turn away and I wouldn't press them. One youngish bloke I asked if he wanted to talk and he said he wanted to talk with his wife first, so I just talked to him for a while, not taking notes, and his wife didn't come back so I asked him again and he said, "Yeah, all right." He had another amazing story of escape.

I wanted to give him the photos we had of his house, so we went to where he was staying and having dinner with some mates. They gave us dinner and showed us all these photos. And it was a horrifying reflection on what had happened.

*

If a victim says they don't want to be interviewed, we ask them once and only once, and we'll walk away. There's always another story. There's always someone else to talk to.

*

If somebody doesn't want to talk then you respect that. You try and give them something that they can take out of the conversation that will maybe help them a little bit for a short period of time. I think there's a bit of a stereotype of journos going in and trawling through victims – I certainly did not do that.

*

Major bushfires have an impact on people for a range of reasons. They are ferocious. They're unpredictable. They're like an enemy that could be coming from any direction. And some people feel guilt that they weren't prepared properly or took risks, or left too late, or had the kids at the house, or they weren't listening to the news. So for all those reasons it's a cocktail, a fiery cocktail, psychologically.

*

It was very apparent to me that I was interviewing people who were medically in shock, and frankly probably shouldn't have been interviewed. But I did interview them, and I just made judgements about who I would speak to. I just stood and I would look at people and I would just try and determine who I thought might be able to handle an approach from a journalist. And nobody told me to nick off.

My approach was simply, "My name's I'm a journalist. If you don't want to talk to me I completely understand that and I'll go away."

The only other way to have gone would have been to not interview anyone, because I don't think there was anyone on that Sunday night, Monday, Tuesday, who wasn't traumatised to some degree.

I think the way I approached severely traumatised people I did as ethically and as humanely as I could, and that's something I pride myself on.

*

You could tell the very shell-shocked-looking people who had lost someone, but I didn't speak to anybody like that. I met one person who was damaged and I said [to the photographer], "I don't think we'll do this". She was very traumatised, and I felt that talking to her would have made it worse rather than better for her. And I didn't feel we needed to have that story.

Sometimes the distressed person approaches the media. The case study below illustrates this. It also illustrates how a media person did put the welfare of a survivor ahead of news-gathering and how, as time went by, the two imperatives were integrated, with good results for the news room too.

CASE STUDY: WHEN HUMANITY TRUMPS JOURNALISM

At about 10 o'clock that morning one of our reporters came over and said there was an opportunity to go into Flowerdale.

The police at the roadblock told us to get out of the way and let the residents go ahead. And as we waited, a guy came out of the Flowerdale hotel and jumped into the back seat. He was a resident of Flowerdale. He'd been in the pub. He wasn't drunk but you could tell he'd had alcohol. And he said, "Can you take me to my house?" Straightaway we said we can but you should know we're the media. We told him we were going to be filing reports and taking photos and if that didn't sit well with him, he'd have to find another way.

He's like, "No, no, that's okay."

He was clearly distressed and bewildered and it looked like he hadn't slept since Saturday, to be honest. We kept asking him if he was okay.

I was thinking, how do you go about interviewing this person or getting their story, without being offensive? Let's face it: the guy is going to see if his house is still there.

[Reporter] simply passed back his little recorder and microphone and put it on the seat and he said, "I've turned that on. If you want to, you're welcome to pick it up and say whatever you like as we're driving in. We'll turn it off if you like." But [the resident] said, "No, leave it on."

I felt comfortable with that approach. If he wanted to tell his story, it might be cathartic for him. It sat well with me on a moral level and on a media level because I thought, well, he probably will pick up the microphone – which he did – and he basically started saying, "That used to be the store there" and pointing out landmarks and saying things like, "That's Robbo's house. Shit, I hope he's alive" and stuff like that.

I started to well up, and I was filming as well. I was filming not [the resident] but what we were looking at. He was saying how the fire was upon him and he'd given up hope. Everyone was gone, and he went into his house and poured himself a bourbon and was going to see it out on his couch, knowing full well he was going to burn to death. I started thinking about this and it started affecting what I was doing as a media person. I was becoming quite emotional about it.

He decided to take us through the most highly populated part of Flowerdale. All the houses were absolutely levelled and you could see the police tape on them, which we assumed meant it was a crime scene as well because someone had probably passed away there.

He was overcome with emotion. He obviously must have known some of the people. It wasn't an interview any more. It was just streams of consciousness – what he was thinking.

Then he said, "If you turn right here, that's my street." His house was about the sixth along. And we pulled up and he started wailing. It's hard to describe how he was wailing and crying.

On the video we published you can hear me, because I started crying. I couldn't help it. I was overcome with what I was seeing. Everything hit me at once.

We got out of the car and I put my arm around him and I turned the camera off and I said, "I know it doesn't mean shit, but I'm really sorry."

So there was another moral question: what do I do now? So I said to him, "I want to turn the camera back on but I certainly won't if you think that in any way that either now or down the track you won't want this to be recorded."

It's a tough question I guess, because how can he know how he's going to feel down the track? But he said, "No, no. It's okay."

So I felt like I did the right thing.

He started rummaging through stuff and he said, "That's the couch where I was sitting with my scotch."

His girlfriend had taken the kids and dogs somewhere safe and then barged through the police roadblocks to get him.

We hadn't planned any of this. We hadn't planned to take someone to see their home. So it was all ad hoc. And [the resident] then said, "I'd like to go to Kinglake to see my father's house and see if some of my mates are there."

Quite frankly, in my head it was a no-brainer. I didn't give a shit about work any more. I was, like, we're taking this bloke wherever he wants to go. And I answered on behalf of both of us and said, "Yes, of course."

The last thing I would want to feel we did was use this person. I knew we had an amazing story, but I also wanted to make this guy's life better that day. That's why it was a no-brainer.

We arrived in Kinglake and that was a whole new level of madness. It was full of fire trucks and police and people. On the way we saw burnt out cars where clearly people hadn't made it. So your mind is racing.

At this stage I'd stopped working, I guess. I dropped [reporter] to find the media centre and took the car and took [resident] to his father's house, which was a sawmill. The house was intact but the sawmill was destroyed, so he was pretty emotional again.

He asked a neighbour about his father. I had stopped filming at this point. Apparently his father had been hurt but he was alive and fine and in a hospital somewhere.

I then walked him into the relief centre and said, "Get some lunch and I'll be back".

I was worried about [resident] and my worries were justified when I went back to the relief centre and couldn't find him. I asked people, described him. No one had seen him. So I became quite flustered and thought, how's this bloke going to get back to Yea. I was a bit cut up that I'd allowed myself to leave him for so long. So I'm literally running around Kinglake looking for him.

Eventually after about 25 minutes he sort of just pops up almost out of nowhere in the middle of the road with a can of Jack Daniels. I said, "Don't fuckin' do that! Don't just leave!" And he's, "Oh I was just catching up with a few mates." I was really losing a plot a little bit. I'd stopped thinking about work altogether.

[They did a live cross, and it started with the audio of the resident wailing when he saw his home destroyed.]

Q: Did he mind that being used?

No. That was put to him. He didn't mind. He made it clear many times during the day that whatever we wanted to do, that was fine. We kept checking in, but he did make that very clear.

[Resident] thanked us on air. He said that what we had done had given him great peace of mind to see the people in Kinglake he thought were dead. I took a lot of pride in that. I thought there's no right or wrong, or rhyme or reason, in what's going on, but this guy's not pissed off, and that's a start.

Back at Yea I made sure he was okay and actually gave him a hug and gave him my number said if I can help, give us a call.

2. THE FIRST 48 HOURS AND AFTER

Catharsis

At first, people wanted to talk. They appeared to find it cathartic. They wanted their experiences validated and made part of the bigger story of this great tragedy. Some needed to "vent", and sometimes the media person was the first person they had spoken to.

It was clear to the media people that these survivors and victims were in shock, but in their view they were able to make decisions about whether to speak. Some refused, but many agreed.

In one or two cases, the survivor used the opportunity to have a look around, as if by helping the media they were also satisfying their own curiosity without having to feel they were just being snoopy.

There was a lot of evidence on this question of the willingness by survivors and victims to speak to the media:

There are certain people in these circumstances who feel the need to speak, who want to speak. I think there's a cathartic thing in it. And they're looking to you to tell everybody how bad it is here. "You've got to tell them we need water." So they look to you as a means to get their message out.

I don't think it's necessarily anything to do with wanting to be on TV. It's because of what they've been through: it's so different, so appalling, they really feel they need that their story is told – "my story needs to be told as well".

I wouldn't claim it's part of the therapeutic process, but we've all learned the benefit of talking about things afterwards. So maybe in some small way these people being enabled to get this off their chest, maybe it is helping them, I don't know.

*

They certainly didn't have any issue with me speaking to them that night. They just wanted to vent and be validated about what had happened to them.

*

We went up to St Andrews on the Sunday morning and found some people who had saved their main home, although they had lost other buildings. Originally they just wanted to show us the ruins. For them it was quite emotional. When we raised the possibility of having a chat to them, they were more than willing.

A woman drove us through some of the streets. Part of her thing was curiosity. The reality hadn't hit her, but she wanted to show us the places that were important to her.

I spoke to a couple of young people in the late teens-early twenties who had lost their parents. They weren't keen on doing anything to camera but they gave us photos and told us a helluva lot about their parents.

*

They would tell you the whole horrible story. And you didn't want to hear it but you had to because they maybe hadn't spoken to anyone for days. People had to get this stuff off their chest.

*

Some people do want to talk to media. Some people can see the value of the media and where they can help the media and the media can help them. And some people just don't want anything to do with it.

*

A lot of the times we would go to, say, families of victims asking for pictures, as you would do, and stories about them, and a couple of times we were told to take a hike, which we did, but a lot of times people would actually come to us and would want to tell the story of a loved one who had died.

*

They were very open, very welcoming, given the circumstances. Very honest. They were obviously shell-shocked, but articulate enough and happy to recount their experience or what they'd found when they came back.

The shock was audible in their voices, but they were happy to talk. They knew they'd survived something, but still in this ground zero and not knowing if the wind was going to change. They still felt on edge.

They knew that there were several hundred or several thousand people like them, but that they had an equal stake in the story. In talking to us, it was a validation of their experience.

*

Had they said, "Look, we've just lost our house, can you please leave us" – but no, he pulled out his digital camera and said, "The fire front had past. I thought we'd saved the house. We turned around and saw some flames licking up from under the eaves on the corner of the house, and within 10 or 20 minutes this was the result. The thing was gone."

He looked a bit vacant in his eyes: the sort of look that somebody who was completely exhausted would have.

*

I was acutely aware from the first day that there are natural barriers that anyone has about the media and being exposed to the world. But there was none of that at all. People in general were desperate to tell their story. The interviews would often go for a long time because they just had to talk.

And then grief

This need to talk seemed to last for about the first 48 hours. After that, the attitude changed. The survivors and victims became tired of the media attention, irritated by its relentlessness, in some cases enraged by its excesses. And, as the media people interpreted it, the survivors and victims moved into another stage: from shock to grief.

Many media people said that there were approaches they could make, and questions they could ask, in the first 48 hours that were quite inappropriate once the grief had set in. People no longer wanted to talk about what had happened or how they had escaped or what they had lost. The period in which it had been cathartic to talk about these things had passed.

That did not mean that journalists stopped approaching people, but they did so more carefully.

Another factor in the growing disenchantment among the survivors and victims was that they saw the media being escorted into places before they themselves had had a chance to go back, and they resented this.

There had been so much sensationalism on the Sunday and the Monday, that people were very wary. "Dirty dog" was one of the nicer comments. "F--- off. Hate you all. You're just making money out of our misery."

*

If you get to a major story that's traumatic in a certain period of time, you can hit people then because it's immediate, they're shocked, they're keen to tell somebody about their experience.

I think once you get beyond the 48-hour mark, I think you've got to be a little but more careful in how you deal with these people, because by that time the shock has probably turned to grief. So they're a bit more sensitive. And you've also got to be aware that they've probably had a lot of cameras in their face.

*

In the early days you got to know people in these relief centres, you were there all the time. You were dealing with people who were in shock, and in those early days they would have talked to anybody [but] as the shock started to wear off they became angry, and they were going through a process of grief, and they became quite hostile to the media.

*

There was reasonable co-operation day one and day two. People [then] enter another phase of the grieving process. I think a few days after, when it's a little less raw but more challenging in a psychological fashion, I guess you can feel your way through that before you make a determination of whether or not you use material involving that person.

You'd still apply the same standards to the end result, whatever you'd discovered. You'd still want to say, "Did I really have to drag that story out? Was it one the person was really willing to tell? Did they mean to tell it that way? Is it a fair representation of what they believe?"

I think you'd err on the side of getting the story and then deciding whether you'd publish it.

*

The Monday they were, if not welcoming, they were accepting of the media being there. By the Tuesday they were quickly beginning to sour, because when word reached them that the media were being escorted back up the hill and they weren't, they predictably got angry with us.

*

I didn't even get the camera out when we were down in Whittlesea, because it's a different circumstance. Whittlesea on the Sunday night – I don't think I'd have had many qualms about shooting these people coming out, but by the time it gets to Tuesday, I think people expect that they're able to come to a relief centre and not have camera shoved in their faces.

3. INTRUSION

Intrusion was an issue on the mind of virtually all the respondents. Many said they had tried to minimise the level of intrusion but all were conscious of having made decisions that involved some level of intrusion.

Some media people were not pressed by their employer to be intrusive; some felt confident enough, or were senior enough, to assert their own standards, whether pressed or not.

Sometimes, especially with television, the competitive imperative is so powerful that if there is something happening on one channel, rivals feel impelled to get it too. It is as if, once the membrane of privacy has been breached, restraint by others tends to be swept away.

A further issue to arise was over the use to be made by media of private moments that were witnessed unobtrusively and unexpectedly. In one case a print reporter witnessed a profoundly distressing scene in which three sisters were told by their husbands that their parents had died. The reporter happened to be standing at the place where the group met to break this news. He saw and heard it happen without intending to eavesdrop. Later he interviewed one of the husbands and filed a report.

This is a common dilemma for media people: they witness something unexpectedly which creates a situation in which they acquire a substantial piece of news but which also causes people to be overcome by grief, making it intrusive to approach them. Do they withhold the information, even if it is substantial? Do they publish what they have seen without intruding on the bereaved to obtain consent, or do they intrude on the bereaved in order to obtain consent?

In this case the reporter bided his time and then approached one of the husbands who, while bereaved, might reasonably be considered to be less directly bereaved than the daughters who had lost their parents.

A lot of people were very abusive towards me because they had been upset by commercial journalists – I don't mean the ABC – but cameras stuck in their faces or journalists who wouldn't leave them alone.

In the relief centre I didn't approach anyone who wasn't wearing a uniform, because that was a kind of haven. But if people were outside standing around, I would go up to them and say, "Would you like to tell me what happened to you?" I was really low-key about it. A lot of people said no. One man spat at me. Some people did speak to me.

*

We took a tack not to go and ask any families coming to the relief centre to come and speak to us. We took the tack that if they wanted to speak to us, we're here. Some people did approach us to tell their story.

I made a conscious decision not to take pictures of survivors. I know that it's probably my job as a media person not to think like this, but my personal stance was, that if that was me, I wouldn't want to be photographed.

I just asked myself the question: If I had just been told I'd lost my family in a bushfire, would I want someone taking a photo of me? And the answer was no. And it was that simple.

*

When we were in Pine Ridge Road one of the families returned and we didn't take photographs – we just left them. We could have said, "That's an amazing picture", but we thought, "This is a really private grief issue". There were kids and dad – mum had died.

You judge the situation – if they're shattered you leave them alone.

*

At the relief centre I left my cameraman outside. That's why I work for [this organisation]. I can make those decisions. I'm not going to get into the same trouble if I don't get a crying mother.

The message board, where people were trying to appeal to different people – "where are you?" – was also at the place where people were getting their clothes, food, and by Tuesday I just felt that people deserved to be able to come to that spot and not have a camera shoved in their face.

So when they [the news desk] asked me to do that picture, I said no, I'm not doing that. And I'm senior enough to be able to say that.

We walked past a group who were obviously looking at the ruins of their house, and I said to the cameraman, "We're here to do destruction, so watch what you're doing in terms of pointing the camera at people's faces. I'll ask them first".

And most people said no.

*

There were tears, and you cover just so much to tell the story then cut away from it or back off. I had no complaints about that from the public, government, politicians, police.

*

So long as you don't present as a threat and you don't start shooting pictures without asking permission, people have embraced what we do.

*

I did tell them to be sensitive and compassionate about it and to not intrude. And they're all really good like that. None of them were intrusive.

There were three sisters there whose husbands had come back to tell them their parents had died. My reporter was there. He's a senior bloke. He was in tears on the phone as he was filing his copy. The copy was subtle but he told the story. He didn't intrude. He sat back and observed and wrote what he observed. He might have quoted one of the husbands but I don't think he quoted the daughters.

*

I remember one situation in which [a current affairs show on a rival station] had some re-uniting happening live on television, and I remember the chief of staff calling the crew and making sure they were there to see it. A helicopter landed and dropped off someone who hadn't seen someone for days.

*

We treated them fairly gently. He still had soot all over his face, but as they were talking to us some family members arrived from out of town and they were re-united. That clearly was not a moment to intrude, so we stepped away from that.

CASE STUDY: EXPERIENCING INTRUSION FROM BOTH SIDES

Researchers' note: While all the interviews for this project were conducted on the basis of anonymity, the unique position of this journalist as a survivor and victim of the fires, and as a reporter who had written for his newspaper about it, made it impossible to maintain his anonymity in every context. His permission was obtained to identify him where it was impossible to do otherwise. His name is Gary Hughes, of *The Australian*.

I was staggered at what it's like to be on the receiving end of the feeding frenzy. I was quite overwhelmed at the number of calls I got, and the requests for interviews. Those requests went on almost right through that week – drove me crazy.

One of the lessons I learned is how draining it is for someone who's been involved in something to give a media interview. It's incredibly draining emotionally.

Some of the requests were a bit silly. There was one TV station who said, "We've got a crew at Whittlesea. Can you get to Whittlesea?" We were in Greensborough [some hours' drive away]. Someone else said, "We'll put you up in a helicopter and fly you over the house", and I thought, well, not only do I not particularly want to see our house burnt from the air, but it would have taken three hours.

Right through this you become schizophrenic. On one side you're detached and you're the professional journalist, and on the other side you're the subject. So I suppose the professional journalist side of me said it would be interesting to go and, as a journalistic exercise, to write about your own anguish.

My wife and daughter, I was very cautious about involving them, and how much involvement, because when people talk about informed decisions, that word informed . . .

I made a decision that things I knew and learned about as a survivor and a resident I would quarantine off from the journalistic side. We knew on the first night that one person had died. I quickly learned about other people who'd died on the Sunday and so when the media was running around trying to get names, I had names, and I knew the circumstances. But that was an easy decision to make that I would quarantine that off and I wouldn't use that information in the journalistic side of things.

Anything I gathered privately or as part of my own experience I wouldn't use their names or identify them in any way. When I did name some people who died, they were people who had already been publicly named.

I've avoided using anyone I know in stories. I wouldn't have let other media anywhere near my daughter, which is probably a sad indictment on our profession.

Training in journalism courses and in workplaces should include educating journalists in the trauma they can cause by the questions they ask. They need to be trained by trauma experts on the type of additional trauma that can be unintentionally caused to victims/survivors, and how to minimize the risk.

When I started covering the bushfires as a "normal" journalist, in particular talking to victims/survivors, I was faced with the question of whether I should tell them I was also a victim/survivor who lost his house. I decided very quickly not to mention it at all.

On rare occasions it has come up, but only after the interview has been completed, and I don't use anything from that part of the conversation.

When people know you are a fellow victim/survivor and share that bond (a bit like combat veterans) they immediately drop their guard and speak to you on that level, being more trusting and revealing than they would otherwise. Ethically I thought that was wrong and would be taking advantage of those being interviewed.

It is a difficult issue and an argument could be equally strongly put that it is unethical not to tell people. There doesn't appear to be any existing accepted practice that I can turn to. So I have to make up the rules as I go along.

4. VULNERABILITY

Many journalists said they were aware that they were dealing with people who had no experience of the media and were vulnerable to being exploited. They said they felt a responsibility to take this into account when choosing what to use and what to omit from their reports:

People who aren't used to dealing with media tell you all kinds of things that perhaps aren't to their benefit. I met one man who told me he was wanted [by the police] and was up there looking for his brother.

*

A lot of people from that area didn't realise they have to be a bit wary of the media, maybe. And a lot of them loved the idea of being in the paper. So you had to be a bit careful that you weren't exploiting that. So I made sure they were in a good enough frame of mind to be able to speak to me and know what they were doing.

*

You have a kind of role of care at a level way beyond what you would normally have. They are not experienced in the media. They have no idea or appreciation of what they're saying or where it will go: people who felt they had to blame someone; people who felt angry. It came up in pretty much everyone we spoke to.

The vulnerability and emotional instability of traumatised people was illustrated by the experience of a photographer outside a relief centre a few days after Black Saturday described in the case study below.

CASE STUDY: THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF TRAUMATISED PEOPLE

I went to Healesville relief centre. I was standing outside and I saw a man come out and he was clearly distressed. He was crying. And I thought, "Goodness, I won't photograph him. You'd be the scum of the earth to do that." So I turned away and he got into a four-wheel-drive and it has a sign [identifying a business]. And he sat there sobbing into his hands. Someone came and he got out of the car and disappeared.

The Premier was arriving and a lot of media turned up. There was a wall of photographers and TV crews facing the front door.

The Premier arrived, and click, click, click, click. When out of nowhere this same man appeared and literally grabbed hold of the one and only person he could see in a CFA uniform, immediately behind the Premier, who is now being gazumped by this man, who's thrown his arms around a CFA member who turned out to be the media liaison person, hugging and sobbing into their neck, facing directly into all the media.

That man ambushed that media contingent and used it, chose it, to publicly air his grief.

Here was somebody I had made the decision not to photograph because they were so visibly upset that I thought it would be unfair to take advantage of his anguish for my photographic purpose, but then to have him do that, I could not understand what had driven him to do it. I knew without a doubt that he clearly intended to do it.

It was choreographed down to the last

Q: Did you get a shot of this?

Yes. But I was the only one who could appreciate how he'd manoeuvred that shot.

Q: If tomorrow you were confronted by the same situation – a person comes out of a place like that in obvious distress – would you make the same decision?

I think I would arrive at the same decision, but I would probably interrogate the whole thing a little more in my own mind. I know I'm not that type of photographer. At funerals, I have that hesitation on the shutter. I can capture grief pictorially without being completely full-blown about it.

5. THE RISK OF BETRAYAL

Some media people and survivors/victims forged bonds which went beyond the usual transient journalist-subject relationship. More generally, media people expressed the view that it would be unconscionable for the media circus just to move on, as it usually does, to the next drama, leaving people in the bushfire areas feeling used and betrayed.

Many of the media people who had been to the fire ground made several return visits to see people they had interviewed, sometimes writing a follow-up story, sometimes not. They found that occasionally the survivors and victims just want to forget.

Many of the news executives planned to have their staff re-visit the places they had covered after three months, six months, twelve months, to report on what was happening.

At one level, this kind of follow-up is routine journalism, but there seemed to be a perception among the respondents in this research that, in this case, there was more to it than that:

Generally I have had good relations with all the people I've dealt with, but there are some I've spent more time with, and I feel I can't just . . . that can't be just my only contact with these people. These people can't just be forgotten: the bloody media turns up once and then just writes one story. At least it's a human thing to contact them again and see how they're going and, sure, are there more stories?

All these people who spoke to us that night: we do have a duty to go back to them and talk to them and ask, how has your life changed and how is it moving on?

*

This girl here [indicating a photo] we went back to her and asked if we could get a photo of her at [her place of work]. So we have this beautiful photo of her, but she rang us the next day and said, "No, I don't want you to run the story. It was an awful night and I just want to forget it."

*

The hundred days stuff we did was a really important piece for the people up there because it was about people living in caravans, it was about mud, it was about "it's gonna snow really soon – it's really bloody cold". That was probably the most important thing I've done.

Q: Have you been welcomed back?

Everywhere.

*

I don't see it as a responsibility of the media; I see it as a responsibility as a human being. I made a promise to people that we would be there for them in the long term and I'm keeping that promise. It's as simple as that. It's not exploiting a situation, it's not riding the crest of a wave, it's not following a story. It's not a story; it's people's lives and they need help.

6. A RIDICULOUS – AND MISLEADING -- SIDE OF MEDIA BEHAVIOUR

Sometimes media people confect apparently spontaneous moments. It happens routinely when a political leader is casting his vote and slips the ballot paper in and out of the ballot box slot a dozen times, or shakes a visiting dignitary's hand for an eternity while the flashbulbs go off. It is all harmless and anyway the viewer can see what is going on, so is not likely to be gulled.

The following case study, however, shows this species of media legerdemain at its most ridiculous. It also misleads the viewer or listener because there is no way of their knowing what is really going on.

CASE STUDY: REAL AND CONFECTED SPONTANEITY

On the Monday we went to Whittlesea. That was particularly gruelling. Every media outlet in the world, virtually, had managed to get to Whittlesea.

There was one woman who came out with a phone to her ear and our broadcast point was right at the door, and she came out and she just yelled, "They're alive! They're alive!" And because we were right on the door, one of my producers said, "Come and talk to [respondent]."

And she came and I said, "What's happened?" And she said, "My husband's just rung and he's been going out the back on his tractor and he's found our neighbours and my son's with them and he's alive, he's alive, he's alive!" And she virtually hugged me, and it was wonderful. And I think I said on air, it's so good to get some good news. And I'd been crying all morning.

And she turned around to walk off and [another radio station] grabbed her and said, "Can you do that again?" And then a TV channel grabbed her and said, "Can you do it for us?" And then another TV channel.

And I'm thinking, "I can't believe it." But that's how it happens. Don't kid yourself that it doesn't.

By and large, though, I think it would be quite unfair to characterise the media response according to those few atrocities. By and large people were fantastic.

CONCLUSIONS

The media people who covered the bushfires 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.

It also emerged from among this group of respondents that there are some informally consensual standards. There appeared to be a greater degree of consensus on these matters than on matters concerning access (discussed in Chapter 1). The standards are:

- 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.
- 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 to treat what they say and do accordingly by applying a fairness test.
- Some degree of intrusion is inevitable but it should be minimised.

On the final point, the experience of the journalist-and-survivor, Mr Gary Hughes, is that even well-intentioned journalists do not appreciate how intrusive they are being. This argues the need for specific training in this area.

Mr Hughes's experience also pointed up a particular ethical dilemma for journalists who are also affected by a disaster: in their interviews with others in the same position, do they disclose or not disclose their shared status as an affected person? This is also fertile ground for training, since it raises an aspect of conflict-of-interest, a wide and complex field in media ethics.

On the issue of consent, too, the experience of one reporter raised an important variant: if a media person unintentionally eavesdrops on a news-worthy event in a public place, is he or she free to use that material without the consent of those whom he has overheard?

In these circumstances, where the information was of a private nature and of necessity was conveyed in a public place, the reporter clearly decided that consent was necessary and obtained it by interviewing one of the participants.

Intentional eavesdropping is discussed in Chapter 6 as part of a wider review of media performance.

CHAPTER 3

THE MAELSTROM OF PRESSURE

There were four main sources of pressure on the media people who covered the Black Saturday bushfires:

1. The demands of their editors (news desk personnel, mainly).
2. Competition from their rivals in the media.
3. Requirements and impediments imposed by the authorities (dealt with in Chapter 1)
4. The reactions of the people affected by the fires.

It can be seen straightaway that these pressures tend to create a maelstrom effect. They tend to pull the person at the centre in several directions at once. Take just one example, already discussed in Chapter 2: the obtaining of survivors' stories:

- The demand from the news desk is to obtain stories from survivors. This generally is consonant with media people's own professional instincts and the self-imposed pressure that comes from within.
- There are competitive pressures because their rivals want the same thing.
- The authorities, in seeking to protect a crime scene, protect people from danger or protect survivors from the media, create roadblocks and other obstructions. They have the force of law behind them, with all the risks for the media that that entails.
- The people affected by the fires – when the media person does encounter them – generate a whole new set of pressures. Even if they are willing to tell their story, their state of vulnerability arouses in many media people a real empathy and concern which can lead, in some cases, to the abandonment of the news-gathering function in favour of taking care of the affected person.

An additional source of pressure is the emotional impact of being in the midst of large-scale horror, devastation and human misery, sometimes for days and weeks on end. This is dealt with in detail in Chapter 5. However, it is part of the cross-currents of pressures within which media people covering the fires had to work and so needs to be borne in mind in this discussion.

Not all media people had to cope with all these pressures all the time, and when they were liberated from one or other of them, it tended to be beneficial to them as individuals as well as to the people they were dealing with. For example, many of the media people interviewed for this research spent at least part of their time liberated from the immediate competitive pressure of rivals working alongside them. The fire ground was so big, it was not difficult to get away from the media throng, and in many places there were few media present at any one time. When they were on their own, they felt autonomous and more empowered to make decisions that in conscience that they felt they should make.

1. PRESSURE FROM EDITORS

At first, the story was so big, the opportunities to get good material so many, and the geographic spread so vast, that news desks had no hope of keeping up, or even of having a reasonably clear idea of what was going on. They were therefore almost totally reliant on what their staff in the field told them. Some staff took this as an opportunity to ease that source of pressure:

The news desk didn't know what was going on. They weren't on the ground. They couldn't see what it was like. So we were saying, "We're here. This is what we think we should do a story on", and we were just hoping that that would be enough.

*

Because you're remote from the office, you've got a lot more leeway to make those decisions yourself. Myself and my colleague chose not to let our editor know about certain opportunities because we felt it was best the decision [was made by us]. We didn't want any more pressure brought to bear on us to do something we didn't want to do.

Q: Were you getting any pressure from the desk?

Yeah, I guess you are under pressure or you're getting some pressure, but I personally didn't feel like I was getting unreasonable or unrealistic pressure. But that might come down to my experience and [being prepared to] argue the toss or be forceful.

Q: Did it come to that?

No, not that I can recall.

*

[Photographer] probably had the greatest frustration when it came to access to places, and the chief photographer putting the pressure on him: "Get the flames! Get the flames!" And [photographer] saying, "They won't let me through."

*

There were community meetings and the media were asked to step away from the door, to not come into the meeting. Journos were going up and putting their ear to the door so they could hear and report what they heard, even though they had been asked not to listen. That sort of stuff. I felt it was quite hard to work out what your line was, because you felt under pressure to always to go beyond that line.

You know that if you do a really great story, it will be well received, and the editors don't really care where that story came from, as long as it's a good story and as long as no one gets into trouble about it.

If you were to do something that was unethical and got a really good story, as long as no one asked any questions and Media Watch didn't find out about it, I don't think they'd really care how you got it. It's only if you get into trouble that they say, "Oh no, we don't do things that way."

Liberation through news desk ignorance, however, seldom lasts long. As soon as news desks see or hear what rivals have published, they are equipped to exert pressure again: "The opposition are saying so-and-so. Have we got that?" As the media people in this research indicated, they had their greatest freedom in the early days.

The view from the desk can be different from that of the staff in the field:

Believe it or not, I don't think the competitive pressures come into what we do here. We have a style. We have an approach to news. I wouldn't vary that to get an advantage on [rival channels], to be honest. We are competitive, but competitive within that mindset

I'm not going to bend or break the rules to compete with [rival channels] because the next day the story is gone and then you find yourself for weeks and months dealing with the backlash, the aftermath, the code complaints. I'm no saint, but I don't get caught up in the tabloid tit-for-tat stuff.

A further liberating factor, for those who were senior and experienced enough, was that they were trusted by the news desk to make sound judgments. These people exercised this power as they thought necessary: no, there will not be a story tonight; no, I will not take pictures of that noticeboard of missing people. Less experienced staff soon learnt the value of having a story idea to offer the news desk rather than waiting for instructions. This enabled them to head off various ill-considered or impractical proposals:

Every day you would get asked to do ridiculous things that reflected that they [the bureau chiefs/editors] really didn't have much of an idea of what it was like out there. That happened to everyone. Ultimately the journalists who were on the ground determined a lot of that coverage.

*

Each day we tried to go and do something different. Sometimes the news desk would ring and say, "We want you to go to XYZ because the police commissioner is going to be there", or whatever. We tried to make it more us ringing them and saying, "We've found these interesting people and we're going to do a story about this today", because it was very chaotic and they didn't have much of a handle on where everybody was.

*

I felt I got most of the information that my editor wanted, although she was pushing me to go into the relief centre, but I said, "No, I can't do that." That was fine.

Some less experienced media people felt vulnerable to a sense of inadequacy when they compared themselves with more experienced or high-profile people:

It's easy when you see all these high fliers around you to get a denuded sense of self, and in that way you can lose something of yourself. You can also rise above the less attractive side of journalism.

*

Pressure from editors began to mount on reporters to put numbers and names on the death toll. This was an acute source of pressure for some, leading in some cases to conflict and lingering regret:

There was some pressure later in the week as the death toll was going up quite rapidly for people higher up in the [organisation] to publish what we knew. And I fought that one quite bitterly.

They were wanting explicit details about numbers of dead people, where they were, what the circumstances were. I fought it on two grounds. First, it wasn't confirmed information. It was initial information obtained at three in the morning after a massive disaster by some very tired coppers. I had agreed to have that information off the record. I had agreed not to publish the information, so obviously I was not prepared to do that.

And by now it was five or six days later and the situation had changed. What they thought at the initial period compared to what they knew the following Thursday were two wildly different things.

I really did crack the shits, and pretty much they backed off. They didn't really hassle me.

*

I really lost it one day with [the boss]. He was saying he didn't want any more pictures of burnt things. "I want kids. I want people. I want to see children grabbing teddy bears and crying." I just walked out.

Those people have been through enough.

Sometimes pressure builds up because a staff member in the field provides background information to the news desk and it suddenly takes on the status of semi-truth. The pressure is then on to “harden it up”, in other words to obtain information that will at least tend to confirm it. This is a long way short of verification, of course, and all the time the pressure is building on the staff member. Other reporters are sniffing around and the editors are impatient.

Sometimes the pressure becomes irresistible. Forms of words are found which technically inject a note of caution – “parachutes” as journalists call them – but which do not alter the substance: “grave fears”, “may” and so on. This process is high risk, as the following case study shows.

CASE STUDY: WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE

At this point nobody knew how many people had died, and in those early days that was what a lot of it was about – it was about deaths and property damage.

And so for me, the emerging story, by Tuesday, was how many people had died in Marysville. All sorts of figures were being bandied around, and this became a significant challenge.

I was [speaking] to my editors. They wanted a figure, and there was no figure at that point, but there was a lot of pressure to quantify this disaster. So I found myself in a situation by the Tuesday night when all day I’d had very senior people in emergency services saying to me that they believed there were 100 to 200 people dead in Marysville. No one had reported that at all, but those numbers were being repeatedly talked about.

I was very anxious because I knew that if that were the case, that was a very very big story that hadn’t been told, but it was also impossible to verify. So I just kept talking to people: I put it to the police, I put it to the Premier, I put it to the Prime Minister’s office, and no-one would deny this. They had all, off the record, been advised that this could well be the case.

At the same time the Red Cross had set up a missing person’s bureau and hundreds and hundreds of people’s names had been registered with them.

It came to a bit of a head on the Tuesday because the story that hadn’t been written, that I was trying to get up, was to say that there are fears that up to 100 people may have died in Marysville alone. And that was very much the story that the paper wanted, because no one had run with that yet.

Other journalists were obviously hearing similar things but no one had run with it. So Tuesday, for Wednesday’s paper, we decided to run with the story that said that there were grave fears held that up to 100 people may have died in Marysville alone – 10% of the population.

There was quite a bit of pressure on me to just say. I worried a lot about this story. I did not sleep that night – I worried myself sick about it because nobody else had said this yet publicly, and it was impossible to verify, but overwhelmingly I was being told it by people who were in the best position to know the magnitude of it.

So we went with the story, and I wrote it as conservatively as you can write a story saying 100 people might have died in Marysville alone. And everybody ran with it – it became the figure. Now we know now that 100 people didn’t die in Marysville. The death toll ended up being about 38. And that has been something that I have worried incredibly about ever since.

Look, I don’t know – I’ve thought about this a lot, and it’s been a source of conversation in my office. For a while I really beat myself up about that and thought, I just should have kept my mouth shut. But now I’ve changed my mind about it again because that was the story – people did genuinely fear that that was going to be the death toll. But I certainly put myself through the wringer over my decision to tell [my editor] because once you tell an editor something like that they’re going to get excited.

They did rewrite the opening par and that has come back to haunt me a bit. It really worried me for a long time that it looked like a huge beat up. It wasn’t meant to be a beat up. It was genuinely what I was hearing.

2. THE PRESENCE OF RIVALS

Media packs formed at major relief centres, such as Whittlesea; they formed on organised tours to destroyed towns, and at places where politicians and celebrities appeared. Some respondents spoke of their intense dislike of media packs, not so much because of the competitive pressure – these situations were so carefully choreographed that everyone got the same material – but because of their embarrassment at the atavistic behaviour they always seemed to create.

Being part of, or even observing, a media pack can raise concerns among media professionals, but experience, seniority and an equable temperament combined to take the pressure off this respondent:

The news desk most of the time were quite helpful. They showed concern for our welfare. They trust my judgment. Each day you'd get told we need a story on whatever's happening up in that area, and the rest of it was left to me.

Q: Were there competing media?

We have arrangements with [TV channel] to team up from time to time, so sometimes [the channel] would go off and film one thing, we'd film the other and share it at the end of the day.

Quite often you were by yourself.

Q: Were you part of a pack at any time?

The Premier came up to Beechworth and there was a media pack there.

Q: Does that immediate presence of the rivals create a competitive pressure?

I seldom feel it. Quite often with media packs you all tend to get the same thing. It's only every so often that you might stumble across good talent or a security camera that's got really good footage, things like that.

I don't get intimidated by that whole pack presence. I'm quite happy standing in front of the talking head and getting in the questions I want.

*

By contrast, this next respondent was never part of a media pack and although placed under acute pressure by her superior, was grateful not to have been put to the test in a pack:

We were lucky [in our area] that all the media was contained to Kinglake. And when I watched television they were chasing people and it just looked horrendous and I was horrified.

So I didn't have to compete with anyone, which was nice to give me that bit of space. Because if you're competing with someone then you tend to get that pack mentality and think, "Oh just go with it."

So I was lucky I didn't have to make those decisions with a pack mentality chasing me.

Q: Do you think you would have made a different decision?

Possibly not. I think I would have gone with the same decision. You've got to live with yourself.

*

The presence or absence of rivals anywhere can be an important factor:

If you've got the story on your own, you can hand-select what you shoot. Unfortunately if another TV station turns up, you've got to shoot everything. Because if it turns up on another channel and you haven't got it, well then, "You're not doing your job. Somebody else . . ." If you're there, then "Why didn't you get that shot?"

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Q: Did it mean you felt under more pressure with the arrival of more rivals: does that alter the pressure balance for you?

Yeah. It does. When there are fewer people around, you have more freedom to choose what you do or don't cover. There is also that pack mentality, especially in the TV networks, where everyone swarms on one thing, and if you miss it – disaster.

It also became less fluid. With the volume of people, there were a lot more controls. There were more organised and scheduled press conferences, and CFA trips were done in much larger convoys.

Q: The less autonomy and discretion you've got because of the arrival of the pack and the attendant controls cuts down your own choices?

It does. Definitely. And we made a lot of efforts not to follow them, not to go to the same places or do exactly the same things.

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Q: On that first day there were no other media there. Did that make a difference?

Possibly. Perhaps we operated with the luxury of knowing we weren't going to be scooped. The trouble was, you didn't quite know what was happening elsewhere. For all we knew, others were getting in, and I picked up the [opposition papers] on the Monday just wondering whether someone had got in. But they hadn't.

So while we were reasonably confident we were on our own, we didn't know for sure.

At Whittlesea on day one there were camera crews everywhere but it was more mayhem than competition.

Q: There are interesting pressure balances: from a media rival, from dealing with traumatised people, from the newsdesk. Did you get any of that?

No. I was dealing with two guys who are very aware of those ethical issues, and sensible, balanced, smart reporters. So there wasn't any pressure from the desk.

It amazes me over time how my views have changed, as a mature person. I'm not a twenty-something reporter trying to make his career, and I draw much more satisfaction now if I feel I've got the story right, balanced and fair, rather than if I've got a headline or if I'm on page one.

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3. PRESSURE FROM SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS

Negative reaction from survivors and victims is always a potential source of pressure for media covering disasters, and there are some journalistic methods that expose journalists to a heightened risk of this. One such method is the "pull-together".

Typically, a journalist with a particular talent for writing and editing, is given a collection of material gathered by others and told to pull it together into a coherent narrative. The risk of error arises because the writer is working at one remove from the gathering of the material. In this vacuum, the writer does not have the nuanced understanding that comes from being present when information is supplied, nor the background knowledge that helps a reporter choose the apt words to piece a story together. Moreover, the writer does not usually have time to verify material first hand, but must rely on the quality of the material supplied, unless it contains a self-evident error or inconsistency.

This is made worse by syndication, when the raw material is supplied from another outlet altogether and there may be no pre-existing working relationship between the writer and the reporter who gathered the material. And in the case described below, the existence of photographs exerted an influence on how the “pull-together” was shaped:

I was asked to do a story and we were copy-sharing with [another paper]. I got told that they'd got some good photographs of some teenage girls who'd died in the fire up around Kinglake, and the [other paper] had written a story which said that it was their love of horses that led them to their death because they went up to look after their horses.

[The news desk] said, "We want to use these photos so can you please top your story with this." Now that hadn't happened to me before. This was early evening so there was no time to go back to those original sources. The [other paper's] story had already been written, so I had to re-write the first four or five pars, and we put it on the front page.

About 24 hours later I got an email from a friend of the mother who was devastated by the report and said, "We couldn't believe how insensitive and inaccurate you were", and I said, "What do you mean?" [She] said, "The girls were sensible, they heeded the warnings." She was actually only disputing the angle on the story, but even so I thought, "That's their daughter, and we're playing with this stuff on the front page." It shook me up – that really upset me.

The experience unsettled the reporter and, he said, made it more difficult for him to judge what to include and what to exclude in later stories. He said he experienced “emotional pressure” after writing a description of a body and said that one of the lessons for him was to be “very careful” about describing bodies in the future.

An especially acute source of pressure came from people who rang radio stations for information and often for advice. Staff were firmly instructed to make a distinction between the two: you can give information; you can't give advice.

This created a pressure of its own:

Some staff felt under pressure to tell them something. Some said, "You have to make this decision, but if you're that worried, what are you still doing there? We can't tell you the right thing to do. Only you can make that decision."

But worse was the reliance people placed on what they were told:

One producer took a call from someone who said, "My parents are in the fire area. Will they be okay?" And she said, "I'm sure they'll be fine." And the caller said, "Oh thank you!" And the producer said, "No! No! Don't think they're okay because I said they'll be okay."

They found themselves in really tricky situations. Really hard.

It was revealing that the pressures of Black Saturday had so burdened some media people that the scope of their responsibilities had come to seem infinite:

Are we to blame if someone dies while they are waiting on hold for talkback? Um, not entirely.

Q: At all?

Ah, well, no. Someone surely has to take the decision to hang up.

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The staff who were reading the “urgent threat” messages and the road closures, the presenters – everyone to an extent – feels that acute sense of responsibility. The consequences of getting it wrong are life-threatening. So for someone who might be reading road closures, if they happen to get a road name wrong or miss one, it’s not a great outcome, potentially.

There was so much information by, say, 7 o’clock that night, and the CFA and DSE websites were out of date, we were trying to update the information by talking to CFA media, trying to bring everything together for the people reading the threat messages. Getting it wrong is . . . human error in this case . . . people working long shifts, stressed, emotional, possibly freaking out about what they were experiencing, the sorts of calls we were getting.

There is a dilemma about what you say to somebody in that scenario. Unless you’re a triple 0 operator, very few people have that sort of training. We certainly didn’t. What do you say to someone who is on a road trying to get out of a fire area with the kids in the car, and wants to know which road to take? The trees are falling down in front of them. I don’t know what you say.

Q: Do you know what your people *did* say?

No, not really. I think they just tried to give them what they could. I know a couple of them are still struggling with the feeling that they could have said more, or could they have done more to save that person, or did I do the right thing?

I have just said to them that, if anything, perhaps they can have some comfort knowing that that person spoke to somebody in their last minutes, rather not being able to get through to anyone; that at least there was a voice on the phone. Maybe they can take some comfort from that. But I don’t know what you say.

CONCLUSIONS

Managing the often competing sources of pressure is critical to how a media person copes in covering a disaster of this scale.

While some media people in the field considered the pressure from their editors to be not unreasonable, others felt it acutely, even if no words had been spoken. They knew from experience what they were expected to do, even if that meant going against their conscience or better judgment.

Senior people, and those who were creative enough to generate their own story ideas, were able to counter news desk pressure, especially in the early days when news desks could not keep up.

What really hurt, though, was when the people affected by the fires exerted pressure, either in the form of complaints or in demands for advice which the media person was not in a position to give.

It is clear that this source of pressure has had the most long-lasting impact.

There also appears to be a need to articulate the limits of media people's responsibilities, especially for those who receive talkback calls. By any reasonable criterion, media people cannot be held responsible for what happens to someone on the other end of the telephone who rings up and is given the best available information. Further preparation and training seems necessary in this area.

The media people interviewed seemed on the whole to find ways of minimising the tension between competitive and news desk pressures, and pressure from survivors and victims. They did this by good journalistic practice: getting away from rivals and finding their own stories. By showing initiative they headed off news desk pressure, and by getting away from rivals they freed themselves to behave as their consciences dictated.

CHAPTER 4

TO PUBLISH OR NOT TO PUBLISH

Some of the most acute pressures of all arose from the circumstances in which decisions had to be made about what to publish and what to withhold from publication. These affected everyone involved in the coverage and in numberless ways: from the video journalist who was present when a man discovered his home in ruins and unleashed a primal scream, to the newspaper editor who was trying to strike the right tone on his front page, to the radio producer who had thousands of text messages and telephone callers saying one thing and the fire authorities saying another.

Their experiences are reported here under five headings:

1. Taste and decency
2. Covering a disaster in the “back yard”
3. Verification
4. The “blame game” and how the story evolved
5. Life, death and conflicting information

1. TASTE AND DECENCY

It was commonplace for the media people on the ground to withhold from publication information or images they had obtained. Mostly these concerned grisly details about how people had died or the state of bodies or other material that would have caused distress either to surviving members of the family or to the public at large.

This material was, for the most part, volunteered to them, sometimes by people who had lost close family. Many journalists put this down to the survivors’ need to unburden themselves, and treated the information as if it had been imparted almost therapeutically.

They also applied a standard news criterion: do I need to publish this in order to tell the story properly? The answer, on the whole, was no:

They told us the details of the phone conversations they’d had up to the point that they were trapped and couldn’t get out. They told us details about the condition of the bodies.

Q: How much of that did you broadcast?

Nothing. I don’t think it needed to be told. Out of respect for the [deceased] people and out of respect for the children who were telling me this . . . because they were suffering so much grief and shock, and probably it hadn’t hit them entirely, they were telling me things that they probably wouldn’t normally have.

I took it upon myself to decide what needed to be told and what didn't: the facts that the parents had died and had been trapped by the fire, and that they had died in their house.

Public interest, not just public curiosity, weighed in the balance when decisions on publication were being made:

When there were tears up in Kinglake and people were meeting each other for the first time, I remember a line in my story about friends not knowing whether one another were still alive, and we'll be as guilty as any of the channels of showing the raw emotion of the moment.

So you could argue that despite some of the precautions I took, we were still intrusive. If you get a great shot of two people who thought one another were dead meeting up and crying and hugging and all the rest, that's great TV.

Q: *What's the ethical justification for publishing that?*

It's a great moment. It's part of the story. There is some hope in amongst all of this. And here is an example of why there is a discrepancy between the number of people said to be missing, because not all the people who are said to be missing are actually dead.

Q: *What I hear you say is that if by broadcasting that material, which we have agreed is intrusive, we have added to information which has some public-interest element like demonstrating why there is a discrepancy between the feared death and the actual, then that weighs heavily in the balance against the intrusion?*

Yeah, yeah. There is an ethical consideration, but it also trying to make the story as watchable and interesting as possible, to keep people attached.

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What is the public interest in it? Is it in the public interest to know that X number of people died in their houses or in their cars? I would say it is in the public interest to know that. It gives an idea of what happened.

But in terms of nitty-gritty details about husband found face down in the pool – it's not necessarily in the public interest, and it will cause trauma to the family and friends. There is no benefit making it more gory or more explicit than it needs to be.

Some drew a distinction between public interest and public curiosity:

I spent a lot of time with CFA foot-soldiers, and they told me some stuff they'd seen on the night, and some of that, there was no way that was going in.

Q: *Grisly detail?*

Yes. Like children and things. I did use what they said, but it was indirect and it added to the mood of it. It was just a line that said something like, that CFA people up had seen things that no people should ever see. I didn't want to say what they had seen, but I wanted to say that they had seen things that horrified them.

And I met a nurse and the same decision process happened. She had treated some burnt people in a CFA shed and she told me some horrific things as well.

Q: *You didn't use it because the detail was disgusting or distressing and there was no countervailing public interest in publishing it?*

I'm not sure. The public-interest thing is problematic because the two horrific stories that I heard, one from the CFA bloke and one from the nurse, I was very interested in the detail of it, and they were very interested in telling me.

The detail is very interesting because it's horrible. I think your average person would be interested to hear about horrible stuff like that. My reasoning was more that it would be generally distressing and upsetting, but there would be a certain amount of curiosity towards it, sure.

I wanted to allude to it, but in a way that wasn't upsetting; in a way that let people understand what was going on up there.

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The issue of survivor stories and death stories: under the pressure and under the time constraints I found it a real challenge to try and get that right. For example, I balked at this, but I wrote something about a 10-year-old boy in Flowerdale who . . . was found lying on his back with his blue eyes staring at the sky. I remember really debating with myself, "Do you put that in or don't you put that in?" I put it in . . . and I remember thinking to myself later on, "What if that was your kid?" I found it very difficult to make those judgements. I found that quite an emotional pressure. If I did it again, I'd be very careful on the description of bodies.

Photographers and television camera operators exercised judgment at the scene about what to shoot, based on their knowledge of what it was likely their organisations would publish. This meant that in the studios of one television station it was not necessary to expunge any of the vision on grounds of taste or decency. The camera operator, who was a respondent in this research, said he did not shoot bodies, had not seen a body, had avoided one when told of its presence. Speaking of this camera operator's footage, his news director, also a respondent, said:

The cameraman was very experienced. He shot an enormous amount of material, and from memory there was not a shot that wasn't usable. I told the head of production that someone should get that field tape and use it to teach young cameramen what to shoot.

Speaking of the criteria used to select material for broadcast, this news director said it was "a gut reaction thing":

In television news there aren't too many hard-and-fast rules about what you put to air. It's a medium that's got a fair bit of latitude. What you're trying to do is get the best pictures, get the best sound grabs and weave a story, tell the story. It is a gut-reaction thing. It is how a piece of vision or an emotive grab strikes a reporter and producers.

For people working on local newspapers, the criteria were different. They knew many of the victims and families personally. They were also constrained by the knowledge that they were going to have to live with these communities afterwards, and by the fact that their newspaper was put into people's letterboxes: the readers had not made a choice to purchase it.

Some of the criteria they used in judging whether to publish, such as verifying information, were no different from the criteria used by the media generally. But the local media were highly sensitised to community feelings: if people asked them not to publish, they did not publish. They did not publish photos of children who died. They did not publish grisly detail about how people died or the condition of bodies. They applied a "public interest" as opposed to a "public curiosity" test:

We were told so many things that we decided not to publish, particularly as a local newspaper. The [daily newspapers and commercial television] can helicopter in and helicopter out, and we can't. We're here. We have to face these people, we have to go back to them. And because we know them, we got some great stuff, and we got contact when a lot of other people didn't.

Q: In general terms, what sort of stuff did you not publish?

There was a claim about three teenagers found dead in a bath, and we made some inquiries and tried to find out if it was true, but we do know that the [daily newspaper] published it as a fact.

Q: What were the considerations you took into account in deciding whether to publish or not publish that kind of detail?

I asked myself, "What is the public interest? What would be the benefit of publishing this information?" And if people are saying, please don't publish this, we're not going to. We're protecting our sources, and we would hope that they would come back to us at some point, knowing we were trustworthy.

And this is a free newspaper that gets put in people's letterboxes.

It was bad enough, the photos we did publish, for the people to have to cope with. It was basically the deaths that we had the biggest questions over: how far do we go with that? I know the [daily newspaper] ran photos of all the children. Kids who'd died in the fires. And I was devastated to see that. And I thought, I would never do that.

What we have thought is, how can we approach it more sensitively? So we have started a pic gallery, starting with three months after the fire.

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Q: Did you find yourself making ethical decisions about what to put in or leave out of your copy?

Definitely. When people are in shock they will tell you things. There were a lot of people who got out of that area who saw dreadful things, and they were telling you, and giving you names of people who they knew were dead because they'd seen them. I didn't run with that because, apart from anything else, it was hearsay, and it was obviously going to be distressing for the families of those people.

There was actually quite a lot of stuff that I didn't use, that I just thought was gratuitous and that the people themselves would later regret, and it would cause incredible harm to the loved ones. And I'm very glad that I made that decision, because I know that others didn't.

A number of respondents were outspokenly critical of what they saw as the failure of some in the media to know where to draw the line between truth-telling on the one hand and voyeurism and mawkishness on the other:

The longer the coverage went on, the worse it got, generally - the need to find out more and more details about who had died and the way they'd died. It annoyed me rather than distressed me.

I think the [daily newspaper] at one point did a big thing about the children that had died, and I couldn't quite see the point of that. And then there were stories about the way children had died, and I couldn't see how that value-adds to anything.

There are limits that the media should draw. I mean, what's the point of knowing? Some of the things I saw on that side of it really kind of made me angry, that they were doing it, and would have caused a lot of distress to people.

I got sick of seeing stupid adjectives all the way through stories. Just do interviews and let people use their words.

A photographer who did not take pictures of a forensic team at work in the ruins of a house was still agonising months later about whether the decision was right. This respondent applied a "public benefit" criterion and balanced that against the impact on the people involved in the photo, especially given that it becomes part of the public record and is there forever:

I did see the forensics going through a house looking for bodies and I saw some media getting those shots and I made a decision at the time to keep going. But then the editors were really wanting those shots and

other media had got those shots and I was questioning whether I would do it again, maybe not showing so much of the property, just more close-up.

But I am still in the middle of the line between whether I would shoot it or pretend I hadn't seen it. I still don't know which way I would lean.

You've got to think, "What's the point in my taking that?" It's an ethical thing and we're all wired differently, and we'll all find our line in a different place.

Q: But what are the common factors we have to weigh?

When you take a picture, the people who are most keen to see the picture are the people involved. How are they going to react to it?

I could show more hard-edged stuff, but what is the benefit of that? That picture never goes away. It's there forever, and you've still got to look back in five years' time and go, did I make the right decision with that picture?

If I have to go to a funeral of a kid killed in a car crash, and I photograph other kids coming out crying, is there a benefit? Maybe it will show what happens when you drive too fast. Maybe that's a benefit.

What kept me going was that I knew it was history. Documenting things like that is so important.

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I don't take shots of corpses. I treat the scene with the sort of dignity that I would want for myself. In death, particularly violent or traumatic death, there is no dignity for the victim. They are in the worst state that they'll be seen. They can't defend their appearance or who they were. That's what I mean by looking after their dignity in death.

Media people make strategic as well as humane decisions about when to advance or withdraw, publish or withhold.

The following case study illustrates a number of these considerations.

CASE STUDY: WITHDRAWING AND WITHHOLDING

By about 2 o'clock [Sunday 8 February] it was obvious that the emergency services had locked up the area. So we ended up at Arthurs Creek, north of Hurstbridge, right next to Strathewen, south of Kinglake. And we saw this extraordinary group of people, anxious and waiting, oddly almost high-spirited: senses heightened by the event. Sometimes you get that feeling at funerals, I find: a slight euphoria because there has been this tense build-up and then a release and it comes out almost inappropriately.

And this great group of people, who had every reason to be on their knees wailing and weeping, were almost chatty and mildly hysterical. No one wanted to acknowledge the truth or the likely realism.

They were mostly residents who had evacuated, and people from Melbourne who knew their families and loved ones hadn't been in contact. Some of those people we approached and they told their story: why they were there. [It] was vague and not very useful, and I might have sent in three or four pars to be mulched in somewhere with other stuff.

We started to get these stories early in the afternoon, but as time went on and the wait continued, it all clamped down, and the whole mood started to shift, because the reality was dawning on them. That euphoria or strange feeling was subsiding, and there was this quite glum mood by about 5 o'clock.

We were speaking to the fire captain. My intention was to get in there [to Strathewen]. We wanted to see what the devastation was, but there was no way they were going to let us in.

A little while later, the fire captain said, "The people here – just be careful. It's getting more and more raw as the day goes on". And we understood that. I rang the newsdesk and said, "I don't think I'm going to get a story today. I think if we sit here long enough, we will get one, but we might not have something for tonight."

The feeling in Melbourne was, do what you think you have to do. If we don't get anything today, there's lots of stuff coming in anyway.

The fire captain tipped us off about 6 o'clock, and said, "You might just want to step back a bit. The police are about to arrive to tell them that there are no survivors in Strathewen. So if they know people were in there when the fire hit, they must know now they're dead.

So we decided to stand back from that.

When the police arrived and started to tell them what happened, people started to crumble. A woman collapsed, and a young man ran to the middle of the oval and we could hear him wailing because he discovered his parents had both perished.

We didn't take photographs of that. We observed it from 50 metres away. He just slumped and sat in the middle of the oval for about an hour, and finally someone walked over and took him away.

We felt we had no right to intrude at that point and listen to those people being told that their loved ones were likely gone.

About 9 o'clock, the fire captain said, "I really appreciate the way you stood back and just waited. Come out here first thing tomorrow and I'll personally take you in on a tour".

So we came back at 8 the next morning and he took us on a tour and the devastation was absolute. It was a hamlet that had been wiped out. So we got a very dramatic story with the fire captain. He was quite clearly traumatised himself, having dealt with the fires and then the aftermath.

As we went through Strathewen, he had graphic stories of what had happened to various people. It was a narrative of the scene through his eyes: what he'd seen and what he'd heard. Acts of bravery, acts of extraordinary luck, what fire fighters had done. There was police tape across driveways, which meant that the forensic team still had to come through. There was no way of verifying any of this, so we took it on his word and wrote a piece through his eyes.

As we went through, the fire chief himself was clearly on the brink. He was also teeing off at just about everybody. He had a red-hot go at the police, he had a red-hot go at CFA command. So when I came to write this piece, I deliberately censored a lot of those more extravagant claims out because I just felt it would have been totally unfair to him 24 hours after that event to have just published every word that fell out of his mouth, because he was quite clearly beside himself: a very high state of agitation, angry, traumatised, grief-stricken because he knew a lot of the people who'd been killed.

I thought if he wants to, in a month's time, sit down and make those same allegations and support them with evidence, I'll come back and ask him. But I didn't get a chance to do that, and I was interested when, five months later, he stood up at the royal commission and said exactly the same stuff again. So I perhaps could have used some of that material without compromising his integrity, but I didn't know that at the time, so I didn't use it.

I guess we apply a different standard when it's a public official who is in the public eye constantly and dealing with media. But I reckon you intuitively know what's right and wrong about that stuff. I don't know if the intuitiveness grows out of your journalism or just out of your humanity. You knew very quickly that this guy was on the edge.

2. COVERING A DISASTER “IN THE BACK YARD”

Decisions on what to publish and what to withhold also depended on the proximity of the audience to the disaster. If what was published was going to an audience that was closely affected, then more caution was exercised than if the audience and the disaster were remote from each other. One respondent, who had covered the 2004 tsunami in Asia, used that case to illustrate the point:

Q: Do you make decisions differently when it's about the local audience and when it's not?

I don't think there is any doubt that you do, because the impact on the viewer could be vastly different. For example, in the first few days of the Victorian bushfires, you might have been telling relatives or friends of people things they didn't know. The likelihood of that happening when you're covering something overseas like the tsunami, is less.

Some of the rules aren't the same, therefore, in terms of what you would say and what you would show, and how quickly you would say and show.

However, some of the rules are the same where you're dealing with cases where you specifically know there are Australians [involved in the remote disaster] and you're pumping it back into an Australian audience.

One thing that strikes me about this disaster is that there wasn't much lying out in the open in terms of human remains or things like that, that were as problematic as, say, the tsunami, where there were just bodies lying everywhere all the time.

And so I think we probably didn't have to do as much selection as people might think. But there were things like not homing in on one very clearly identifiable property when a death hadn't been confirmed from there yet.

There were issues like, we came to know after a few days what the police signal was for “there's a body in here”. They would tie a little bit of tape, and we had to be careful about showing that, because everybody else soon figured out what it meant too.

So there was shot selection in terms of just being careful that you weren't passing on news of a death to someone who, because they were a friend or relative, might look at it and realise what this meant in context.

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There was this woman in the distance with her head bowed and she was in front of a pile of rubble and we took some shots. She was quite upset and crying. I asked, “Do you mind if we have a few words?” But she said, “No, I don't want to speak.”

There was this great picture of that woman, but because subsequently she hadn't wanted to be interviewed, I took the decision not to use that picture. I might another time, but not this time.

Q: You said you might use such a picture another time. Can we explore that?

I do a lot of reporting overseas and people aren't going to see the pictures anyway. But this is different. If I took that sort of shot in Indonesia, I wouldn't set myself the same standards because that woman is never going to see the shot.

But if I'm in Indonesia and somebody says to me, “I don't want to be filmed”, I wouldn't show them.

At the same time, some respondents were concerned that the media were becoming hypersensitive and therefore might be failing on the truth-telling side of the balance:

We have to remember that we are supposed to be a mirror on society. Sometimes when you look in a mirror you don't like what you see. Now, sure, we have a responsibility to shield children from particular images, and things like that, but I fear that at the moment the community in general and even the authorities are probably trying to suppress what we do a little bit too much, and sanitise what we do a little bit too much, and that maybe the media is reacting to that and in fact is self-sanitising a little bit too much. I firmly believe that.

Sometimes I push people who I think are over-sensitising. Some people who work for us do apply too much sensitivity at the expense of the story and the outcome, and there are some who need to be reined in a little bit because they're tempted to push too far.

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When you're talking about the death of people who [were] living very close by and people who will read the paper might well know of, it does make you cover it differently. It does make it a bit trickier. However, I also think that it caused people to not be sceptical enough early on about some of those issues involving the authorities and the CFA and the competence of those [organisations].

There was a bit of a sense that you shouldn't really criticize the CFA because they did their best, that it was an overwhelming natural freak phenomenon – don't criticise them. And I think the closeness of the tragedy inhibited some media in criticising them. That sense permeated even my copy. So I think distance does make a difference in lots of ways.

My sense is that when the crisis was that big, we tended to get more of those decisions right, and we tended to err more on the side of caution.

Another respondent with experience of covering overseas disasters agreed that it makes a difference when the audience is so closely affected. This respondent's guiding principle was "to say it how it is, within boundaries". He did not articulate what these boundaries were, but illustrated what he meant:

Q: How important is it that it was in your own community?

That's really important. I think the local thing makes it much much worse. Hypothetically, you go to, say, Bangkok for a coup. You don't know anyone; they're not really your people. You feel for them but you don't have an attachment.

Q: What about that issue of what you put in or leave out? Is that an issue?

I don't leave much out. There were some details in relation to some deaths which I didn't put in because it was horrific for the people involved and for the readers, so you do edit a little bit out. I saw one body on the side of the road – obviously there was a blanket over it. A farmer looked under it and gave us detail but I didn't use any of that for obvious reasons. You try not to leave too much out, though, because then you just water things down and it's not how it is. You try to say it how it is within boundaries.

3. VERIFICATION

Verification was often difficult, particularly concerning names of the dead. Several respondents spoke of the need to withhold unconfirmed information of this kind.

A particular issue concerning verification arose from the use of the social networking website *Facebook* and other secondary sources, mainly for pictures of people:

Q: Did you go to Facebook for source material?

We do go to Facebook.

Q: How do you verify it?

You go to a source and you make sure that the person is identified. Either the person themselves or someone who can identify them. We don't just take it off Facebook and hope for the best.

Or the newspapers would have photos and quite often we'd borrow them off them.

Q: Would you verify them separately?

Yeah. You have to verify them. Otherwise you're cursed by your opposition's mistakes.

And the internet produced a further challenge to standards of verification. Most of the media people in this study were required to file for their organisation's websites as well as for their newspaper, radio or television station. This ceaseless demand for material created a situation in which, to quote one respondent, "what is fact right now can be proven to be fiction 20 minutes later". This respondent said:

It's very easy in the online age to be swept up . . . in the story and just whack stuff on and off the web.

Our reporters were told, when you've got information that is credible, newsworthy, and adds to the coverage, you must file online. Pictures as well.

The world is replete with online examples where everyone is in this mad rush to publish online. Everybody gets swept up in this. You've got a 24/7 news platform now.

[I said] "We want rigour." Obviously there are some things we are going to, with all good intentions, publish that in an hour or two, or next day, [are] going to be found to have been incorrect.

Another respondent, whose main job was to provide online content, also touched on the issue of verification. The standards described by this person were qualitatively different from those regarded as standard for journalism:

Online, it is important to have something simple but something up very quickly. So initially we had stuff up which the [TV] networks were using. We're allowed to use 30 per cent of anyone else's vision.

Q: Are you required to verify the material?

Only to the extent that you would cross-reference them and try and find [the parent newspaper's] story and contact the journalist who's written it before upload. You also weigh up the reputation of the source it's coming from.

One journalist, a careful and experienced reporter, recounted the process of verification he went through before naming a victim. It included obtaining the consent of an informant to using the information provided by him, as part of the process:

I was very confident of the name of some dead people, but the guy who told me said he didn't want it published. He later told me he had discovered the dead and knew who they were. And at that stage I told him I wanted to write something and I asked if that was all right and he said it was. He told me where the [dead man] worked and I rang the business and spoke to his business partner. He was the executor of the will.

Q: Had that identification been officially confirmed at that point?

No it hadn't.

Q: Did you publish the name?

Yep, on the basis of the identification from the executor of the will and the friend [who had found him].

Q: Had the executor seen the body?

No, but he knew the details.

This reporter also spoke about the impact even a minor factual error can have on traumatised survivors. He had written a story in which he mentioned the model of the family car. He got an irate phone call from a family member berating him for getting wrong the model of the car. After venting on this subject, she had added, "You are doing a great job. Keep it up." Reflecting on this, the reporter said:

It was a salutary lesson. It showed the importance of accuracy. I'm anal, pedantic and old-fashioned, but her just going nuts over this issue of the model of the car was a reminder.

4. THE "BLAME GAME" AND HOW THE STORY EVOLVED

One issue to be raised in the aftermath of the fires was whether the media gave sufficient attention to questions about the performance of the authorities and about the causes of the fires. When this issue came up, respondents referred to what was clearly an intuitive assessment of what they thought the news priorities were as the events unfolded. As the research proceeded, it became evident that the story of the bushfires – like many stories of major disaster – had a sequence of phases. Whether this is a sequence imposed by the media, or is a reflection by the media of a sequence which is natural or organic, is an open question.

One respondent discussed the evolutionary sequence of the story in some detail. The discussion began with a question:

Q: Why do you say a story about a fire captain going ape about the CFA command structure may not have got a run on day one?

Because the disaster was a bigger story than the blame game.

Q: Was there a time at which the blame game should have cut in?

I think it cut in about day three or four. Questions were starting to be asked. You had CFA captains questioning resources.

Q: Might there have been an instinctive sense by media generally that the public mood was such that it wasn't ready for the blame game to start?

I don't disagree with that. Because the fires were still going, because the volunteers were still working, because the State was in the hands of the CFA and the DSE and this fire-fighting effort which is now being questioned and scrutinised at the Royal Commission: I don't think it was a conscious decision not to start

going deeper into it. I don't think it was a propaganda decision. I don't think it was like, let's not discourage the troops.

But I think the story needed to evolve a bit more. The fight was still happening. The question of the competence of the response was always going to be asked. Everyone knew it was going to be asked. It was just when and how it was going to be asked.

Even before the Royal Commission started, these questions were being asked by the media, but it wasn't at the forefront of our mind on day one or two.

Q: Is what you come to regard as news by day five from different from what was regarded as news on day two?

That's right. It's the same story, the same terrible thing, but it has evolved.

This matter of story evolution was explored because it seemed at this point – relatively late in the fieldwork – that, from the pattern of responses already received, it played a part in decisions by media people about what kind of stories to pursue, when to pursue them, and how to do so.

This particular respondent became engaged with the topic, and a discussion ensued in which the researcher proposed names for certain phases of the bushfire story, and the respondent agreed, disagreed or made further comments and suggestions.

The conversation illustrates that media coverage – not just of disasters but of a wide range of stories – follows a fairly predictable pattern. The patterns are different for different types of story – the pattern for a federal election is different from the pattern for a disaster – but the patterns exist nonetheless:

Q: Can we try to put some names on the phases?

Interviewer's suggestions	Respondent's answers
The flame phase?	<i>Yes, by all means.</i>
The death-toll/wreckage/devastation phase?	<i>Yes.</i>
The survivor phase?	<i>Yes.</i>
	<i>The "victims" phase put in here at the respondent's suggestion</i>
	<i>The "tribute" phase put in here after discussion with the respondent.</i>
The relief and support phase?	<i>Yep.</i>
The comprehension phase?	<i>Yes.</i>
The incipient recovery phase?	<i>Yes.</i>
The causation/blame phase?	<i>Yes.</i>

Q: Is that sort of the way it moved?

That's exactly the way it moved.

Another respondent, from another medium, also spoke of the sequential development of the story. He also spoke of how the media divined when it was time to move from one to the next, by responding to audience feedback. He spoke first, however, about the specific issue of the "blame game":

On the second or third day [another paper]’s front page headline was something like “Now the blame game starts” – I can’t recall the exact words. But we felt in the first week [that] the time would come for those sorts of stories; the time would come when the scrutiny and the investigation and the rigours of journalism would have to be applied to ‘why?’ and ‘what went wrong?’ etc.

But the first week was not the time to do it. They were still finding bodies, and people were grieving, and there had to be a whole grieving process, and there was these amazing tales at the same time of people who’d survived. These were powerful stories, and we felt that needed to be told first. There was a grieving process if you like.

It’s not that we ignored the so-called blame stories – they were there, but not with the prominence that some of the other papers gave it. We got into that kind of stuff week two. We probably knew on February the 8th, 9th that something had gone wrong.

Q: You obviously think that in covering a disaster in your own community there are phases in the coverage – that the first phase is a kind of grieving phase. Is that true?

Yeah, absolutely – celebration of survival, grieving for our loved ones.

Q: So how do you make the decision to move on to the next phase?

At some point, a reader will say, “Enough. I cannot read another story about a family that got into their bath thinking they were going to survive and were killed.”

5. LIFE, DEATH, AND CONFLICTING INFORMATION

Radio remains the fleetest medium for conveying breaking news. Throughout Black Saturday, it was radio that became the most important source of information to the public. Swift or slow, however, any medium of news is only as good as its sources of information. By convention and good practice, radio relies on official sources for its information about unfolding disasters. On Black Saturday, however, the official sources of information – the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and the State Emergency Services (SES) - were overwhelmed. The consequences of this for the decision-making in radio stations, which were trying to provide a comprehensive information service, were exceptionally challenging for the staff involved.

As the official sources of information fell further and further behind what was happening on the ground, vast amounts of unofficial information began pouring in from phone calls, text messages and Twitter. One broadcaster received approximately 8000 phone calls – ten times the usual daily number – and between 7000 and 10,000 SMS messages on Black Saturday, mostly between mid-afternoon and early evening.

This confronted broadcasters with several difficult tasks:

- how to assess the quality of the unofficial information;
- how to choose what, from this vast harvest, they should broadcast;
- how to reconcile this unofficial information with the often contradictory information from the official sources which – as became clear months later – was hopelessly out of date, and
- how to provide the best possible information without undermining public confidence in the official sources and the organisations behind them.

Arrangements between broadcasters and the emergency services stipulate the minimum requirements for broadcasting bushfire information. These requirements define three levels of message, each with a different level of priority:

1. An “awareness” message is the least urgent and refers to fires that are not a threat to people or property. These can be broadcast at the broadcaster’s convenience, more or less.
2. An “alert” message refers to fires that might become a danger to people and property, and are broadcast about half-hourly.
3. An “urgent threat” message is the most urgent and refers to fires that pose an immediate threat to people or property. These must be broadcast immediately and then repeated every 15 minutes.

Against that backdrop, this is the account of a radio producer’s afternoon on Black Saturday.

CASE STUDY: MANAGING A “ROLLING” BROADCAST

We took the news at one, and then we “rolled” [broadcast fire information continuously] from then on. A whole lot of factors play into that: the conditions on the day; the fact that there were three separate “going” fires, one with an “urgent threat” message; a recognition that the community needed that comprehensive coverage. Perhaps it’s the companionship as well: that we’re not leaving them.

The threat messages aren’t telling the whole story. There is a whole lot of other information. By rolling coverage, we can take talkback callers, we can talk to the incident controllers, do one-on-one interviews, we can talk to the weather bureau and find out what the local conditions are like.

I was just amazed at how quickly it took off: from half-past twelve, when there was an “alert” message, to suddenly an “urgent threat” message. And then we had three “urgent threat” messages, and then we had six and then we had fifteen.

I was trying to keep a mental log, a list of each major fire so I could tick off in my mind regular updates with the incident controllers.

I had a Word document open on my computer. As each new “threat” message came in, I was adding it to my list, but about 4 o’clock – although it might have been earlier – I felt quite panicked, and I turned to the producer beside me and said, “I can’t keep up with this. I haven’t got my head around it.” It was just too many to keep track of: location, and the towns each one was threatening. So many fires started simultaneously.

I don’t generally lose my head. I am quite a calm person, but I just found it so hard to understand what was happening.

We just tried to cope as best we could. We had a big laminated map of Victoria in the studio. Every time a new fire sprang up, I tried to put a dot on the place so at least I could look at it and say, okay, here and here and here.

I just had to hope that in our “threat” messages, we would get out what was necessary.

[We needed] better mapping. An electronic map, or access to the maps that they must have at the incident control centres. We didn’t have a lot of mapping on that day.

A producer’s friend – a fire-behaviour expert – to work with us in the studio to help give us that perspective [would help], because it was all happening so quickly. Someone to say, “Hey, look: I tell you now, this Kilmore East fire, with that wind behind it, it’s going to be threatening Kinglake. Forget that it’s in Kilmore or Wandong. Over here is what we need to worry about.”

The same with the Murrindindi Mill fire: "This bit here is State Forest; here's a big hill." We've got a map but it's not a topographic map with valleys and hills and ridges.

Someone who can make sense of it, both on air and in the studio.

Q: So it's mid to late afternoon and all these fires are happening and you're getting a stream of information from the CFA. Are you getting other information?

Yes. Mostly from the public. Phone calls. On a regular day, we get around 800 talkback calls. We had 8000 on that Saturday. We answered as many as we could: perhaps 800 or 1000.

Initially people rang to tell us what they were experiencing. As the day went on, they were ringing for very specific information. They wanted to know, would they be okay?

It was really hard. Our set position is to tell them that we can't provide personalised information because we don't know enough, and we risk giving people information that they're basing their life-and-death decisions on. So we say, "Keep listening. We're going to have another update on that fire soon."

Q: Were there occasions when the information you were getting from people like that was different from the information you were getting from the authorities?

Yes. I took about half a dozen calls from Kinglake saying the fire was in Kinglake or approaching Kinglake, and there were no [official] messages for Kinglake. So I rang the CFA media and said, "What's going on in Kinglake?" And they said, "There's nothing listed for Kinglake." And I said, "Well, I've had half a dozen calls from Kinglake, so you'd better go and check", because there was clearly something happening in Kinglake.

Q: What did you do by way of broadcast?

We were putting callers to air who were eye-witnesses; people who weren't panicking.

Q: How did you assess a caller's credibility?

Ideally people who could speak directly about what they had seen. So they weren't reporting hearsay. In some cases it was people who had spoken with friends or relatives in the fire area, but first-hand account where possible.

Some people rang up quite panicked, and we were cautious about putting that sort of tone to air.

Q: So if they were factual, sounded stable, preferably reporting first-hand?

Yes. They were the main ones.

In some cases the producers knew they were the last people who spoke to these callers before they died in the fire. And God, you just wouldn't want to hear that on air. It's horrific.

It might have made great radio from a really morbid perspective. But we want to be accurate, timely and useful in what we put to air, and I'm not sure it fits with our role to create public panic in an emergency.

I've heard people speak about coverage that other broadcasters provided in other fire situations where they did put callers to air who were panicking, and you run the risk of adding to it, whipping up fear and frenzy rather than broadcasting calm and clear information.

We were trying to keep a radio program going, but we were human beings first and radio producers second.

In the case of radio, broadcasters had to decide whether people calling on the talkback line were ringing to tell what was happening to them or to ask for help. Calls for help were not considered suitable for broadcast because it was seen to be a violation of the caller's intent and therefore a breach of trust. These decisions were made on the run and for reasons which the broadcasters had no time to articulate at the time, although they did so later in conversation with the researchers:

Q: What about people who were in obvious distress? Did you broadcast any of them?

Not to my memory. The ones I'm thinking of were later in the afternoon, from 4 o'clock getting towards 7 o'clock, which matches the time the fires went through Kinglake and Marysville.

People rang us because they couldn't get through to triple 0, and they were really facing life-and-death situations. They weren't ringing to go on air but to find out if there was any help.

I had a caller in Healesville who said, "The fire is at the end of my street. There is no fire truck. Do they know about this fire? Are they coming?" I put her on hold and rang CFA media and they said they knew about it. So I told the caller that they knew.

Q: You didn't broadcast the call?

No. I didn't even consider it. She didn't ring and say I want to talk about what I'm seeing". It was a call for help.

A couple of people took calls from people who were trapped in their houses. Someone took a call from someone trapped in a car with the kids.

Q: You didn't broadcast those?

No. Going back to the criteria [for selecting calls to broadcast]: the people would have been panicking, they would not have been rational. We felt that we did what we could for those people.

Q: And not exploit them?

No. That was the situation. There was a sense of responsibility in giving life-or-death information.

Another respondent spoke of the utterly unforeseen roles thrust on to media people working in radio:

People turned to us to play all sorts of roles that we're not equipped for. This isn't what we signed up for. None of us ever contemplated that we would be live to air giving people information that is determining whether they live or die in the middle of a massive emergency.

There was one call where the guy is saying, "The main street's on fire, the petrol station's on fire, shit it's coming . . . I've got to go, I've got to go!" Click. I don't know what happened to that man. And that's but one.

It's a privilege. It's also, as we have learnt, an awesome responsibility.

We have to stay dispassionate, disconnected. We can't give advice on the radio. We can't tell people what to do.

CASE STUDY: SIFTING WHEAT FROM CHAFF

People were ringing up for everything you can think of, and more. I took a call from a woman who rang from Brisbane at 11 o'clock on the Saturday night and said, "Thank God you've answered the phone. My father lives in Kinglake, he's in his eighties, he doesn't have a mobile phone, his home phone's disconnected. How do I find out if he's alive or dead?"

That's a really hard conversation to have with anybody in any circumstances, let alone when you're in the middle of a radio studio. You've got pandemonium. You've got every imaginable phone line ringing all the time. You've got half a dozen people buzzing around with their heads exploding trying to keep the service going out to air. You can't say, "I'll put you on hold." You can't say, "Ring someone else, leave me alone, I'm trying to put a radio show to air."

We grabbed an extra handset and I said to the people who were running the program, "Give me the hard ones, so you're free to put the program to air. The emotionally distraught, or the crying person, or the one that's too complicated and is going to take too long, flick it to me."

Q: How did you deal with those sorts of people? What could you do for them?

You'd be empathetic and try to reassure people. You could give them some time. They had finally got through after ringing triple 0 and getting an engaged signal, and ringing police who said, "We can't help you".

That's where technology is very useful. You don't get an engaged signal with a text message. If you've got some very important information – "Don't go down the Melba Highway" – you don't stand in the middle of a fire waiting to get through for 15 minutes. But if you can send a text message, we can read it out.

The texting was brilliant. There were literally thousands of text messages that night, and we read out as many as we could.

We were trying to pick the guts out of them whilst on air, at the same time monitoring the texts to try to get the really important ones out. It's pot luck of course, but you do the best you can.

Q: You have to make an assumption that people are texting you accurate information?

You do. As you do with a talkback caller. If a talkback caller says the Melba Highway is on fire, do you believe them or not? You can't independently verify it. You can't verify it until it's far too late to be useful.

You just decide: Do you sound credible? Yes. You go to air. You sound hysterical, you don't sound credible, or, "Do you know that yourself, or has someone told you?" "Oh me mate said . . ." "Right, thanks, we'll pass that on." And you don't.

But if someone says, "I'm driving on the Melba Highway and it's shit. Don't let anyone else come down here", okay, thank you, we'll read that out on air. And you're making those decisions every moment.

It's really pretty intense, and that's why experience is so important.

Those text messages are coming; you're getting faxes thrown at you; you're getting stuff printed off the website; you're getting stuff in your ears, and you have to process and prioritise it.

Q: Do you have anyone to assist you do that while you're on air?

No. You can't. Your producers are feeding you talent for the interviews, and on the screen they're saying, "Next cross to the CFA or the DSE", or "Go now to Sale or Beechworth, or the policeman in Bendigo", and sometimes they'll wave their arms at you: "Now! You've got to do it!"

Q: You're getting information from the emergency services?

And some of it's shit.

Q: How do you know?

When the official information is contradicted by all your text messages and talkback callers, and they are on the spot, you're hamstrung. You read the emergency service message, but at the same time you're saying – and we did this a few times – okay, we've got this latest information from the emergency services, although we have had a text message that says [something contrary].

It's not for me, on air, to undermine the integrity of the emergency message.

Q: Or to make a choice between the two?

Can't do that. You don't actually absolutely know, but by golly there's something seriously wrong here.

Q: You're not subject to controls by the emergency services for what you broadcast?

Absolutely not, although we can't second-guess them, and from a public-policy point of view we're not going to undermine people's confidence in them.

But we will add to what they're saying. We'll challenge what they're saying, and we will say, "We're getting reports from people that the fire is here. Why are you saying it's there?"

They say, "Yes, we're getting reports of all sorts but the latest official information . . ." and we used to contrast this: the latest official information is blah blah, but we're getting reports of blah blah. We did that time and time again.

I'm immensely proud of what the team did, and I'm acutely aware that there are people who died and maybe we let them down. And it's horrible.

No matter what you did do, you can't help but wonder what you didn't do.

What was discovered [when the material was reviewed] was that the broadcast to air kept up to an extraordinary level with the latest information coming in on the texts. The texts are time-coded. Apparently we picked the eyes out of the texts to a really high degree.

We kept ticking over the vital information, sifting out from the dross and the criticisms of the emergency services and people complaining that they couldn't get through to triple 0 and all that stuff.

Q: Why did you sift out stuff that was criticism?

You don't want to read out "I can't get through to triple 0" eight hundred times in a five-hour shift. In fact we were doing the opposite. We were saying, "Please do not ring triple 0 unless you are in direct need of a service. If you just want information, do not ring triple 0." I remember saying that countless times.

Q: In prioritising the material, what was your priority order?

Information about the fires: where is the fire? I can't go on the radio and say, "Get the ____ out of Kinglake. I'm not allowed to do that, even if it's abundantly clear that that's what people should do.

What if I say, "Get out of Kinglake", and someone gets out of Kinglake and perishes on the road? Tempting as it may be, you can't tell people what to do.

Q: You give them the information but you can't tell them what to do?

You can't tell them what to do. That's not what we're here for. Even if you think you know, you might not, and the consequences of it being wrong are beyond contemplation.

It's not our role to tell people what to do at any time, but especially not during an emergency like this. That was really hard.

CONCLUSIONS

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.

One or two respondents spoke of self-censorship when they were talking about material they had withheld; others spoke of censorship when they referred to attempts by the authorities to keep the media out of fire-ground places.

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 used the “need to know” test when deciding how much grisly detail to put in their copy – and the answer tended to be “none” or “not much”. They asked themselves: Can I tell the story without putting this in? 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. No respondent thought that the authorities had any interest in a cover up. It is difficult, then, to reconcile that view with the 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. One journalist had been fascinated by the accounts of how people died, and realised that others would probably be fascinated too, in a morbid kind of way. But he also realised that to publish that information, while satiating public curiosity, was not in the public interest.

It is also not in the public interest to publish wrong or misleading material and the way to prevent that is to verify the accuracy of the facts beforehand. At least that is the conventional journalistic method. 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, and that the processes for verifying online content, except when it came directly from the associated newspaper's own reporters, were threadbare.

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 clear from this research that 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 had 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 was known that the tape signified a death. It also had to do with a more subtle factor: that the audience is more affected when it closely identifies with the victims.

So the idea of the “back yard” – proximity – has both a geographic and a cultural dimension.

Proximity seemed also to play a part in decisions by the media about when to move from one phase of the story to the next. In particular, it appeared to affect decisions about when the community was ready to start debating the performance of the authorities – “the blame game”. Many respondents, especially those in positions to make decisions about editorial strategy, revealed an instinctive approach to this. As a general rule, the closer the outlet was to the affected community, the longer it took to start engaging in the “blame game”.

The research also showed that there is a formulaic approach to media coverage of major disasters, as there is to coverage of many events. Formulae help because they create routines which make decision-making easier. However, there is a question about how the formulae develop, and whether they are optimal in serving the interests of the audience. They tend to develop from the copying of what looks like good ideas from coverage of earlier similar events, rather than from hard thinking about what the public might need. The “tribute” phase is a good example. Does the public need to be confronted with photos of children who perished?

CHAPTER 5

EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF COVERING THE BUSHFIRES

Covering the Black Saturday bushfires and their aftermath exacted a severe emotional toll on many of the media people interviewed for this research. The interviews were conducted between May and August 2009, between three and six months after the fires. Few respondents got through the interview without showing emotion.

Seasoned veterans and relative novices; men and women; people from newspapers, radio stations, television channels or websites; reporters, photographers, camera operators; those who had been to the fire ground and those who had not: it made no difference. All were deeply affected.

Their ability to cope, however, differed widely, and here experience did count. Those with substantial exposure to trauma, especially wars and disasters, were able to recognise within themselves the symptoms of their own familiar reactions. They were also able to assimilate the emotional impact more quickly and remain fixed on the job at hand.

Their employers had offered counselling, but whether because of the way it was offered or because of the state of mind in which the offers were received, few took it up. Some went off and obtained professional help at their own expense rather than do it through the company for fear that, despite assurances to the contrary, their cards would be marked and they might not be assigned to similar big stories in future.

Some de-briefing sessions were held, but they differed widely in content, atmosphere and effectiveness. Even where they were conducted in a constructive atmosphere, participants preferred to confine their discussions to logistics and equipment failures rather than matters of the mind. Some were conducted in a slightly hard-bitten atmosphere where there was a sense that this was something that had to be got through regardless of individual need. None of the respondents said they gave much away in these sessions.

The picture to emerge was of an industry that, while it has come a long way in recognising the trauma caused by covering disasters and wars, still has a lot to learn about how to help traumatised staff.

Five themes emerged in these discussions:

1. The sources of trauma.
2. The impact of coming back.
3. Effects of physical and emotional exhaustion.
4. Getting help: needs and barriers.
5. The value of experience.

1. SOURCES OF TRAUMA

Not many of the respondents saw exposed bodies. A few did, a few more saw bodies in bags or under covers, but most did not. Many were told of horrendous ways in which people had died and of indescribably awful discoveries made by the emergency services personnel. So exposure to physical horror was to a considerable extent vicarious. While this was bad enough and played a part in traumatising them, it became clear from what respondents said that it was by no means the whole story, nor perhaps even the most important part of it. Judging from their emotional responses during the interviews, the important factors were:

- the shocking scale and intensity of destruction;
- the cruel capriciousness of the fires, and
- the unrelenting exposure to human suffering.

2. THE IMPACT OF COMING BACK

Their immersion in this consuming tragedy was made worse for many by the shock of coming back. It was all so close to Melbourne. Within a few minutes' drive from the fire ground, they were transported from a Dantean world of lamentation to what seemed the obscenely serene normality of suburban Melbourne: fast food joints, traffic lights and everyone going about as if indifferent to what had happened just over the ridge.

This engendered a sense of embittered disconnection between them and the rest of their world, and was something for which few were prepared. It was as if no one understood or could grasp what had happened. Many likened it to returning from a war, where the only people who understood were those who had been in the war too. This created tensions in the office and, for some, at home. It also altered people's perspective on what was important.

Another commonly reported symptom was a flatness and lack of interest in routine work. Many respondents spoke disparagingly of the usual diet of media stories, as if none of it mattered any more. This mood tended to last for two or three weeks, sometimes longer. Those who sought professional advice about it had been told it was a normal reaction.

The case studies that follow illustrate two of these major themes: the sources of trauma, and the impact of coming back. The first is an account of Marysville on the morning of Sunday 8 February.

CASE STUDY: ON THE FIRE GROUND

We believed Kinglake had been taken out. We thought a few houses here and there. We did not expect to see what I saw. I'd never seen anything like that before.

And if I thought Kinglake was bad, Marysville was just . . . it went from bad to worse to a catastrophe.

At this stage we're not seeing bodies. We're just seeing property, and the enormity of it all, and the fact that these hills could be scarred. Just black sticks.

It was a bit hard to cope with.

The smoke was quite strong. I came over the hill and I could just make out some plots. There were these white things on the ground, these little white blocks, and I looked at them and went, "Okay, what are . . .? Oh my God, they're houses".

But there are trees still standing. It was like someone had come along and torched every house individually. All that was left was the foundation, the brickwork and the stumps. Everything else was dust. The house in its entirety was this white powder. And it was incredibly hot.

I was never at Hiroshima, but this was pretty close to it.

At this stage it didn't really hit me, and I'm taking it all in. We walked up to the Marysville Primary School, and that's when it hit me. There was the school demolished. To my left there was a sail cloth, still blowing in the breeze, still painted, still green, poles still green.

But I think the bit that hit me was the sign: Marysville Primary School, perfectly painted, not even touched. Trees had fallen. Everything was burnt. This thing was pristine. I let go. Then I counted to ten and got on with the job.

I kept seeing things with disbelief. There was a grate in the school to take water. There were flames coming out of it. It was bizarre.

We walked around the streets. There was a house demolished, the roller door still standing. The car in the driveway is completely gutted, everything around it is burnt, but there's a picket fence with a letterbox still intact, still with its paint. Doesn't make sense.

The "Police" sign is about a metre square, depth of about 40 centimetres. Has fluoros inside it. One side was completely melted, disappeared. The other side was fine.

It didn't make any sense.

There was an ice chest. The ice had melted but the bags of water were still in the ice chest. The bags were sitting there floating.

And there was this little lean-to or weatherboard shed or very small house, bright blue, standing amongst carnage left and right.

Didn't make any sense at all.

CASE STUDY: COMING BACK

You've spent three days in a war zone and you come back to Melbourne, and you get to Whittlesea and, bang, you're back in the suburbs. And it's Triple M, McDonald's. It's like nothing's happened. And that really affected me. It was just a sense that this horrible, horrible thing had happened so close, but it was almost like a gate that you went through, and you were back in Mill Park and Melbourne, and it was as if it might never have happened.

I felt an absolute sense of disconnection. Coming back was incredibly difficult.

The immediate thing it did was to colour the way I wrote, because I understood then that people didn't get it. They got that there had been a fire; they got that there were lots of people dead – but they didn't get certain things about it – like how hot it was.

I'd spent some time at a bloke's house and the glass around his place had melted. So I found out how hot it has to be to melt domestic glass and it was 600 degrees. And it was quite common to find melted aluminium. That's 800 degrees. I wanted people to understand that.

And I wanted people to understand that where a house was – they'd seen just the chimney stacks – all that white stuff – that's bone, among other things – wood, brick, mud brick, and bone. That's what that is. I wanted people to understand that. And the horrific nature of what people had seen, without going into the detail.

It was so confronting, coming back. It was really hard.

[The editor] was really supportive and really good. Slowly, after a few more days, I started feeling a bit more human again.

I thought the going there and the being there would be a hard bit, but it's not. It's the coming back that's the hard bit. I didn't know that. I do now.

Other media people also recounted difficulties with disconnection:

I really struggled when I came back. I don't think any of the people here had any understanding of what I'd been through.

We'd have our news meeting and I didn't even feel as though I was in the room. I was talking in the meeting, but I felt like I wasn't in the room. It was awful. There was this total disassociation.

If I went to the shops, I'd think, why is everyone acting so normal?

I was up there nine days. In the middle of all this I got an email from management inviting us to drinks to thank us for all the hard work. And I didn't cope very well with that. I interpreted that as, "Oh well done, everybody, let's all celebrate how well you've done." This was the Tuesday or Wednesday and we were still in the middle of a whole lot of horrible things that were happening. I just felt they had no understanding whatsoever of what we were going through.

I rang [a senior manager] and told them they had no idea and I would not be coming to their drinks. [Manager] was here within the hour to say they were here for us and giving me a direct phone number, and that was great.

*

When I came home I felt quite removed from everything, because you've been working on something that is so huge and extreme. And you go back to your ordinary reporting and I felt really flat. I think that's normal.

*

Q: How have you coped?

Pretty dreadful. I was pretty silent at home. This job is about being a spectator, and the trick is to know when in life to stop being a spectator and start being a participant. Sometimes you continue being a spectator with your own family. You have to re-engage and remember that you have to be a participant.

Not long after the fires, one of our neighbours had a party and they lit a large bonfire. I went outside and the sound and the smell – it was too much for me. And I thought, “It’s done something to me”.

Q: Have you been offered any assistance?

Yes, and I haven’t made use of it, but I probably will.

3. THE EFFECTS OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

Many respondents described the effects of overwork and constant exposure to human suffering:

I was angry. I was unmotivated. Victims speak to us about their grief – we encourage it. But when we’ve got it, what do we do with it?

This time, for about three weeks I bottled up my feelings and became another person to my family. I felt that they probably didn’t understand.

I turned to alcohol a bit to help deal with that at the time.

It has helped going back up there. It helps watching blocks of land starting to be rebuilt.

*

Physically I was absolutely exhausted. For weeks after I couldn’t function properly at work, I was just emotionally drained. I was only out there for that one day. My main stress was just trying to get it right.

*

It was getting to me. You saw and heard terrible things. I was pretty upset. I lost three kilos. I couldn’t eat.

*

I got back to Melbourne at nine o’clock at night. I hadn’t eaten all day, hadn’t slept for a week, pretty much, and I was just an emotional and physical wreck. I decided that was it for me. I didn’t go out into the field after that. I’d had enough mentally.

I decided to go to the beach on the Saturday, and I was driving down to Torquay with my wife, and I just burst into tears. It was weird. I had a big flash in my head. I had the week flash before my eyes and I started hearing the talkback callers. Everything seemed to hit me all at once and I just lost it, and I cried for about 20 minutes, and I hadn’t cried in years. It was only from that time on that I started to get a bit of normalcy again and get some rest and some food and start to function as a human being again.

Q: Did you get some help?

[Superiors] encouraged me to get some help. They provided me with a counselling number. I decided against it, rightly or wrongly. It sounds stupid, but after I had that cry, I felt that was what I needed. I probably should have seen a counsellor. I think I probably will eventually.

And work – once you started moving back to some of the crap we cover in the media, it’s a real emotional comedown. You start to think, what am I doing with my life? How is this relevant to anything?

*

I came back on the Saturday and went to a party on the Saturday night, and quite a lot of people were asking me about it, and I remember saying to my partner, "I want to just have a few drinks and forget about this."

I didn't see anything that disturbed me. I didn't do any particularly traumatic interviews, but the destruction – it was huge. And being in amongst all those people who had lost everything – I'd say I was a little bit depressed when I came back.

4. GETTING HELP: NEEDS AND BARRIERS

All the employers of the media people in this research had offered counselling. Among editors and news executives, there was an awareness that this was a sensitive matter for the individuals:

I offered counselling to all the staff. We don't track it, because it's a personal thing, so I don't know who went and who didn't, but I offered it a couple of times. Nobody's told me that went. Sometimes they do. We've done that right back to Port Arthur.

*

We have a responsibility to make sure our own people are okay, and I don't think the media have done that well enough and I still don't think it does it well enough.

*

The hardest part for us to deal with was that it was relentless. It was day in, day out, threats coming back. The risk to the upper Yarra Valley and Warburton went on until the 4th of March.

As days and days went by, I had to look out for them a bit more, and I would have to say no, I don't think you should do that; I think you should go home and get some rest.

The company offered us counselling. They provided what support they could.

Q: Did you take it up?

No. I impressed on my staff that it would be a good idea to take the [phone] number, because even if they didn't feel like it now, in six months you may need it.

It was hard to keep going. Other people had moved on and they were expecting you to go back to normal and you're still talking about fires, and they're going, "What the . . . what are you going on about? It's gone, it's passed." Well, sorry, it hasn't.

There was a fresh alert in Healesville [weeks after Black Saturday] and I asked [a reporter] if she could go up there. She said, "Yes, fine", got in the car, and then a little while later she rang me in tears saying, "I can't do it. I can't go and everyone will think I'm a wuss." And I said, "No. Most people would be scared out of their wits going into a fire zone." No one wants to go into them.

The best thing I did to support them was being organised, being around and being, for them, the voice of reason when they were out there and everything was chaotic.

And when they got back from the field, I made sure there was food.

*

People were working long hours and getting tired. Some were becoming vulnerable to exhaustion and also emotional. I have been in those situations, so I was keeping an eye on them.

I adopted an approach of sending the same people back to the same locations, because it was safer to have the same people back into the same areas. They knew what the hazards were. They knew what we

had and hadn't done already in those areas. But as a consequence you had to monitor those people carefully because they were getting it in their face every day.

Q: Have you offered assistance?

Yes, we did it formally and I guess I was doing it informally right from the start.

Q: Did many staff take up the offer?

I don't know, and that's the way it should be. There are a couple who I hope did.

*

We've done emails, all sorts of things. It's a very private thing. We've been very careful of not being overly prescriptive about it. I've encouraged the editors and the section heads to look for the signs and try and get people to get [help].

One reporter was sent out – very good reporter – and the first thing this reporter saw was a body covered by a sheet. [The reporter] went to pieces completely. We said, "That's quite all right", pulled this person out and this person was given what could only be described as the most tender loving care by management. Told in no uncertain terms, "It's cool, it's fine." [This person was] given counselling. And that was a great example of how we recognized and managed [it].

Despite these assurances, many respondents were wary of accepting company offers of assistance. This reflects a longstanding culture in the media that might be summed up as "real reporters don't cry". Despite decades of evidence to the contrary, this attitude still lingers, or is perceived to linger, and creates real barriers to people accepting psychological help after covering traumatic stories.

From the staff perspective, there was in some cases a perfunctoriness or remoteness about the offers of assistance which reinforced their preconceptions that it probably was not a good look to be getting help. And while some editorial executives did a fine job in supporting their staff, others did little. The picture is very mixed:

I have suffered post-traumatic stress quite a bit. I have been to a psychologist. I think I'm fine now. I have probably been more emotional about a lot of things, and I can't explain it.

Work did offer it, but I didn't take up their offer. I paid for it myself, because I felt that if I had taken that, I probably wouldn't be chosen to cover things like this in the future.

*

Q: Do you think media companies offer enough help [to journalists covering the fires]?

No. Nowhere near enough. You can't have anything to do with a disaster like that without being traumatised.

I think most of the media organizations would have said, "If you need help" – standard thing – "if you need help, the phone number for the counselling service is here. . . ."

Very few people are going to do that voluntarily, for lots of reasons. But they should make it compulsory. They should say, "You have covered this story and we're going to give you a week off, but you have to go and see this person and have at least one initial counselling session." At [organisation] I suppose generally people were offered counselling – I think they were encouraged to go – but I only know one person who rang up and spoke to a counsellor over the phone.

Q: So all the reporters haven't been called in? There hasn't been a de-briefing?

Not as far as I'm aware.

Historically, media companies have not been good at this, and even now I think they offer it without really knowing. They offer counselling because Human Resources tells them that they should do it. They don't see any need for it. And I think that senior editorial executives don't . . . you come up through the school of hard knocks and you don't even recognize it as being an issue.

*

Word got back that [another paper] had brought in people and editorially they'd got people together. So we were sent an email saying, "We've got this company and if you're having any problems you can ring". We all then got rung up by a counsellor, who asked us a series of questions and [gave his] number.

Q: But editors didn't call you all together?

No, there was nothing. None of that happened.

Q: Do you think it should have?

Yes, I think it should have.

*

We had a bit of a de-brief in here among the group. We just sat around the table, but there was not much said. No one was really traumatised, or nobody said they were. People were talking about logistics and how that could be done better.

*

We had a post-fires briefing from the DART Centre. It wasn't entirely successful because you were in there with people saying things like, "Oh this is just bullshit, this trauma stuff. None of us have to worry about any of this stuff. That's just part of the job."

Q: Might it have been better to do it individually?

I think so, yes. Or small groups. In a big group like that, once someone has said that, no one else wants to open up. So there were a few minutes talking about stress, and then it was about equipment failures. That seemed a bit easier to talk about in a group.

What was good was that he said, "You might feel a bit vulnerable for a couple of weeks, everything else might feel a bit flat by comparison, but then you start to feel better and things return to normal. If it keeps going for four or five weeks, if you're getting nightmares or anything like that, then you need to go and seek some help. It was good to have those parameters set out.

The company offers counselling sessions. I didn't feel I need to [take that up].

Some companies were seen to be improving in the way they handled this matter:

Q: Has covering the fires had an effect on you personally?

Absolutely. It was very upsetting, particularly the first week. It makes me upset thinking about it now, thinking about the people. It was as if they were in a one-day war. It was short, but it was overpowering, a massive scale. And they were all innocent.

Q: Did the company offer assistance?

Yes, they offered counselling and got us together for a session a couple of weeks afterwards. How the company performed was fine. But they have a shithouse way of managing their bushfire kits. Seriously.

*

I've pretty much been there the whole time. I've had breaks – there've been times when I've been worn out. But I've been up and back a lot – probably more than anyone else at the paper.

Q: Has it had an effect on you?

Yeah it has. I'm still processing it all. Continually going back has made it much harder. I'm quite emotional about it all.

Q: Has assistance been offered?

It's been offered, but I haven't taken it up. I've had a lot of experience and I like to think I've got pretty sophisticated skills at dealing with this sort of stuff. I had a bad two weeks about six or eight weeks after it all – I was a bit of a mess – very anxious and all that. But I worked through that.

Q: Did your organization do that well?

I think we're getting there. This is the best I've seen in terms of the company making a real effort. I was surprised at the level of compassion in the office. Every night the editor-in-chief made sure that the editorial assistants rang up to see how we were going. And that was terrific – it's all you really need.

Some media people said they suspected their experiences in the fires might have changed forever the way they did their job:

I love doing hard news. That's what I do best. But after the fires I started to question that. I thought, "It's really tainted me and I don't know if I can jump straight in again".

*

In some ways I think that's probably hampered my ability to do something since, because there are probably some questions that maybe, as a journalist, I should ask, but I won't because I know what you're asking the subject of the interview to do. Maybe I err too much on the side of caution now.

It's changed the way I would cover those kinds of things in future. Print journalists feel this compulsion to try and convey some sense of what it was like. I would never ever, from now on, try and do that kind of writing again, where you're trying to put yourself into the situation.

Some people in managerial positions were personally involved in the coverage and were traumatised themselves. On top of that, they had their staff to consider, as the following case study illustrates.

CASE STUDY: WHEN YOU HAVE OTHERS TO THINK ABOUT TOO

By Tuesday lunchtime I just hit the wall. I just felt terrible. I couldn't string a sentence together. The blank stare. The whole lot.

It was the first time I stopped and looked back and saw the catastrophe that had happened.

I walked up to the park and I just felt so sad. That heaviness.

And it was trying to come to terms with a lot of that stuff: could we have done more?

I remember going home one night and watching the television news and saying to my husband, "I just wish we could have done more to save those people." I was trying to reconcile what we'd done; had we done enough? Had we missed anything?

Q: Were there other staff whose welfare you had to concern yourself with?

Yes. Knowing the sorts of calls we had had, I was particularly concerned about the staff who took those calls. I found it really difficult. We had counsellors come in. I really struggled with knowing how to handle that. I didn't know whether I should force people to see the counsellor, because some people I reckoned needed it – and I'm thinking of those people who took those calls – or whether we should just leave it up to people to seek counselling if they wanted it.

I didn't know whether forcing them to see the counsellor was helpful or harmful. I still don't know. I know I directed one person to see a counsellor, and then I felt bad about it. I have never talked to them about it. I still struggle.

So I thought the only thing I can do is set a good example, so I went and saw the counsellor myself, and then I could say to people, "Look, it's nothing to be ashamed of. I've gone. You should all go. I found it useful. This is where they are. Please make use of it. It's free. It's confidential."

I still don't know if that was the right way to handle it.

People who did see the counsellors at first said they were hopeless; that they didn't understand what we had been doing. And then the sorts of counsellors that we were using changed and we got trauma specialists in, and the feedback since then has been that they have been really good.

I was also concerned for staff who had been up in the fire ground and had seen things that people shouldn't see. I was concerned for people who wouldn't go home. People felt guilty when they weren't working. There were some people I told: "I'm sending you home, now, because I know I am going to need you back here at X time tomorrow."

Generally people were pretty good, but some people who had done really long hours and hard stressful work, when they were given a day off felt really guilty about being at home.

Q: So the way you got round that was to point out to them how much more useful they would be if they went home and got some rest?

Yes. I could say, "I need you to have tomorrow off because I don't know when your next day off is going to be. I know I can spare you tomorrow. Take it because you'll be working 12 hours a day for the next . . . you know."

We did a DART Centre trauma session a couple of months after, and that really helped me personally, because I looked down the list of all the symptoms and went tick, tick, tick. And I thought, "Oh, that's good. I'm normal."

5. THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE

Experience counted for a great deal in coping with Black Saturday and its aftermath. Media people who have had a lot of exposure to emergencies or disasters appear to have a level of self-understanding that allowed them to assimilate what was happening to them. This seemed to save them from panic, distraction or emotional meltdown. In a sense they were able to say to themselves, "I have been here before. I know this feeling. I know why I am reacting like this. This is me and I am normal."

It did not prevent them from crying or feeling sick, but it did enable them to see these reactions for what they were and not to think less of themselves for exhibiting them:

I think I coped okay. I was looking out for a lot of my colleagues where I saw some danger signs that they weren't coping so well. I'm a maturer man and have seen a few things in life. I was acutely aware that I was the "old hand".

Most of these people were dealing with their first emergency. There were people in tears. There were people melting down. There were people who said, "I can't come in tomorrow", and we just went, "That's good that you know that". And then there were people who came in and shouldn't have.

There were other people who were just sensational, rose to the occasion and learned a lot about themselves and their capacity and what they really want to do in life.

By the Tuesday there was [a counsellor] in one of the offices, for two reasons: they were there for us, or they were there for anyone who rang in and needed to talk to someone. We could refer them through. That was good.

And individuals were asked. Your manager would come to you and look you in the eye and say, "Are you okay?" Not just leaving it to you to self-select, and that was really good.

By the time I got to my long weekend at Easter, I was totally washed out.

I'm not a machine or a robot. I cried. I felt sick. I felt terrible. I got caught up. I defy anybody with a heart not to. But you try your best to gather yourself together and keep going.

*

I do think the experience of reporting [a civil war] helped me in the sense that I didn't find it at all distracting, the damage and the trauma, because if you've had guns poked at your head, frankly, and you've seen lots of bullet-ridden bodies and you've been to mass-grave exhumations and you smell that terrible stench, if you can get through three months or so of reporting that, you get past that level where you are overawed as a reporter when you go into a scene like Strathewan, which looked like a bomb site, so complete was the devastation.

So you're able to absorb it quickly, see it accurately, draw conclusions quickly, recognise traumatised people, recognise that the fire captain might be talking gobbledegook or stuff he would regret sharing, recognise that people don't want a camera under their nose right now. That's just experience.

Q: So the nauseating stuff doesn't get in the way of your clarity of mind?

Yes, that's absolutely right. You don't become immune to the suffering, but you become more able to process it. There were some details that the fire captain told us about how some people had died. That detail was horrific, but I felt that sharing that with the public bordered on prurience. The only defence for using that material would be if it could be shown very clearly to be in the public interest.

CONCLUSIONS

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.

And not just employers, but some employees too have a tendency to crack hardy and not let go of the old shibboleths about the emotional immunity of the detached professional observer.

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.

CHAPTER 6

MEDIA ASSESSMENTS OF MEDIAPERFORMANCE

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.

It would also seem that the more individual the assistance, the better. Group discussions did not appear to be effective at all in helping people de-brief, except on the most prosaic of topics such as logistics and equipment failures.

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.

Media performance has two dimensions: performance in gathering material, and performance in publishing. In this chapter, they are dealt with under separate headings.

1. PERFORMANCE IN GATHERING MATERIAL

Respondents to this research thought in general that their own performance in gathering material, particularly in the way they treated people, conformed to their own expectations of themselves and their own personal standards. Some had regrets, and some would do things differently if they had their time over again, but on the whole they looked back with a clear conscience on how they had treated people and how they had gathered material.

They tended to make more negative assessments about the performance of some other media people, especially television and in particular current-affairs television.

Because there are no agreed professional standards that all media people consensually adhere to, these assessments are based on each respondent's own individual idea of what is acceptable and unacceptable in the circumstances. It follows that there is a substantial degree of subjectivity in the assessments. There are, however, patterns which indicate where most of these respondents draw the line. These patterns provide guidance about what a set of agreed professional standards might look like were the professionals, and the industry for which they work, ever able to develop such a set and have the profession and the industry as a whole sign on to it.

The most common negative assessment of media behaviour was that it had been intrusive. This type of criticism was directed mainly at camera operators and photographers from all media, especially when they were clustered in packs. Some camera operators and photographers were themselves self-conscious about this, but were certain that they had no choice but to be there, particularly when politicians or celebrities were present. No one relished being part of a pack but knew from experience that if they stood back and missed a shot that everyone else had, their careers would be harmed:

Q: Tell me what happens at these occasions when you have the PM and countless other TV channels etc? How do you approach that sort of job?

If it's anything to do with politics, you've got to shoot everything that moves, because if Mr Rudd happens to slip or something like that, you've got to capture it. It is a circus, a gaggle of geese following the Prime Minister.

Q: What decisions do you make about what to photograph when people are obviously grieving?

It depends on whether you're working with experienced people. It makes it a lot easier when they too can respect [the person's grief].

If you're there by yourself, you can make the judgment. If I'm there by myself, I'll stand back and let them grieve. We have a zoom lens. That's what it's there for. Unfortunately you have some others who are in there all the time. They see themselves above and beyond the role of a news cameraman. They are God, as far as they are concerned. News cameramen who defect to the "bright side", that's a real problem. [This was a reference to commercial TV current affairs programs.]

Most of our news cameramen will stay back. It's only when you get these current affairs programs in there. If they're in there, you have to go in there. You don't like it but you've got to do it. You have to get in and get your stuff, no matter what it takes or what it costs.

Q: Because if you don't, questions will be asked when you get back here?

Yes. Sensational pictures sell.

*

Q: Were you with a media pack at any point?

Once, but it was horrific and I just got out of there. Shane Warne and Gary Lyon came to Kinglake on the Thursday. And it was just appalling. Mate, it was just . . . The photographer who was with me had to shoot it, but I didn't have to report it because there was another reporter there. They arrived in a bus. They were dressed up like you would expect those people to be dressed up in their designer jeans. And as soon as they were there it was [channel] and the whole catastrophe. It was horrible.

The terrible thing that happened was that there were some children there who had lost their parents, who were orphans, and who we knew about and who we weren't approaching. We'd been introduced to their uncles and aunts and guardians. The [rival newspaper] photographer who had come up for the day with Warnie and co, was in their face, just taking photos of them. He had to be taken out. It was just a terrible terrible situation.

Suddenly you're drawn into this pack and you just think, "F---. It's all for nothing."

As is already clear from earlier chapters of this report, the pack phenomenon is only a relatively small part of media activity at disaster scenes like the bushfires. Therefore, a sense of proportion is called for when discussing this phenomenon. Packs also perform the somewhat ironic function of showing up the media in the worst possible light. The media's great power is the power to portray: the public gets its impressions of people, events and organisations from the media. When the media turn the lens on themselves – as inevitably happens with packs – they portray the media in only one facet of their work, but it is the facet that the public sees and bases judgments on.

Intrusiveness was not, however, confined to packs or to television or to camera operators and photographers, as the following statements attest:

I thought a lot of it was appalling: a lot of cameras in people's faces. One cameraman came up to me at a barbecue and told me that his reporter was really invasive and pushing him and he said he was very unhappy.

There were reporters standing with their backs to people taking notes, obviously listening. It was really sickening.

At the same time, you're there to do your own job. You're not there to be the ethics avenger. I'd like to think that if it happened again I'd have the guts to go up to someone and say, "I don't think what you're doing is right".

Q: *Were all sections of the media engaged in this more invasive behaviour?*

No. Radio wasn't.

*

When [channel] crossed from the rooms of Brian Naylor's house, I didn't like that.

*

The complaints that I had from people who knew me and knew I was a journalist - the overwhelming complaint was the intrusiveness of the media. They appreciated the media had a job to do . . . what they really didn't like was the fact that people walked up their driveways as they're standing in the ruins of a house with cameras rolling or with the tape already rolling. That caused a lot of anger.

There was a feeling that your privacy was being invaded as well. I think the media may not appreciate in those circumstances that photographing the remains of your house when you're not there, and doing it without your permission, is a gross invasion of privacy.

I remember one journalist who had been stopped at the roadblocks and he and the photographer had gone up around the back and parked somewhere and hiked across three fields and gone in and talked to someone, and I was really angry at that, that they would do that. And yet, when I stopped and thought about it, I thought, well, as a journalist, I probably would have done the same thing because that's the only way you're going to get in and try and get a story of someone.

So, yeah, I think the media probably doesn't appreciate the way sometimes it operates, and tries to operate with sensitivity, but even so you're intruding on things and causing distress in ways that you don't

even realize exist, and I can't see any way around that. And again, it's something that I've only seen because I'm on the receiving end.

*

I understand there were instances of photographers taking photos of bodies that they were asked not to do. There were instances of photographers trying to put cameras over the Coroner's Court fence to try to take pictures of body bags being unloaded. The Coroner threatened one newspaper with being charged over that.

*

By and large the media came out of it pretty well. There were a few smaller instances. I remember the well-publicised one where [current affairs program] broke the cordon and went into one of the towns. We certainly didn't do that.

*

I thought the newspaper coverage was good. Pictorially it was fantastic. Some of the personal human stories were terrific. The TV coverage – some of it was pretty ugly, some of it was badly intrusive: allegedly chopping people into Marysville that were crime scenes that were sealed off, just to get the story. The [television] reporter saying, "I'm the first in here because it's a crime scene." Well, shit! Why are you there, then? And they went to somebody's house and were pretty much were filming inside the lounge room.

This question of respecting the integrity of crime scenes was also touched upon by a news executive:

Q: Did the media do anything you think they shouldn't have done?

Yes. I don't think they should have landed helicopters in Marysville after the exclusion zones were in. We sent one in the first day because it was the only way to get up there and there were no blocks on the airspace.

Q: [A television channel] landed there day after day?

Yes, and that was the problem, because there was an exclusion zone. It was them cocking a snook at the authorities. That would be my interpretation.

One thing we did was, we went to the Coroner's Court where they were setting up a temporary tent morgue, and I know that rankled the Coroner's Court. We just shot it from the other side of the fence. Just the tents at the back of the Coroner's Court, because we wanted to show the scale of this. We didn't trespass, but we did shoot from the street into the Coroner's Court and that annoyed them.

In addition to the issue of intrusion, deliberate deception was another subject of criticism:

The media for the most part behaved reasonably well, apart from one or two rogue elements, but you get them on any story.

Q: Do you have a particular incident in mind?

There was talk that a television network had put some sort of RSPCA magnetic logo on the side of their vehicle to get past a roadblock. It wasn't us. One network was accused publicly and I don't think it was them, but I think maybe something like that did happen.

And it's no secret that the large proportion of the media in Australia think there's a couple of current affairs programs that push the envelope more than we do, and we end up getting tarred with the same brush.

*

On about the second last day I was up there I went in [to the relief centre] and suddenly security guards had appeared. They said, "You can't come in. The community have taken a vote and said we don't want

any more journalists in here.” And someone who I’d got to know saw me and said, “She can come in”, and they let me in, and I said, “What’s happened?” and he said, “Last night there was an incident.”

At about 10 o’clock at night a television reporter posing as a volunteer had come into the relief centre – people were going to sleep, and [there were] kids and dogs and elderly people – didn’t identify themselves and then started going up to people and trying to interview them, at which point they said, that’s it, and security guards were brought in and that was the end of it. It was disgraceful.

Some respondents said that people were grateful to the media for drawing attention to what had happened, as a result of which huge quantities of goods and services and monetary donations flooded in:

I don’t remember any hostility against the media on the ground, although by the end of the week people were getting a bit fed up with it. But look at the amount of food and clothing that came in. Of course the media played a big role in that. People responded to what they saw.

And I remember one of the people saying to me, it had been such a terrible time but one of the things that gave them hope was seeing how other people in other parts of Australia had responded. And by that they meant, look at all the stuff that’s here at this reception centre.

I don’t remember seeing anything that was very obtrusive.

I didn’t see any behaviour from the media that I thought was out of order. I got the impression that most people were pretty aware of the level of trauma that other people were dealing with.

I had a man come up to me, who had lost everything, and he wanted to help me get the story. People talk about the media being obtrusive, but then you get some people like that who like what you do and want to help. He felt like he knew me.

*

Some had learnt that an unobtrusive approach can be effective:

... The little notebook and not going in all guns blazing, just going in softly softly, but being reasonably quick to react if it was clear that they had a story to tell.

Another had gained confidence in being able to make ethical decisions under pressure:

I don’t think I’d do anything differently. I think I would feel more confident to make my own decisions. I was one of the less experienced journalists that the [organisation] sent, I was continually questioning myself: should I be trying to run that roadblock? Should I be doing things that were pushing my boundaries but everyone else seemed to be doing? Now I would feel confident to say, no, I don’t have to do any of that stuff because you can still find what you need without doing that stuff.

I was pleased with the decisions I made. I am glad I said something to bring that interview in Kinglake to an end, although I wish I had said something earlier. I let it go on too long. Also when the photographer and I were really tired, I said, “I think we need to go back now”.

Many respondents referred to the need to remain “human”:

Be human. Use commonsense. It’s not just a normal story, like, “What are your views on this new road?”

Q: What distinguishes it from a “normal” story?

The long-term effect on the people and the gravity of the impact: deaths, destruction, lives totally uprooted.

Don't lose your sense of humanity. Don't let your boss push you over the ethical line. Look after yourself. Make it easy to be more yourself when covering these things.

*

Don't forget the humanity of it.

Think of what the audience needs, rather than what you need. We have to be useful. I hope we have been useful on every level: emotionally, financially, bureaucracy-busting useful.

Some respondents preferred not to particularise their criticisms:

Q: What about the coverage generally?

Some of it was terrific and some of it was shocking.

Q: Would you like to exemplify both extremes?

Not while your tape-recorder is on.

Some respondents focused on the logistical triumphs, a little self-consciously:

We broke all our own records that day. Normally we have to allow two-and-a-half hours to get the whole process done. We got it done in something like an hour and 35 minutes.

I got a kick out of turning this round fast, but also still making a few important editorial ethical decisions. These are the things that give us a bit of a kick. You're looking at big and important issues here and I'm getting a kick out of the fact that we were able to turn round this whole complicated story, but also make those difficult decisions.

*

Due to a few technological improvements over the past year or so, we were able to send video footage pretty much from wherever you can get mobile reception. So with a laptop and a little card, it can all be sent. We're a very small budget and a very small team but in some way we were able to compete with the television networks in some ways.

2. PERFORMANCE IN PUBLISHING MATERIAL

The respondents to this research were generally complimentary about the media coverage in general. All took pride in their own work and usually in the work of their own outlet. With few exceptions they also expressed approval of the work of the media generally. It was considered to be comprehensive, well-presented, relevant and helpful to the community.

One respondent summed it up as follows:

The Australian media as a whole did their job: did what they are paid to do, did what they are trained to do, except for those isolated instances where they overstepped the mark by reporting on things that were incredibly harsh, and [publishing] unconfirmed reports.

*

We were able to illustrate the gravity of the situation very early and very quickly. Our coverage was comprehensive. We extended our bulletins to 90 minutes.

I think we made the very timely news judgment switch from focusing on the extent of the disaster to focusing on stories of survival, hope and recovery. I think that was important for the mindset of the State.

If I remember rightly, it was about four or five days in. It probably took about four or five days to accurately establish the extent of the disaster before you could make the switch anyway.

But it became clear that this kind of story was no longer palatable to us, and if it was no longer palatable to us it was no longer palatable to the community, and it felt like you were saying the same sort of things and telling the same sort of stories.

The only flaw in our coverage was the first 24 hours. Everybody here recognises that we reacted poorly on the day. The forecasts were so dire that I would have positioned people in areas that were most at risk, and that wasn't done. We would have captured a lot more of the initial fires if we had done that.

*

To the best of our ability, we provided accurate information about what was happening at the time. For a few days, I believe we were the only source of television news in [a regional area], so we made that a bit of a focus, even though the fires there weren't of the scale of Kinglake and Marysville

*

We were determined to get the tonality of the front pages, the content, right. Obviously we're not perfect. Maybe once or twice we got things wrong in terms of the tone of a little headline or caption, the placement of a picture – in good faith though. At the end of the week I think we all said by and large we got the decision-making, right. I mean, editing's an imprecise business, and some decisions in hindsight – I can't rattle them off now but if I went back through the papers I'd probably say, "Gee, why did we do that there? We should have done that there." But on the day, with what you've got in front of you, you make your decisions.

[Another paper] – and I'd never criticize them because I just don't like criticizing other editors because it's a prick of a job we do – but they ran a front page headline '300 feared dead,' and I said, "What are you basing that on? How do you know? Have you literally gone and counted the bodies in the morgue?" I remember saying, "We are not going to say 300 dead unless a copper of the rank of Simon Overland, Christine Nixon . . . gets up and says, 'Yes, there are 300 dead.'"

There was some criticism that after the first 48 hours, the coverage became somewhat formulaic and fell back on old stereotypes such as "heroes", some of which, in one respondent's view, had harmful consequences:

I think overall it was pretty good actually. I thought the first 48 hours was really good, because it was a case where journalism was faster than the official story – you don't get that very often, and I think that was really insightful, it was a real sign of the strengths of journalism. . . . I think that then the media fell into a trap of being almost formulaic.

*

Generally it was good. I think [own newspaper] was good because it kept issue-based. From almost the first or second day, they began looking at issues – the stay and go policy and what went wrong, and why did it happen.

I was aware that there is a cycle there, a natural cycle within the media, that initially they want the horror, and then the victims, then the heroes, and then basically by the end of the first week, or certainly by the end of the second week, they want stories about hope and rebuilding, and then they're finished, and then they're on to the next.

And I think that some of the coverage has been a bit naïve, in a way. Initially there was a lot of that rubbish about the heroes – you know, the guy who stood in his shorts and thongs on the roof of a hotel and saved the hotel. The media created him, and then I remember [another newspaper] after 100 days, whatever it was, or 50 days, went back and they did a piece and there he was on the front page: he's shattered and he can't work and he's emotionally destroyed and suffering from depression.

And you look at it and you think, you know, the media would have been partly responsible, if not wholly responsible, for that, because they built him up, they made him into a hero, and then they walked away and forgot about him, and then they get surprised that, oh look, he's doing it hard.

Some would have made different editorial judgments:

I'd be harsher on the authorities than I was at the time. I'd be more critical and less timid. . . . I think the biggest challenge for me in writing [the reconstruction] was to try to keep a detached perspective on it because a lot of the reporters out there were becoming almost participants, through no fault of their own – they were seeing horrific stuff.

*

I thought [own newspaper] was generally good, but I think we care a bit too much about what other media outlets are doing. A classic example was in week one, when I thought our first two days' coverage was very good, but then [another outlet] had a whole lot of victims' pictures in a sort of "tribute". So we suddenly decided we didn't have enough victims, so we threw all these resources into finding the victims.

I thought we lost the balance there. And then we swung back again. So we seemed to lurch between strong news coverage and a sort of mawkishness.

I thought a lot of [rival newspaper's coverage] was hysterical, really. Aspects of it were okay, but as time went on and they were looking for angles, some of their stuff was ridiculous. I think they led the paper one day on some poor bugger who snatched a glass jar full of donations that was on a bar somewhere because he was a drug addict and it probably had thirty bucks in it. Silly nonsense, really.

But the papers did some good stuff too, and I think their reporting of the royal commission has been pretty good.

The fact that the disaster affected the audience directly and occurred "in the backyard", as it were, affected decisions about what to publish.

On a big story like Black Saturday, with many deaths in your own backyard, you can be fairly robust in what you put to air. But nobody was putting shots of charred bodies to air. We didn't, and I didn't see any elsewhere.

3. STAYING ON THE STORY

This issue of the media moving on and appearing to forget about the people who have just been the focus of overwhelming media attention was a matter of concern for many respondents, who said the media had a duty to stay in touch with the survivors and victims, not to do what the media circus usually does: rolls into town for the drama, then folds its tent and moves on to the next one. There were mixed reviews about how well the media in general and their own outlets in particular were discharging this duty:

Q: Is it important that the media stays on this story?

I think that at least one media organization, shall we say, has only a very moderate amount of interest in it now. We're giving a reasonable run to the royal commission, but very uneven. . . . I suggested a big piece for six months after and it wasn't taken up.

I think it's a failure. There's a sense that there is fire fatigue, perhaps. I think it's a failure of imagination.

*

Part of their job is to ensure, for instance, that governments who make commitments follow them through. We should make sure that things are happening, that clean-ups are going on, that relief is getting where it's needed. The media still hasn't really come to grips with the fact that, apart from the people who died and the people who lost their houses and things, there's a huge amount of trauma caused by this.

People who've lived through it have still had their lives destroyed in some cases, and there will be suicides and marriage break-ups. So there's a whole area there, of darkness, which I don't think the media wants to know about.

*

Q: Do you have a responsibility to go back to the communities?

Absolutely we have. We have been back. We've done lots of stories: the clean-up; we'll do the reconstruction. I was in a meeting with Christine Nixon last week about what we can do.

*

CASE STUDY: STAYING WITH IT BEHIND THE SCENES TOO

In the months since, there's not been a day go by without someone asking us to help them with something arising from the fires:

In the immediate aftermath, with families finding frustrations in dealing with the coroner, and being unable to get the bodies of their loved ones for burial, we had a substantial role, publicly and privately.

It's bringing insurance companies to heel and making them live up to their solemn promises that we forced out of them publicly that they wouldn't be mongrels, and then reminding them of it from time to time, including as recently as yesterday [early August].

Trying to organise some of the relief efforts and get some coherence when it was a mess. Terrible fragmentation of response, duplicating each other's efforts, everyone was rushing to help, and no one understood what anyone else was doing. We put in a lot of time, publicly and privately, getting people to talk to each other.

The role you can play as the go-between was really special.

It's not journalism. It's nothing to do with journalism, although some of the skills of journalism need to be applied. You still need to hold people to account.

This week we bashed up the Treasurer for the delay in having the tax-deductible status of the appeal resolved. There has been this major blockage in the system, and we used the six-month anniversary of the fires to force Wayne Swan's office to announce that they would fix it.

We finally got the Assistant Treasurer publicly giving an iron-clad guarantee it would be fixed this week.

That's activism, not journalism.

Others had been involved in follow-up work and had found it beneficial personally as well as to the survivors and victims:

I had a bit of closure in that I went back and did a follow-up story about the footy club. I saw all the people I had met during that week, including my chaperones, the nurse, the CFA blokes who'd helped us out, all the residents I'd met, the people I'd written about, who loved what I'd written and who were pleased to see me. They were full of hope because of this footy match. It was great.

So that was something to learn as well: if you can get back when people are starting to rebuild, it really makes you feel good. It was really helpful.

4. BREAKING DOWN THE PRINT/ONLINE BARRIER

For many print journalists, the role played by online media was a revelation. These journalists were, for the most part, the products of an internal newspaper culture in which the printed version of the paper was the "real" one and the online version was somehow inferior and separate. In covering the fires, however, they were required to file for both the printed and online versions of their companies' papers. In doing so they became exhilarated by the experience of rapid round-the-clock capability to publish. The old idea of one deadline a day was swept away.

As a result, in many newspaper newsrooms the barriers between print and online came down. In this respect, the bushfire coverage may turn out to be a watershed in Australian journalistic practice. A good number of respondents thought so, at least:

I don't regret putting anything on the web. I know that flies in the face of print journalism, but we put everything on the web. That had a massive impact. We knew there were thousands of people turning to our website for information. Therefore the most pressing need was not what paper will hit the streets on Monday, because a lot of people won't even get it, but how to get information out there.

So we learnt the powerfulness of the web. And it was rewarding. It was like working on a daily, because we were updating every half hour or so.

Q: It sounds as though you over-rode a kind of residual prejudice?

Absolutely, yes. We turned into an online team for the days that were not production days.

Q: Did the paper suffer because lots of stuff broke online?

No. [The paper's circulation is eight times greater than its website hits.]

It's fantastic they that we got there first, because it is our area, and we got it out. We're all proud of that.

*

Q: Were there professional lessons out of this for you and your paper?

The power of online. Our online traffic just surged through the roof. It demonstrated once and for all the 24-hour news cycle, and that a paper and a website can act not in competition, [but] they can drive what we call the holy trinity – paper, website, back to paper. Absolutely proved that it can work, that people come to newspapers and a website in a time of crisis. And it just showed, papers are not dead. People will turn to newspapers at times like this when they want information. Papers have a strong role to play in the community in situations like that.

CONCLUSIONS

Intrusion and deception emerged as major ethical issues in gathering material, and many respondents saw grounds for criticising the media on their handling of those issues. Once again the research 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. For example, what does it mean to “use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material”? Some media people clearly think disguising oneself as a volunteer or resident is not a violation of this clause, which comes from the most widely recognised code in Australia, that of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance.

The same code also enjoins media people to respect private grief and personal privacy. The evidence from this research is that each of the words in that clause, and the clause as a whole, are open to a very wide range of interpretations.

On the positive side, the media coverage is widely credited with generating the massive public support that flooded in for the survivors and victims, demonstrated by the donation of huge sums of money and quantities of goods and services.

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.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

We believe that this study has explored the key issues, challenges, and lessons to be learnt from the Black Saturday bushfires. It has also revealed the deep level of self-awareness and reflection amongst media people, if given the time and opportunity to engage in such reflection. We hope that the outcome of this report will be the opening of a space in which debate can occur, between individual journalists; within media organisations; between the media and members of the authorities involved in dealing with the bushfires, and between the general public, including those in the fire-affected communities.

Some of the key issues that have emerged through this research include the lack of ethical consensus amongst those people covering the fires and the absence of specific guidelines to provide a framework for the challenging decisions that must be made by all sectors of the media when covering disasters and dealing with traumatised people and communities. Another significant finding was the magnitude of the impact the process of covering the bushfires had on members of the media, whether they were in the field, taking calls on radio, or managing people and coverage behind the scenes. Another key question that was on the minds of many of the respondents was how to reconcile their sometimes competing responsibilities to the victims of the fires, the authorities and the general public to whom they are providing information.

Ultimately, we hope that this report leads to increased insight into the complexity of the issues faced by the media, the lessons learnt from this devastating experience, and the areas that need further reflection and debate. We hope that this study will contribute to increasing both the quality of future coverage of similar disasters and the understanding between the media and the community it serves.

We would like to thank the participants in this study for their time and their willingness to revisit their often traumatic experiences with frankness and in a spirit of inquiry.

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

JOURNALISTS' EXPERIENCES AND LEARNINGS FROM COVERING THE VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES 2009

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR NEWS EXECUTIVES

Record:

Respondent's name

Respondent's professional function

Date of interview

Contact email or phone number

THESE DETAILS ARE TO BE REMOVED FROM THE DATA BEFORE PROCESSING, AND DESTROYED AT THE END OF THE PROJECT. THEY ARE RECEIVED IN CONFIDENCE FOR THE TEMPORARY PURPOSES OF THE RESEARCH AND WILL BE SEEN ONLY BY THE RESEARCHERS.

YOU MIGHT FIND THAT SOME OF THESE QUESTIONS CAUSE YOU DISTRESS. IF SO, YOU DON'T HAVE TO ANSWER THEM, AND IF YOU FEEL YOU NEED PROFESSIONAL HELP, IT IS AVAILABLE.

QUESTIONS

1. Had you had any experience prior to covering the Victorian bushfires of covering or managing the coverage of major disaster stories involving local people or places? Those affecting local people may have happened far away (for example, Bali).
2. What was your role or roles in the coverage of the Victorian bushfires?
3. What general briefings or instructions, if any, did you give your staff?
4. Did you find it necessary to provide any staff with specific briefings? If so, what issues were covered in those briefings?
5. What were the main experiences that have stayed in your mind from managing the story?
6. Did you find yourself having to make any ethical decisions about:
 - how to behave towards the victims, or
 - what to put in or leave out of copy?
7. (If yes) What were those ethical decisions and how did you arrive at them?
8. Did you find yourself facing any legal problems, for example, to do with access to people's property, or dealing with the powers of the various authorities?
9. (If yes) How did you resolve those problems?
10. Looking back, what was it about your work that you think you did well? In answering this, you may like to think of the way you dealt with people, the quality of your decision-making and the way you met your professional obligations generally.
11. And is there anything you think you would do differently if you had your time over again? You may like to think about the same aspects: the way you dealt with people, the quality of your decision-making, the way you met your professional obligations generally.
12. What, for you personally, were the important professional lessons to come out of your experience?
13. Were there other lessons?
14. Has the fires story had an effect on you personally? Without disclosing anything you wish to keep private, are you able to indicate what any of those effects have been?
15. Have you been offered any de-briefing or other assistance to help you come to terms with your experiences in covering the fires?
16. (If yes) Have you availed yourself of that assistance?
17. (If no) Would you like to be offered that kind of assistance, or do you not feel it is necessary for you?
18. Have you offered de-briefing to the staff?
19. (If yes) Have any of them taken it up?
20. Finally, how would you assess the overall media coverage of the fires? What did the media as a whole do well? What did they not do well?
21. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about anything to do with the coverage of the fires and your experiences?

Thank you sincerely for your participation. It is greatly appreciated.

JOURNALISTS' EXPERIENCES AND LEARNINGS FROM COVERING THE VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES 2009
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR REPORTERS, PHOTOGRAPHERS AND TECHNICIANS

Record:

Respondent's name _____

Respondent's professional function _____

Date of interview _____

Contact email or phone number _____

THESE DETAILS ARE TO BE REMOVED FROM THE DATA BEFORE PROCESSING, AND DESTROYED AT THE END OF THE PROJECT. THEY ARE RECEIVED IN CONFIDENCE FOR THE TEMPORARY PURPOSES OF THE RESEARCH AND WILL BE SEEN ONLY BY THE RESEARCHERS.

YOU MIGHT FIND THAT SOME OF THESE QUESTIONS CAUSE YOU DISTRESS. IF SO, YOU DON'T HAVE TO ANSWER THEM, AND IF YOU FEEL YOU NEED PROFESSIONAL HELP, IT IS AVAILABLE.

QUESTIONS

1. Had you had any experience prior to covering the Victorian bushfires of covering stories involving death, severe trauma or mass destruction of property?
2. What were your duties in covering the Victorian bushfires? That is, where were you sent, with whom, at what stage in the unfolding of the story?
3. What briefing or instructions, if any, were you given at any stage?
4. What were your main pieces of work in the coverage?
5. What were the main experiences that have stayed in your mind from your time on the assignment?
6. Did you find yourself having to make any ethical decisions about:
7. how to behave towards the victims, or
8. what to put in or leave out of your copy?
9. (If yes) What were those ethical decisions and how did you arrive at them?
10. Did you find yourself facing any legal problems, for example, to do with access to people's property, or dealing with the powers of the various authorities?
11. (If yes) How did you resolve those problems?
12. Looking back, what was it about your work that you think you did well? In answering this, you may like to think of the way you dealt with people, the quality of your copy and the way you met your professional obligations generally.
13. And is there anything you think you would do differently if you had your time over again? You may like to think about the same aspects: the way you dealt with people, the quality of your copy, the way you met your professional obligations generally.
14. What, for you personally, were the important professional lessons to come out of your experience?
15. Were there other lessons?
16. Has covering the fires had an effect on you personally? Without disclosing anything you wish to keep private, are you able to indicate what any of those effects have been?
17. Have you been offered any de-briefing or other assistance to help you come to terms with your experiences in covering the fires?
18. (If yes) Have you availed yourself of that assistance?
19. (If no) Would you like to be offered that kind of assistance, or do you not feel it is necessary for you?
20. Finally, how would you assess the overall media coverage of the fires? What did the media as a whole do well? What did they not do well?
21. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about anything to do with the coverage of the fires and your experiences?

Thank you sincerely for your participation. It is greatly appreciated.

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