



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

Gearing, Amanda Ann (2008) Trauma overload. *The Walkley Magazine*, April/May(50).

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/68617/>

© Copyright 2008 Amanda Gearing

Notice: *Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source:*

Trauma Overload

Reporting on death and accidents in regional and rural areas can exact a heavy toll

by Amanda Gearing

News reporters necessarily report on trauma. Overseas correspondents who report from war zones or areas of conflict or natural disaster are often exposed to physical risk and are sometimes required to confront extreme trauma.

To an extent reporters embarking on overseas assignments are mentally prepared to face traumatic situations.

Their supervisors are more or less aware of the reporter's isolation and vulnerability.

By contrast, reporters who work either alone or with a small group of colleagues in regional and rural Australia can be exposed to human trauma which is often unexpected, repetitive and is more likely to involve their own acquaintances.

Their supervisors are less likely to be aware of the impact on staff members of being exposed to repeated traumatic situations.

The reporters are more likely to take the trauma home.

In my experience, reporters in rural areas learn to cope in different ways, which often requires them to re-negotiate their world-view.

Faced with the death and injury toll of the regular round of fatal car crashes, plane crashes and farm accidents, a young reporter's world-view could be forced to shift.

Anyone who grew up thinking or assuming that good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people, is challenged. In their everyday reporting they see sad, tragic, unfair things happening to good people, careful people, innocent people.

They might conclude the world is rather more chaotic than they first thought.

Yet their inexperience of life shields them to an extent from the trauma they are meeting in their daily work.

As a young reporter I was assigned to interview the mother of a youth killed in a car crash.

It was not until I spoke to her that I discovered she had had five sons, of whom four had been killed in car crashes. The latest crash claimed her last remaining son.

It has only been in much later years and as a mother myself with children who are driving, that I can look

back and have some understanding of the depth of her grief.

Whilst my techniques for dealing with trauma were quite rudimentary in those days, I do remember looking for an angle in the stories that might prevent similar deaths or accidents – that just the reporting of the trauma made no sense unless some consolation, some solace, some ‘good’ might be wrought from it for someone in the future if possible.

One story I recall was about a car crash where a baby was killed when it was thrown from its mother’s arms and out of the car in a high-speed rollover.

Both parents survived and they gave a tearful warning to other mothers not to breastfeed their babies in moving cars.

It was not until I was a reporter and a mother that I found my professional ethics being more strongly challenged by trauma reporting.

Why report trauma when reporting it exposes traumatised and often bereaved people to the added trauma of media intrusion?

Can we personally justify adding trauma to a situation for the sake of another story? If so, how?

At base, trauma and death are reported because human life has value. This does not in itself justify adding to the trauma of someone who is bereaved.

Reporters are bound by the Code of Ethics of respecting people who are grieving.

But respecting people who are grieving does not mean not speaking to them at all, especially if they are willing to, or want to, speak to a reporter.

After being out of the workforce for several years to raise my children, the first ‘death knock’ I recall was the death of a healthy teenage boy who died suddenly running laps in a lap-a-thon to raise money for a charity.

All I had was a surname, a common surname, and I began dialling the list in the phone book.

After many calls, a distressed voice answered the phone - a familiar voice. I was invited to the house and listened while the bereaved mother told me about her son’s life and sudden death.

I gathered all the details I needed and a photo, which all ran page one the following morning.

The family was avalanched with messages of sympathy and support from friends, relatives and total strangers from around Australia.

I kept in contact and after a few months I was able to ask the mother if the media coverage had added to her trauma at losing her son. Her response surprised me.

She told me she had been grateful for the opportunity to publicly express her love for her son.

What had traumatised her more in the longer term was that she still didn’t know the cause of his death.

She knew his heart had been removed and sent for analysis but she didn't have a result and for six months she had been frightened her other children could also have an undiagnosed fatal condition.

I phoned around Australia until I found the professor who had the boy's heart and I was able to phone the mother back the same day and let her know that her son's death was not caused by a genetic condition – her other children were ok.

Many people assume that relatives who are suddenly bereaved, especially in traumatic circumstances don't want to speak to the media.

Working in a regional centre where I also live, has taught me that most people do want the opportunity to express their grief, to take the opportunity to express their love for a family member who has been killed, talk about their achievements, or even to warn others of a known or unknown danger.

I was forced to re-assess my own views about trauma reporting. I could not take it for granted that all families would want to shut out reporters at a time of family tragedy.

I had to be aware that some would want, indeed welcome, the opportunity I had given to my friend to talk about her son.

Other families have wanted and welcomed the opportunity to warn other people of a potential danger.

Some have found a consolation in a death which otherwise appears traumatic and they welcome the opportunity to convey that consolation to the public.

An elderly man washed down a mountainside by a flash flood and drowned was, at first glance, a tragic event.

His family, however, knew the seriously ill man went for a regular Sunday drive to the area, still connected to his oxygen tank, because the old drover loved the bush.

The family wanted the public to know his wish was that he not die in a hospital.

Apart from speaking to newspaper reporters, the old drover's daughter went to the effort of facing television cameras at the scene of the accident to comfort the public that even though her father died by accident, he died in the place he loved and where he wanted to be.

Discovering that some families want to speak to the media during times of trauma, has given me determination to try to speak to the next of kin rather than to allow well-meaning relatives or friends to ward off reporters assuming, without even asking, that the next-of-kin don't want to be interviewed.

Even though a family might welcome a reporter in the door, does not mean however that telling the story is easy for them.

Sometimes it's very difficult. One of the most heart-rending interviews I recall was speaking to a woman about her fiancé who accidentally fell to his death from a Gold Coast high-rise building a week before their wedding.

On the day I met the bereaved woman, she had set aside time to speak to me before an appointment with the funeral director when she was going to put the wedding ring on her fiancé's finger. She cried as she told me about her plan.

This was one of the few times I recall crying with an interviewee during an interview.

Although emotionally challenging, the published story powerfully conveyed the love of the woman for her fiancé.

Reporters who work alone in regional or rural centres are more likely to download their experiences of trauma reporting to their family and friends since they have few or no office colleagues.

Trauma is more likely to be taken home. Families cope with a regular flow of trauma from crime and court reporting, deaths and injury stories.

However there are some circumstances when the reporter or the family can be overloaded, such as if there is a death in the family at the same time as an overload of work-related trauma.

A fortnight of deaths and funerals stands out for me, beginning with a man killed in a light plane crash on a Sunday afternoon, two toddlers killed in a shed fire a few days later and five university students killed in a car crash all in the same fortnight as the death of my father-in-law, on the same day as the funeral of a work colleague of my husband, which I also reported.

Despite the juxtaposition of the long working hours on the stories, my own grief and my family's grief, I achieved every deadline.

But the fortnight stands out as one where the trauma load I carried was not recognised as being overwhelming by myself or by my workplace.

I expected myself to deliver copy, my supervisor expected me to deliver copy, and I did it.

That fortnight didn't trigger any effort by me or by my supervisor to obtain workplace support.

It was not until several months later when I covered the shooting death of a police dog squad officer and then the death of a helicopter pilot flying a medical mercy mission in bad weather soon after, that I was advised to find someone outside my family to provide me with a debrief.

In searching for the family of the pilot, I door-knocked, and a familiar face came to the door. I was shocked.

The door opened and the bereaved wife, a professional counsellor, sat me down and gave me a cup of tea before telling me of her husband's career as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and ending with a suggestion that I should find a debriefing counsellor.

The story ran page one.

Over time, the process of reporting trauma does get easier, but the repetition of confronting death and trauma can become so emotionally draining that the reporter needs a break.

Reporters, in my experience, have generally avoided confronting their own vulnerability in reporting trauma.

We might like to think we are bullet-proof emotionally because of our job but underneath we are human beings who respond through our emotions to the world around us.

Foreign correspondents and war correspondents are not the only reporters who see and report trauma.

Reporters in any front-line reporting role are exposed over time to trauma, for which they have little training, little or no professional support and sometimes little understanding from their work supervisors, whose work is focussed on filling news holes.

Regional and rural-based reporters around Australia face the added challenge of professional isolation which results in them taking home the trauma to their families and friends.
