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Why disaster survivors speak to reporters

Abstract

Practice-led journalism research techniques were used in this study to produce a ‘first draft of history’ recording the human experience of survivors and rescuers during the January 2011 flash flood disaster in Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley in Queensland, Australia. The study aimed to discover what can be learnt from engaging in journalistic reporting of natural disasters, using journalism as both a creative practice and a research methodology. (Lindgren and Phillips, 2011, 75)

The willingness of a very high proportion of severely traumatised flood survivors to participate in the flood research was unexpected but made it possible to document a relatively unstudied question within the literature about journalism and trauma – when and why disaster survivors will want to speak to journalists. The study reports six categories of reasons interviewees gave for their willingness to speak to the media: for their own personal recovery; their desire for the public to know what had happened; that lessons need to be learned from the disaster; their sense of duty to make sure warning systems and disaster responses are improved in future; the financial disinterest of reporters in listening to survivors; and the timing of the request for an interview. In addition, traumatised flood survivors found both the opportunity to speak to the media and the journalistic outputs of the research cathartic in their recovery.

Introduction

On January 10, 2011 extremely heavy rainfall event led to flash flooding in Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley in Queensland, Australia, resulting in 21 deaths, comprising 16 adults and five

children. Hundreds more people survived due to a combination of factors: physical strength, determination, coincidence or because they were rescued by civilians or professional swift rescuers. Television audiences around the globe saw footage of flash flooding washing away cars from the streets of a city on top of a mountain, lifting cars off a major highway and swiping houses off concrete slabs in the Lockyer Valley.

In addition to the death toll, the floods destroyed hundreds of houses and other buildings, destroyed or damaged major civil infrastructure such as roads, railway lines, bridges and caused widespread environmental destruction of the landscape. The floods continued east towards the state capital of Brisbane. Water science journal *Water* reported in December 2011 that more than 56,000 insurance claims were made and payouts totaled more than \$2.55 billion. (van den Honert and McAneney, 2011, 1149-1173)

Journalists are often amongst the ‘first-responders’ to natural disasters and therefore are required to report on individuals who have suffered trauma. Austin and Godleski (1999, 897) describe the three common types of trauma experienced by people in disasters:

The first type of trauma is the experience of terror or horror when one's own life is threatened or one is exposed to grotesque or disturbing sights. The second type is traumatic bereavement, which occurs when beloved friends or family members die as a result of disaster. The third occurs as a reaction to disruption of normal living, which is a common element of virtually all disasters.

Many of the survivors in the Toowoomba and Lockyer Valley disaster were facing one or more of these traumas, and several experienced all three. Raphael (1986) has traced decades of psychological research into the human impact of disasters: the psychological effects of the shock of an unexpected disaster; the emotional toll at the time of the impact; and how people cope in

the aftermath. None of the studies, however, canvassed why disaster survivors chose to speak, or not to speak, to the media about their ordeal. Australian researcher Cait McMahon has researched and documented both the adversity and the growth experienced by journalists who report trauma (McMahon 2005, McMahon and McLellan, 2008) and Denis Muller has examined the affect on media people of reporting the 'Black Saturday' bushfires (Muller 2010, 5-10). The present flood research study is amongst few studies that have asked interviewees who had recently endured life-threatening and/or bereavement experiences *why* they decided to speak about them, to a reporter.

Muller's study (2010, 10) found that there was an absence of consensus amongst media people on ethical questions faced by media personnel working in the disaster zone. He concluded that "the ethical vacuum in which journalists work is primarily a systemic failure that abandons them to a kind of relativist jungle where what is right or wrong is decided by reference to what each individual journalist thinks." Similar ethical dilemmas in the flood disaster zone meant that survivors, who had little experience with the media, were treated in vastly different ways by different reporters. Some survivors reported, for example that reports were inaccurate or that reporters breached commonly-accepted privacy codes. Some reporters, for example entered evacuation centres with no identification, eating and drinking with survivors and not identifying themselves as reporters when they spoke to people. One reporter who thus overheard news of deaths as they were delivered to a bereaved survivor, then asked permission to report what was heard. The survivors were understandably incensed, and refused. Other survivors had very different experiences and quickly realised the power of the media to 'get the news out', to articulate what emergency relief was needed and subsequently to thank the public for the

overwhelming donations of food, clothing, money, equipment and manpower given during the recovery effort.

The reasons given by participants in this study, for agreeing to participate in a recorded interview with a journalist writing media articles and a book and producing radio documentaries are useful insights for reporters and camera people working in disaster zones to better understand the important and trusted role they play in accurately reporting news of a disaster; documenting the casualties and damage; and galvanising emergency relief and assistance for rebuilding and recovery.

Most of the flood research interviews were carried out from six to eight months after the disaster. Participants were chosen through an inductive process, because they were connected with a rescue, or a death, of a person or they had narrowly escaped death themselves. Some of the participants were referred to the researcher by other participants. Almost all of the participants had not previously been interviewed in the aftermath of the disaster. Potential participants were mostly contacted by phone initially and then interviewed in person. The interviews were all recorded on broadcast quality digital equipment. Some participants who were a long distance away were interviewed by phone. These interviews were also recorded.

The high percentage of people who were willing to participate was unexpected, given the level of trauma experienced by the survivors and rescuers and that some survivors who had been interviewed in the immediate aftermath of the floods had felt betrayed by news reports that were inaccurate. Some people were therefore cautious about agreeing to another interview. However, only 5 of the 125 people who were invited to take part in the research declined to be interviewed.

The five who declined had all suffered bereavement or multiple bereavements and/or had narrowly escaped death themselves during the disaster.

In addition to being willing to participate in the research, the participants were also willing to be identified in the book, *The Torrent: Toowoomba and Lockyer Valley January 2011* (Gearing 2012) and radio documentary *The day that changed Grantham* (Gearing 2011b), outputs of the research and in main-stream media coverage that emerged from some of the interviews. The requirement that participants be named because of the historical nature of the book, did not prove to be a disincentive for any participant.

Participants in the study comprised the following groups of people: 87 flood survivors at Toowoomba, Spring Bluff, Murphys Creek, Withcott, Postmans Ridge, Helidon, Carpendale and Grantham; seven family members of flood victims; 41 civilian rescuers in the disaster zone; 16 rescue agency staff in the disaster zone; and two reporters who were in the disaster zone during the floods. Some people were both survivors and rescuers, or survivors and family members of victims. The total number of interviewees was 120.

The interviews were semi-structured, with a set of pre-determined questions. Additional depth and width probe questions were added as required for clarification. The questions covered where each person was located when they realised they were suddenly in danger, what they did and how they survived, rescued people or tried to rescue people. Further questions gathered information about what lessons needed to be learned from the disaster by individuals and civil authorities.

The interviewing began in the area of the final catastrophic impact of the floods in Grantham. I then went to the first location to be struck, at the top of the catchment, at Spring Bluff and then

the town downstream, Murphy's Creek. I then worked from the city of Toowoomba to the east, following the direction of the floodwater, through Withcott, Postman's Ridge, Helidon, Carpendale and back to Grantham where I interviewed some people who had been willing to be interviewed but at a later time.

Why do survivors speak to reporters?

During my reporting of the disaster for *The Australian* I was surprised that so many of the flood survivors were willing to be interviewed despite the extremely traumatic nature of their experiences. Motivated by a desire to help find their missing loved-ones, grieving families used Facebook and other social media to disseminate information as widely as they could. The offer of media coverage therefore, was perceived as a means for helping them to locate missing family members or to let their friends and family know they were alive, given the failure of telecommunications and electricity supplies in much of the disaster zone.

When I subsequently interviewed research participants, I asked those who had been confronted with their own imminent death or the threat of imminent death of a member or members of their family *why* they had decided to be interviewed, given the emotions that would be awakened speaking about the floods. Participants were free to provide as many reasons as they wished for their participation. Their responses provide an important glimpse into an under-researched topic: the reasons why traumatised individuals decided to speak to reporters.

The answers to the research question asking why people had agreed to be interviewed, were grouped using common keywords. Some people gave more than one reason for participation. The groups of reasons that participants agreed to participate emerged without any pre-determined categories from the data, during analysis. Participant responses fell into six categories (see Table

1): lessons need to be learned from the disaster; the participant's desire for the public to know what had happened; a sense of duty to make sure warning systems and disaster responses are improved in future; for their own personal recovery; and the timing of the interview request. Three respondents gave more than one reason for their participation.

Interestingly, none of the participants gave answers to do with my perceived ability as a reporter, that they liked me, knew my work, or felt safe talking to me. These personal factors may have been taken into account but they were not mentioned as reasons. The responses therefore appear to apply to a journalist's role rather than to the personal attributes of a particular reporter.

Table 1 Reasons for volunteering to speak about disaster experiences to the media

Why did you volunteer to be interviewed about your experience during the flood?	Number of respondents n = 30
As part of my personal recovery	10
Desire for the public to know what happened	9
Lessons need to be learned	6
A sense of duty to make sure warning systems and disaster responses are improved in future.	4
Financial disinterest of reporters in listening to survivor stories	2
Enough time has elapsed for me to be able to speak	2
Total	33

a) Personal recovery

Survivors of trauma, such as people who have lived through war, may simultaneously exhibit symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder but also posttraumatic *growth* (eg Mattoon 2010). Posttraumatic growth is a combination of positive changes experienced by survivors of trauma.

These can include improved relationships, a greater appreciation for life, a greater sense of personal strength and spiritual development. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, 2) found that trauma survivors themselves often identify the paradox that despite their losses, they have experienced valuable 'gains'. Social work therapists are taught to listen for, and to identify strengths and survivorship, in the stories of their clients. This, according to Norman (2000, 308), assists survivors to begin to establish a foundation for healing from a traumatic experience. Cait McMahon (2005) has identified that journalists exhibit post trauma responses following the coverage of disaster, violence and tragedy. She was the first researcher to identify that these responses can include both PTSD and posttraumatic growth. McMahon suggested that journalists confront trauma on an emotional and cognitive level and that the narrative process of writing news stories assists them to process the trauma into coping or recovery (McMahon, 2005, 4). Reporters in the Toowoomba–Lockyer Valley disaster in most cases were in contact with survivors before any counselling agencies. Survivors of the disaster reported a similar process – that in speaking about their experience of the disaster and later by reading the book, they were able to emotionally and cognitively 'reassemble' themselves post-disaster.

The willingness of reporters to listen to interviewees was appreciated by several flood survivors and in some cases led to immediate problems being identified or resolved. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, 3) found that 'listening - without necessarily trying to solve - tends to allow patients to process trauma into growth'.

Grantham resident John Mahon identified posttraumatic growth which he recognised as he told and re-told the story of his family's survival and publicly thanked the helicopter rescue teams which winched them all to safety:

I think talking to people and telling my story helps me a lot. You relive it again but it helps me get over it. Talking to reporters and other people has helped me get through it.

In Murphys Creek, Sue Patterson saw the family's cars lifted from her yard and float down the creek. She fled her house with her daughter. Mrs Patterson also found speaking about the event therapeutic:

I think it's very beneficial to be able to talk it out. I think that as you talk it helps you sift through things in your own mind. It's very healing.

As the tsunami wave hit the town of Grantham, it lifted a highset house off its stumps and carried it almost two kilometres across farm paddocks. Retired couple Marie and Peter Van Straten were inside the house and believed by dusk that they would not live until the morning. However, a rescue helicopter appeared and airlifted them to safety. The couple were both in hospital after the disaster and therefore were unable to speak to the media about their ordeal. They both found the process of telling their story therapeutic when they were interviewed for the first time six months after the disaster. Mrs van Straten had, by then, found important positives from the disaster, such as an improved relationship with her husband and a closer connection with other people from the town of Grantham. She spoke because she wanted people to know about the posttraumatic growth she had experienced:

I hope with all my heart that my story is going to help somebody. I need people to know that out of horrible things, good things can come.

You can help people more when you've been through something like that but if you withdraw into yourself and don't talk about it, you don't help yourself and you don't help anybody else either. I'm really happy to be able to do this.

People did die. For a long time I wouldn't laugh or even smile because I felt, what gives me the right to enjoy life when people around us died? I need people to hear my story and know that you can be a better person by having something really horrible happen. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy much less someone that is close to me. That's why I want to tell the story now.

b) Desire for the public to know what had happened

The public sharing of stories has been found by various researchers including Wilson, Leary, Mitchell and Ritchie (2009) to benefit survivors such as soldiers returning from war zones, by improving public understanding of the veterans' experiences and the experiences of their families as the soldiers readjust to civilian life. Several participants in the flood research volunteered that the major reason for speaking about this flood disaster was to improve public understanding of what had happened. A consequence of flood survivors telling their stories was a strong public response in donating substantial amounts of labour, goods and money to the recovery effort. Some flood survivors expressed being overwhelmed by the generosity of both relatives, friends and strangers who took them into their homes, gave them accommodation, food, clothing, goods, financial support, use of heavy earthmoving equipment and other practical help. The media was seen as a vital facilitator of information sharing between the disaster zone and the public.

Anthropologists identify three 'transition rituals': separation, transformation and aggregation. (Kitch and Hume, 2007, 141). Helicopter pilot Brian Willmet spoke about the first stage – the tearing of the fabric of society and the shock and disbelief of those who were witnesses. His reason for speaking about his experience as a rescuer at Postmans Ridge was to ensure the

historical record of the event was as accurate as possible and in honour of his neighbour, Sylvia Baillie, who died:

I think history is history and it's got to be told hasn't it? I think if history is going to be recorded it's got to be accurate as well. I've told you what I believe happened . . . Talking to you helps me honour Sylvia. To get emotional about Sylvia honours her.

In Helidon, Jean and Lloyd Warr scrambled to the roof of their house as the water suddenly started flowing through their house and rose higher than the gutters. Jean Warr felt constrained to speak about the flood in the hope of avoiding future catastrophe:

If people don't tell people what happened, the next time it happens there will be just the same awful consequences. We will be in the position again where too many people will die for stupid reasons.

Spring Bluff railway station caretaker and gardener Craig Ritchie contributed to the study out of his concern for his community and their need for assistance. He said:

I think it's important that it gets out there how people are feeling. It really helps with public donations. It really just shows people that we are all vulnerable. We'll all pitch in and help each other. It's extremely important to get that news out there.

c) Lessons need to be learned from the disaster

Some of the survivors spoke because they thought lessons needed to be learned from the disaster, even though they knew they would find the process of speaking about their ordeal emotionally stressful. Some participants sobbed during the interview but were determined to continue because of their strong conviction that they needed the most frightening aspects of

the disaster to be recorded and acted upon by authorities. Gilbert Kilah of Grantham, for example, had floated on a car bonnet down Railway Street in Grantham with two teenage girls on the roof of the car. He had been flung off the car and had not known the fate of the girls while he clung to a power pole in the torrent for an hour and a half, terrified that a large object might hit the pole and cut off his fingers. Mr Kilah wanted authorities to be aware that the disaster although dire, could have been far worse in Grantham.

I'm surprised that so few (people) died. There are lessons to be learned from all this. It had the potential with rain falling in a wider catchment area to be five or six feet deeper in Grantham. If all the creeks had flowed at the same time and at the same rate, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you. Simple as that.

A Helidon teenager, Angela Emmerson who took part in the research, was close to Helidon bridge where the tsunami was five metres high as it went down the creek. The Helidon river gauge tracing shows that the creek rose from four metres to 13 metres in 23 minutes. It was here that a family in a car was swept off the Warrego Highway and were filmed on the roof of their car being carried helplessly along by the current. Angela Emmerson spoke because she and her sister had been in great peril but had survived. She felt compelled to pass on everything she had learned:

If someone else can learn just one lesson from what I've told you then that might save someone's life. It was horrible for me, yes. I survived though. If I can save someone else's life from them hearing this, then that's great. And being able to tell your story, makes you think that people care and they want to know what's going on which is also great.

d) A sense of duty to make sure warning systems and disaster responses are improved in future

Withcott publican Neil Simpson watched from his pub as a car was swept down the Warrego Highway and the two women inside were rescued by a truck driver who jackknifed his truck to catch the floating car against a power pole as it came past. He recognised that the collation of all available information was important to prevent loss of life in similar future disasters:

I think it's so important that we look at ways of preventing this horrible thing happening ever again. If I can give one little bit of information that helps a bit, that would be great.

In Murphys Creek, Nelly Gitsham risked her life to save a horse as the flood was destroying her house. She was rescued by her neighbour when she became trapped in a paddock. She spoke on behalf of others in nearby districts who were not warned of the scale of the impending disaster:

I've got no problem with talking because if my story is out there then maybe the state can look back and say 'there's a person who didn't get warning, like everyone in Murphy's Creek and all the poor people in Grantham who lost their lives. Maybe they should do something else about it.

Grantham father Matthew Keep spoke publicly about his family's ordeal to highlight the system failures which he said had resulted in the deaths of his mother, mother-in-law and his young daughter Jessica, two. (Gearing, 2011a)

There has to be a level of accountability for local governments to adhere to frameworks that are determined at a state level. To say that they will get it right for the future holds little comfort for my family; they should have had it right to start with. This was one of the biggest floods to take place in Queensland's history and yet no-one knew about it.

e) Financial disinterest of reporters in listening to survivor stories

In the first few months after the disaster, some flood survivors sought counsellors to help deal with their traumatic experiences. When I was interviewing people about six months after the flood, several compared their experience of counselling as less helpful than speaking to a reporter who they perceived to be listening out of interest and care rather than for financial gain. Participants were aware that they did not have to pay to speak to a reporter. Many participants were grateful that a member of the media was willing to listen and to document the disaster that for them was a life-changing event. Grantham father Danny McGuire whose wife and two of his three children died, told me:

It's better talking to you than to a psychologist because I can talk to someone without paying them to listen to me.

Postmans Ridge resident and counter-disaster planner Rod Alford, who had also attended a counsellor, expressed a similar view:

I find it more relaxing talk to you than the highly educated professionals. They tend to be more financially focussed – they are watching their clock and say ‘times’ up’ – would you like to make another appointment? And I think ‘you bastards – you’re caring and sharing for two hours – but only because you’re being paid.’

f) Timing

The fifth reason given by interviewees for being willing to speak to a reporter was that sufficient time had passed for them to be able to talk about their experiences. Whilst Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has been a focus of post-disaster research studies, there is also evidence that some people, while shocked and shaken, recover relatively quickly (George Bonnano et al, 2010, 11-

12). Bonnano et al argue that levels of resilience have been underestimated in post-disaster studies in recent decades and that practical assistance acts as a form of 'psychological first aid'. Murphys Creek resident Susan Mouflih spoke to three reporters in the months after the flood. She described how her ability to talk about the disaster increased over time. On the first occasion, within a week of the flood, she spoke to a reporter but could not say more than 'My brother saved my life'. In a second interview she was able to remember more detail of what had happened. When I interviewed her six months after the flood she was able to give detailed information about what happened, what she was thinking about as she was struggling underwater to dig her fingers into the ground to prevent herself from being swept away and how she reacted to the event. This third interview was arguably the most informative for news audiences and also provided the best opportunity for Mrs Mouflih to piece together in her mind what had happened. If not for the extended reporting undertaken for the research project, it is unlikely her story would have been captured in detail. Whilst the imperative of news coverage is to be timely, there is also a place for the richer detail available from survivors once they have recovered enough to be able to relate the important detail of what happened. Several of the interviews revealed important information about the flood event which had not been made public and these generated news stories despite the passage of several months after the floods. In addition, it is important for journalists to understand that an initial rejection by a source may be based solely on the timing of the interview request, and that a later request may succeed.

The timing of the interview request was also a significant factor for Withcott resident Ben Burton. Mr Burton had been asked for an interview by a reporter immediately after the flood but he had refused. When I approached him he agreed to an interview and was able to talk about the flood without becoming emotionally distressed. He told me:

I do recall one or two days after the flood I was asked but I wasn't ready to talk. I was absolutely shell-shocked at the time. Six months later, I'm quite happy to talk to you.

The explanations given by the participants are consistent with the findings of Newman and Kaloupek (2004, 383-394) who reported that, 'Current, limited evidence suggests that most individuals make favourable cost-benefit appraisals regarding their participation (in trauma-focussed research studies). Although a subset of participants report strong negative emotions or unanticipated distress, the majority of these do not regret or negatively evaluate the overall experience.' Several participants who read the chapter or chapters in which their stories were told found the experience emotionally challenging but therapeutic. One participant made special mention that having his wife, who had not been at home on the day, read the chapter had helped her to understand what had happened and that in turn had helped him to feel that she understood what he and the community had experienced. Another survivor, whose sister and nephew died and whose house was destroyed, could only manage to read the book three pages at the time but she found the book helpful in coming to terms with how the disaster unfolded and helpful in her personal recovery.

Lessons for journalists

This study highlighted five practical ways in which journalists can minimise the stress on interviewees post-disaster.

Firstly, while reporters are not therapists, it is important to recognise that for survivors who want to tell their stories, the telling is not necessarily a re-traumatisation. Instead, the telling of the story can be a positive experience for the survivor, especially if the reporter draws out aspects of their resilience, their learning from the experience or their learning on behalf of their community.

While reporters have no therapeutic qualifications and should not attempt to ‘counsel’ survivors, it is helpful to recognise the possibility that telling stories of survival can have positive effects on people and be capable of empowering victims by emphasising their strengths which played a role in their survival.

Secondly, developing the discipline of sitting with survivors and hearing their stories without feeling rushed by deadline pressure is a skill which must be developed in advance for effective reporting of survivor stories as well as to minimise harm to survivors who are willing to be interviewed.

Thirdly, given the risk of causing distress to someone who may be suffering from post trauma symptoms, journalists need to carefully assess any risk to the survivor and make a professional judgement on whether to invite the person to be interviewed. However, journalists should recognise that despite having endured traumatic situations and even traumatic bereavement, some people may be willing to be interviewed and may find the process therapeutic.

Fourthly, flood survivors interviewed in this project often spoke of their new-found appreciation for life and the relative unimportance of material goods which they had found could be taken away surprisingly quickly. As I listened to the stories of survival and rescue I drew out detail about the consolations people recognised, for example that although they had lost their home and possessions, they and their children had survived. Some interviewees identified their own consolations which helped them to cope.

Audience feedback

The creative outputs of the research: a 54-minute ABC radio documentary *The day that changed Grantham* and the book *The Torrent: Toowoomba and Lockyer Valley, January 2001*, both

received favourable reactions from flood survivors, rescuers and audiences. The radio documentary told the story of what happened in Grantham – the worst-affected town – where twelve people died. The book explained how the flood affected each of the nine locations and two final chapters documented the aftermath of the floods and the rebuilding. The final chapter included information collated from the flood survivors on how to prepare for flash flooding and safety precautions to take before and during a flash flood emergency.

Feedback from audiences of the journalism outputs of the research indicated a strong emotional reaction from listeners which was sympathetic to the survivors and admiring of the courage of rescuers. Strong audience responses included comments that the radio program was ‘amazing and deeply emotional’ and ‘community storytelling at its most important’. Participants reported that the creative outcome resulted in ‘a very precious record of an afternoon of tragedy and triumph and the bitter-sweetness of survival.

Conclusion

Journalists are often required to report traumatic incidents and are amongst the first-responders to disasters. Their social role is to act as witnesses and to gather witness accounts which allow readers and viewers to identify with those affected and to mourn the loss of life as the narrative is transformed into a shared experience with cultural meaning (Kitch and Hume, 2007, 151).

Recognising that most disaster survivors are likely to be willing to be interviewed for a variety of reasons can help reporters understand their role in facilitating accurate reporting of disasters including the important eye-witness accounts of people in the disaster zone. It is also important for other disaster response agencies such as emergency and welfare services organisations to respect the legitimacy of the role of reporters and to facilitate, rather than restrict, reporters

working in disaster zones. Several flood survivors provided written feedback that they were grateful for the opportunity to tell their story and also for the collection and presentation of the book as a history of the disaster.

Withcott business owners Norm and Wendy Head, for example expressed these thoughts:

We must commend you on the book and your detailed accounts of the events of January 2011. This book will be on our shelf (once all the family have read it) for future generations of our family to read and realise what was endured by so many last year. Many friends have bought your book and now have a more informed account of those few days. Sometimes it is hard for us to relate these things to people and now through your book they understand.

Once again thank you for relating everyone's story with dignity.

Another survivor, Elizabeth Fraser, who was bereaved of two members of her family, found the book difficult to read but cathartic in coming to terms with the event: "Even though I saw it, I lived it, I smelt it, I heard it, reading the book brings it back, like you're there again. So I know it wasn't a nightmare. It was the truth."

Research findings on why very traumatised people chose to speak to a journalist in this study fell into six main categories: lessons need to be learned from the disaster; a desire for the public to know what had happened; a sense of duty to make sure warning systems and disaster responses are improved in future; personal recovery and the timing of the request for an interview.

The imperative which urged Helidon resident Jean Warr to speak to the media arguably imposes a similar ethical responsibility on journalists to confront the trauma of disasters, to listen patiently and to re-tell the stories accurately. Gathering the stories and retelling them is important to reduce future risks. To borrow Mrs Warr's words, if journalists don't tell people what happened, 'the next time it happens there will be just the same awful consequences. We will be in the position again where too many people will die for stupid reasons'.

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Amanda Gearing's book *The Torrent: Toowoomba and Lockyer Valley January 2011* is published by UQP. Her documentary *The day that changed Grantham* is available via podcast from ABC Radio National at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/360/the-day-that-changed-grantham/3584672>.