

Media coverage of mass death: not always unwelcome

When ordinary persons die in unremarkable ways, the media usually pay little attention. In contrast, when someone dies in an unusual or violent way—especially in a mass death accident or disaster—the media react as if the dead were celebrities. They head to the scene, record the grief of survivors, sometimes even film and photograph the bodies of the dead. They also track down family members, friends and associates for information, comment and pictures.

An ordinary person dying of a heart attack at home is not news, but one who is murdered or dies in a fire will certainly make the local news, and those who die in a major air crash will have the cause of their death raked over in fine detail by the national media (Walter, Littlewood and Pickering 1995).

Emergency responders tend to see media behaviour in such incidents as inappropriate and try to control access to the scene of mass death incidents and protect the privacy of the bereaved. This is often very difficult and, on the basis of the evidence available, may be inappropriate. This article looks at how the media treat mass death. It concludes that although some efforts to control media behaviour are justified, much media behaviour is acceptable to those who are most affected—though it is not clear why.

Literature Review

Although there is a small but detailed literature on mass death and a growing literature on the mass media and disaster both sets of the literature generally ignores the way the media deal with death, especially mass death. The most recent discussion of the handling of bodies (Scanlon 1998) makes no mention of the media. That is also true of earlier major reports on the same subject (Blanshan 1977; Blanshan Undated; Blanshan and Quarantelli; Catron, Hershiser, Hershiser and Quarantelli 1976; Hershiser and Quarantelli 1979; Pine 1969a; Pine 1969b; Pine 1974; Pine 1980). Similarly, when the Disaster Research Center of the University of Delaware prepared a major bibliography on the media and disaster they included no articles on how the

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media deal with death Wenger, Dennis and E. L. Quarantelli 1989). Other major reviews of media performance in disaster also ignore this issue (Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media; Scanlon and Alldred; Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick). Even when articles cover both the handling of bodies and the role of the media in a mass death incident, they don't link the two together (Emergency Communications Research Unit 1985). Discussion of the media's relationship to death, including mass death has, in other words, not been documented in the academic literature but left to the text books and to guides on professional practice.

Normal Death

At one time, preparing an 'obit' was a standard assignment in introductory Journalism classes and reporting texts had full sections on writing obituaries (MacDougall 1968; Metz 1977; Harriss, Leiter and Johnson 1992).

Besides being cherished by newspapers for their readership, obituaries are... clipped, saved, sent to friends and relatives, pasted in scrapbooks and albums, placed in family Bibles. They endure virtually forever (Metz 1977).

However most obits are run because someone did something in life considered newsworthy. For example, the *Toronto Daily Star* ran a 12-paragraph story on the death of Rudolf Krogler because he was a classmate of Pope John Paul II in Poland: a photo of Krogler and the Pope accompanied the obit (Turnbull 1998). Similarly, the *Markham (Ontario) Economist & Sun* carried coverage of the death of Markham's mayor and even covered his funeral. The stories included quotes from those who knew him and from the eulogy ('Mayor Tony Roman Dead at 56' 1992, Belgrave 1992).

Major newspapers ignore ordinary death but do carry obituaries for truly prominent figures. For example, on November 21, 1998, *The (London) Times*

ran obituaries on:

- Alan Pakula, the US film director, responsible for 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and 'All the President's Men'; and
- Paddy Clancy who with his brothers, Tommy and Liam, attracted the attention to Irish music that eventually led to the spectacular success of 'Riverdance' ('Alan Pakula' 'Paddy Clancy' November 21, 1998).

There was also a note of the earlier death of Valerie Hobson, a British film star perhaps better known as the spouse of John Profumo, central figure in a British cabinet scandal ('Milestones' November 21, 1998). These stories appear so quickly and with so much detail because for the really well known, the media stay ready for death: wire services and many newspapers maintain biographical files on prominent citizens who are in their mature years, so that obituaries can be prepared quickly. Indeed, obits of the most important people are already written: should one of them suddenly die the editors need only add the circumstances of death to the beginning of the story (Metzler 1986).

Some deaths are seen as so significant that newspapers assign a reporter to interview those persons while they are still alive. Alden Whitman of the *New York Times* reports that only twice was he refused such interviews:

Some others have been hesitant at first, but having acquiesced, seem to have enjoyed themselves. One of these was Sir Anthony Eden, British prime minister during the murky Suez Canal crisis of 1956, now Lord Avon. At first his Lordship was adamant. 'I have never given a private interview,' he wrote me. In London in 1967 I pressed him by telephone. Pleasantly, he said no again until I had the wit to say, 'Please, sir, this is not an interview for now, but for the future.' 'Oh,' he replied, brightening, 'you mean it's for when I'm dead.' 'Well, that's the short of it,' I said. 'In that case,' he continued, 'do come and have tea with me at the House of Lords.' The result was a behind-the-scenes recapitulation of the Suez business as well as some glimpses of his private self (Whitman 1972).

Other who agreed to similar predeath interviews included Harry Truman, Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, Francois Muriac and Graham Greene.

Coverage Continues

If the death of someone prominent is tragic or has other newsworthy qualities the coverage may continue for days, weeks, months or even years. When Michel Trudeau, son of former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, was washed into a British Columbia lake by an avalanche the story made page one and the coverage continued for more than a week. There were television interviews with Royal Canadian Mounted Police explaining how they would search Kokanee Lake for Michel's body. Eventually, Michel's brother Sacha appealed to the media: 'As you all understand, I'm sure, it's a lot of pain for my family so I would ask you to respect our peace' (Steffenhagen, 1998, p. A3). The coverage was minute compared to coverage of the death of President Kennedy:

The networks abandoned entertainment programs and commercials and devoted themselves to the big story from Friday to Monday evening... The newspapers covered it in extenso and the wire services moved thousands of words on it... During those days the average home in the Neilsen sample had a television receiver tuned to the Kennedy report for a total of 31.6 hours... people estimated that they had spent on the average of 8 hours Friday, 10 Saturday, 8 Sunday and 8 Monday watching television or listening to the radio (Schramm 1965).

Coverage still continues for Kennedy and for Diana, Princess of Wales, both because of their prominence and speculation about the details of their deaths.

Although the media are often ready for the death of celebrities, they are *not* prepared for the death of less notable persons. That means when they do decide to give major coverage to the death of someone less well known they have to scramble for information and photos. For example they send reporters to the person's home for what are called 'pick-up pictures', a task that McKercher and Cumming state is seen by editors as a test of a young reporter's ability to be persistent under difficult circumstances.

The authors report how Ottawa *Sun* reporter, Stephanie Chamberlain handled three such assignments. On one she noticed an air force sticker on the door and mentioned she had worked for an air force magazine. On another, after being turned away, she returned with doughnuts

and coffee. On a third—an incident where a woman was murdered by her husband—she persuaded one of the woman's friends to find a picture by arguing that the story needed to be told to emphasize the need for society to stop spousal abuse. Chamberlain said she felt a certain triumph in getting all three photos: she was also conscious of 'an element of manipulation' (McKercher and Cumming 1998).

In the wake of the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania, Australia (25 dead, 22 injured), the Hobart *Mercury* ran a huge front-page photo of Martin Bryant, the man accused of the killings, with a huge headline, 'THIS IS THE MAN':

Late that morning I received a phone call from an employee of the *Mercury* who described with disgust how three staff members had distracted the Constable on duty outside Bryant's house while one of them broke in to steal the photograph (Easton 1997).

In addition to chasing photos of the dead, the media call all possible sources for information and flock to the scene or the community that is the focus of the response. They also jam the phone lines with calls to any agency or anyone who might have information. More than 200 journalists—from Canada, Denmark, England, France, Ireland, Japan, Norway, Scotland and Sweden—showed up in Jonesboro, Arkansas after a teacher and four girls were shot at an elementary school. There were 325 media personnel on hand after a charter aircraft carrying US military personnel crashed in Gander, Newfoundland and roughly 1,000 media at Lockerbie after the air crash. So many media helicopters responded to Coalinga, California after an earthquake that they created an aerial traffic jam

In addition to heading to the scene, journalists try to find persons in their own community or coverage area who are related to those involved. When the ferry *Estonia* sank en route from Tallin to Stockholm on September 28, 1994, most of the 913 passengers were Estonian or Swedish. However, the *Ostlandets Blad* in Ski, south of Oslo, tracked down the ex-wife of a local resident who died in the incident, interviewed her and ran a page one story based on that interview. The next day there was a second page one story with photo based on an interview with a friend of the victim. Because Matti Sormul, the man who died, was a successful local businessman, the newspaper had his photo on file (personal interview with Espen Larson, the reporter who did the interviews). Similarly, media

in Australia and elsewhere tracked down the families of those who were shot and killed in the massacre at Port Arthur, Tasmania.

Morbid Interest

Along with stories and photos the media go for graphic, often gruesome coverage. For example after the Swissair crash off Nova Scotia, *Time* ran a feature story on Master Seaman Rene Poirier, one of the divers who recovered debris:

In every direction, nothing but tiny pieces of debris. The jet lay unrecognizable, 'like a huge pane of shattered glass'. And scattered among the shards were the people he had come for. He found an eye, a heart, a jawbone. Part of a hand imbedded in an armrest. Poirier tries the word hellish to describe the scene then takes it back. 'There is no way to describe it' (Lopez 1998).

At Lockerbie journalists photographed a body being removed from a roof:

'The day they brought the body down the photographers were running around stupid,' a neighbourhood resident recalled. 'They were running through my garden up on to my step to get as near as they could to get a photo of it being brought down. That was really ghastly and I thought they were pigs at the time' (Deppa *et. al.* 1994).

Four publications including *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post* used those photos. If access to such photo opportunities is denied the media may resort to subterfuge. After US soldiers were killed in the air crash at Gander, Newfoundland, reporters were barred from the crash site until it was no longer possible to see bodies. One photographer slipped by security, climbed a ladder and shot a picture of the floor of an aircraft hangar that was being used as a morgue.

After the Port Arthur massacre, the media also provided coverage usually reserved for the prominent—they broadcast a memorial service for the dead. Even CNN aired a live satellite feed from Hobart, Tasmania:

CNN intended to take the first half-hour of the service live before switching to its regularly scheduled interview program Larry King Live. But as the service unfolded CNN decided to continue airing the whole memorial service and delay Larry King Live (Raedler 1997).

While that coverage was relatively unobtrusive, that was not the case when a vigil was held in Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University the evening a number of Syracuse students were killed in the Lockerbie crash:

As the chapel filled media were asked to stay away from the area in front of the raised platform, where chaplains and representatives of the various faiths would lead the service. Photographers were asked not to use flash. But the emotion generated by the event, especially in the moments of meditation between scriptures and sacred music, created compelling pictures and the whirl of automatic levers advancing film echoed from both sides of the sanctuary. Soon flashes began going off. Upstairs, at the back of the balcony, a local television reporter 'went live' over the protests of students in the area (Deppa *et. al.*, 1994, p.55).

Journalists often feel uneasy about this type of behaviour. After the Swissair crash, reporters gathered at Halifax airport so they could film relatives arriving, at the Lord Nelson Hotel (so they could film relatives coming and going) and at Peggy's Cove the closest community to the crash site (so they could see relatives gazing out to sea). Television journalist Kim Brunhuber felt guilty about what he was doing. He recalls editing footage of a woman leaving the hotel en route to the scene:

She catches sight of our camera 20 feet away, lowers her head, pulls part of her black dress to hide her face. When we put our report together, we stay with the shot until the moment she shields her face. Saving us the public acknowledgement of our grim voyeurism. Days later what I suspected becomes clear. I can edit the shot, but I can't edit my guilt (Brunhuber 1998).

Support for Media

Although such customs have been criticised by others, journalism text books support the custom of survivor interviews and provide much the same advice they give for writing a simple obit: get the interview; be sensitive how you do that; and, if you do it properly the effect may be positive.

4. *If possible, interview the victims.* Survivors...may be badly shaken, but if they are able to talk, they can provide firsthand detail that an official report never could....

6. *Be sensitive to victims and their families.* You have a job to do and you must do it. That does not mean, however, that you can be insensitive to those involved.... (The Missouri Group 1992)

One of the toughest things that a reporter has to do while covering a disaster is to interview the families of victims. At no other time does the public's right to know seem to come into direct conflict with people's right to privacy...

Professionals realize that if they handle the interviews with a great deal of sensitivity they can offer survivors an opportunity to grieve openly and to eulogize a loved one (Itule and Anderson 1991).

One journalism publication carried guidelines on how to approach victims and their families. It suggested reporters ask for permission to do an interview and indicate they will stop or stop taking notes or recording any time an interviewee wants that. It suggested that reporters make clear precisely what they want at the start of the interview (Cote and Bucqueroux 1996). It said such an approach makes the person being interviewed feel a sense of power and reduces uneasiness. Frank Ochberg is a specialist in dealing with victims of violence. He not only condones such interviews, he suggests that reporters must understand and respect their interviewee's reactions:

When victims cry during interviews they are not necessarily reluctant to continue. They may have difficulty communicating but they often want to tell their stories. Interrupting them may appear as patronizing and denying an opportunity to testify. Remember, if you terminate an interview unilaterally because *you* find it upsetting, or you incorrectly assume that your subjects wants to stop, you may be re-victimizing the victim (Ochberg 1996).

He says that research shows that victims have some anxiety when journalists interview them but that they also experience an overall increase in self-esteem.

Survivors Agree

Though some emergency personnel might question this advice survivors seem to agree. When the Broadcast Standards Council in the United Kingdom interviewed 210 victims of violence or disaster including 54 who had been interviewed by reporters, they found that three-quarters were not offended by news coverage and that that was especially true of those involved in a disaster. Those who did complain were concerned about newspaper especially tabloid reporters, but not about broadcast journalists (Shearer 1991). Survivors said they were prepared to be interviewed if the stories had a purpose, for example, 'exposed the human frailties and negligences that had contributed to major disasters and so help to minimize the danger of such disasters happening again' (Shearer 1991).

There were similar findings in a study by Karen McCowan, a reporter with *The Arizona Republic* who surveyed victims

and reporters after an air crash. Two victims complained about interviews. A third had mixed feelings. Most said they wanted the public to know about their loved ones and saw the interviews as a way to ensure accuracy and to allow them to vent their emotions. Again, most complaints were about print media (Itule and Anderson 1991).

In some cases survivors do not only welcome exposure to the media, they exploit it. Relatives of the dead have formed groups to try and do something about the incident that caused the death of their loved ones or to share information about lawsuits or other actions that result from these deaths. Those groups put out news releases formalizing their relations with the media. There were, for example, two such groups formed after Lockerbie—'UK Families Flight 103' and 'Victims of Pan Am 103'. One specific goal of the second group is to 'disseminate to the general public through the means of a newsletter and other materials, information regarding the issues of airline safety and security...' (McIntosh 1989).

Flashbacks

When normal death occurs, memories of loved ones flash back during a visit to a familiar setting or because of a familiar piece of music. They also occur on anniversaries: persons who have lost loved ones around a religious festival such as Christmas are reminded of their loss every Christmas from then on.

In the case of mass death, however, the trigger for such memories is often the media. Many people have discovered that when someone in their family is involved in unusual, violent or mass death, contact with the media is not a one-time affair. The 1917 Halifax explosion—2,000 dead, 9,000 injured—is still news in Halifax each December 6, and the local media still run interviews with survivors. There were also items on French and English Canadian television 10 years to the day after the massacre of women engineering students in Montreal. (Of course, the media were not solely responsible: the news reports all contained coverage of vigils in the memory of these students who are seen as victims of male violence against women.) Similarly, on New Year's Eve 1998, the *Express* in Blenheim, New Zealand carried front page photos of two young people, Ben Smart and Olivia Hope who disappeared in Marlborough Sound the previous New Year's Eve. Their bodies have never been found but a youth named Scott Watson has been charged with their

murder (Nicholson 1998). The same day the anniversary story appeared in the Blenheim paper, the first name of one of the missing was the crossword answer to 142 down in Wellington's daily, *The Dominion*, the following day ('Mindgames Monster' 1998).

The same re-visiting happens every time a tragic incident again becomes news or when a similar event occurs. When a person is charged with a crime, is convicted, or appeals, or applies for parole, the media will run the story, often using photos. While relatives of those who die from mass violence or disaster may brace themselves for anniversary stories—it may even help them to know that others remember—relatives of victims of individual violent crime are sometimes startled to turn on the TV and see their loved one's photo because of some development unknown to them or, for that matter, to find their child's name as a clue in a crossword.

...such material...is available to be reused months or years after the event whenever a news story occurs directly or indirectly connected to the event. Particular photographs or film footage become symbols of a particular disaster and are reused on an anniversary or whenever a similar tragedy occurs. The sudden appearance of these images can be distressing (Eyre 1998).

Summary and Conclusions

When someone dies after a long illness or a long life, the passing may attract limited attention in the media except for a death notice in the ad columns—unless that person is prominent. Then the death is treated very differently. That changes when anyone dies in a violent, tragic or bizarre way and it changes dramatically when a number of people die at the same time. On those occasions, people who have been largely ignored by the media throughout their lives suddenly become the focus of media attention: they are treated as if they were prominent. The grief of their friends and family becomes a public rather than private matter—and the attention may last for decades. For those who are related to or know someone who has died violently, mourning is a media, as well as a private, experience.

Emergency responders may be able to control media behaviour at the scene of such incidents. At Gander, after the air crash, the media were taken to the site in a school bus and kept in the bus as it followed a route that guaranteed they would not be able to see or take pictures of any bodies. Emergency responders can

also provide some privacy for survivors and relatives of the dead when they are at or near the scene. After the Swissair crash the media were kept behind barricades when relatives arrived at Halifax airport. They were also kept some distance away from Peggy's Cove, the nearest location to the crash, when relatives of the dead came for a visit. There can also be controls at the hospital and the experience at Munich (after the Manchester air crash) suggests the media will cooperate with such arrangements. The increasing sophistication of video equipment makes such actions less and less significant. The media can take shots from a distance that makes it appear they are beside the person being videoed.

In mass death situations, however, complete control of the media is very difficult. This is partly because of the numbers involved and partly because in a real disaster where there is widespread destruction, there is no 'site' and no place to establish a perimeter. Most important, control is difficult because the media activity is diffuse: media far from the scene 'localize' the story by finding a nearby survivor, relative or friend. Even if control measures are effective at the scene it is difficult to impossible for official agencies to control media activity away from the scene. As journalists try to find a local angle to such stories they will track down the relatives and friends of the dead wherever they may be located.

In any case, there are so many journalists doing so many things and talking to so many people that media control is more of a fiction than a reality. It may be especially difficult in an incident like the Swissair crash where there was no visual evidence of what happened except the occasional piece of aircraft or human debris trapped in a fisherpersons' net, brought to shore and turned over to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The media had nothing else to do but to chase visuals of the families. Finally, media control is next to impossible in a widespread disaster, especially one not predicted, such as an earthquake. There is simply too much happening in too many places for the media to be restrained.

In short, media behaviour after mass death seems to be more a function of media perceptions of what is acceptable than perceptions by personnel from emergency agencies as to what is appropriate. There is little doubt that the relatives and friends of the dead will continue to be the objects of media attention—attention that may last for

days, weeks, months or even decades; and that media replays will often force unexpected recall of what happened. Yet as the limited research available shows, it is far from clear whether that is as bad as some critics would suggest—though it is not clear why this is so. Perhaps it is because talking with a reporter allows a relative or friend to tell someone about their loved one. Perhaps it helps them deal with the finality of death. Perhaps through the media they ensure their memories will endure in more lasting form. Perhaps—there is some evidence to support this—the media help make death meaningful.

For some, coverage of death is a one-time affair, a brief moment of attention for someone who has lived an unremarkable life. For others, it is just another page in a life of prominence. For those involved in violent or unusual death or mass death incidents, the exposure to the media may be the start of a long-term relationship, one that some will at first resist but later seek out. It is difficult for those on the sidelines, including emergency responders, to understand what sort of media behaviour is intrusive and what is acceptable, even desired—in other words to know when the media are uncomfortable vultures and when they are welcome, sympathetic listeners.

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Book Reviews

Global environmental crises: an Australian perspective

Aplin, G. [et al.], 1999, *Oxford University Press, Melb., 2nd ed., 392pp.*

Explores the pressing environmental problems facing the earth from an Australian viewpoint. Case studies dealing with population and health, land, water, forests, the atmosphere, and cities illustrate a number of fundamental themes relevant to all such crises: humans play a pivotal role as both cause and potential solution; environmental issues are complex and require interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches; there is a need to achieve sustainability in all human activity. The concluding chapters bring the case studies together in a discussion about attempts at international cooperation and possible paths to a viable, sustainable future.

Major incident procedure manual

Metropolitan Police Service, 1998, Metropolitan Police Service, Lond., 50pp.

The procedures adopted by each of the emergency services in response to a major incident are understandably devoted to the role of the service concerned. The purpose of this document is to describe the agreed procedures and arrangements for their joint efforts. In this way the overall response of the emergency services will be greater than the sum of their individual efforts, to the benefit of the public.