

- ARTICLE -

Quake Aftermath: Christchurch Journalists' Collective Trauma Experience and the Implications for Their Reporting

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Abstract

On February 22, 2011, Christchurch-based journalists were jolted out of their normal work routine by a large 6.3 magnitude earthquake that killed 185 people, wrecked the city and forced reporters to reappraise their journalism. This study considers how the earthquake affected journalists' relationship to the community, their use of sources and news selection. A theory of collective trauma is used to explain the changes that journalists made to their reporting practice. Specifically, Christchurch journalists had a greater identification and attachment to their audience post-earthquake. Journalists viewed themselves as part of the earthquake story, which prompted them to view sources differently, use those sources differently and see advocacy as a keystone of their news work after the disaster. This study adds to a growing scholarship about journalists and trauma, but focuses on what the event meant for local reporters' choice of sources and news selection rather than measuring rates of psychological distress.

The 22 February 2011 Canterbury earthquake provides an opportunity to consider how a traumatic event affects local journalists' perception of their role in society, and their relationships to their audience and sources. From seeing the deadly results of the initial shake to interviewing those who lost loved ones, Christchurch-based journalists across print, radio and television faced difficult situations that they would not ordinarily encounter. These conditions presented unusual challenges for local journalists who shared the disaster experience with their audience. Many journalists had damaged homes, and personally knew people who were killed or injured, so could understand to a greater extent what people were going through. Therefore, the Canterbury earthquake created an

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environment for local reporters to connect with their public in a different, less detached way than in their normal routine. The disaster also created conditions that posed ethical challenges for local journalists with regard to how they carried out their reporting role because they were part of the event itself.

Any change to reporting practice is important to assess because journalists' stories are central to the public's understanding of what has happened in a disaster and how to respond. Newman, Shapiro and Nelson note, 'In a disaster, no sector of civil society bears more responsibility than the news media. Before, during, and after a disaster, news media are the essential vehicle for public perception of risk, preparedness, scope of disaster, the impact on victims and survivors, and lines of accountability' (2009, 291). At the heart of this article, which is based on continuing doctoral research, is a consideration of local journalists' relationship to their community and how that changed after the Canterbury earthquake. This article argues for an understanding of news reporting post-disaster based on a theoretical framework of collective trauma, which has been adapted from work by trauma theorists, including Jeffery Alexander's work in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004) and Kai T. Erikson's study on the 1972 Buffalo Creek flood. Underpinning the theory of collective trauma is a 'shared experience' between journalists and the public. Journalists became part of the disaster story, and as the experiences of Christchurch-based journalists after the February 2011 earthquake demonstrate, it is important to consider the impact of journalists' trauma on traditional, Western-based, New Zealand journalistic norms. This research argues that sharing traumatic experience will be reflected by a change in reporters' attitudes to their community and sources.

A Framework of Collective Trauma

The bulk of academic inquiry regarding journalists and trauma stems from American or British experience (see Dworzniak 2006; Berrington and Jemphrey 2003; Roberts 2007; Usher 2009; Bretherton and Ride 2011; Downie 2012; Dill 2010; Smith 2008; Keats and Buchanan 2009; Newman et al 2003; Feinstein et al 2002). It is often focused on assessing rates of psychological distress rather than the impact on journalists' work practices (Newman et al 2009). Hanusch, in fact, contends the field of trauma and journalism is still young 'and little is known about the complicated ways in which traumatic events affect journalists' decision making' (2010, 94). This study attempts to increase knowledge about how trauma can affect journalists' news practice. Before discussing the method used for this research I will outline a theory of collective trauma.

A range of theoretical approaches can be used in the study of trauma. Kai Erikson, in *Everything in Its Path*, takes a sociological approach to a disaster's impact on a community. Erikson says the Buffalo Creek disaster had 'two closely related but nonetheless distinguishable facets - individual trauma and collective trauma' (1976, 153). Individual

trauma is the initial 'blow to the psyche' (ibid), resulting in shock from the exposure to a terrible event, including death and devastation on a large scale. Collective trauma, on the other hand, recognises a 'blow to the basic tissues of social life' (ibid) that evolves as those affected realise how their community has changed. This suggests that a journalist working on 22 February in Christchurch would experience their own individual trauma associated with the earthquake event itself, which would then become part of a wider collective experience that recognises the blow to the community.

Following on from Erikson's work, Arthur Neal, in his book *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, argues that national traumas form after 'individual and collective reactions to a volcano-like event' (1976, 153). The trauma grows out of 'an injury, a wound, or an assault on social life as it is known and understood'. These traumas can result from a range of events including natural disasters, collapse of an economic system and technological catastrophe. Neal argues that collective trauma differs from individual trauma because it is shared with others. Journalists, by reporting the event, help the public understand what has happened to the community and to people on an individual and personal level. For Neal, collective trauma has the power to create 'radical change' that can alter people's behaviour, practices and attitudes. The radical change can be applied to 'subgroups of the population' and prompt emotional responses and public attention. Using Neal's argument, media workers, as an identifiable sub-group of the population, could be influenced by collective trauma, and as such, their approach to reporting news is potentially subject to change.

Trauma theorist Jeffery Alexander concludes that trauma can be a cultural phenomenon. He says,

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. It is by constructing cultural traumas that social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilisations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but 'take on board' some significant responsibility for it. Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidarity relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others. (2004, 1)

The Christchurch earthquake, because of the scale of damage and loss of life, is a 'horrendous' event capable of leaving 'indelible marks' on the community, journalists included. As a result, journalists are likely to acknowledge their responsibility to help others and recognise their suffering, which has repercussions for reporting; for example,

who they use as sources, how they relate to those sources and ultimately what they consider important for their stories and news selection. This is important because the construction of collective trauma is aided by 'carrier groups' who are the 'collective agents of the trauma process' (Alexander 2004, 11). Carrier groups are defined as holding a particular place in the social structure; for example, reporters and many of their sources (including people from government agencies, disaster response organisations and welfare groups as well as politicians) are part of institutions that hold central roles post-disaster. These groups have a 'particular discursive talent for articulating their claims – for what might be called meaning making – in the public sphere' (Alexander 2004, 11). The media are a central part of this group because of their power to disseminate information, to portray people and events, and act as a conduit for the voices of individuals who are part of the collective trauma, placing a human face on the tragedy. Reporters, trauma theory suggests, have the power to influence how a community responds to a crisis event through the stories they write. However, it is not suggested that local journalists simply convey messages about trauma for a waiting audience. Rather, the journalist sits within a web of interactions whereby they receive messages about the experiences of others, see the unfolding event for themselves and construct their stories through the prism of their own experience – in doing so they help to create a new shared reality with their audience.

The theory of collective trauma has implications for traditional notions of the 'objective journalist'. Objectivity's value as a professional norm has been debated for decades by academics, journalism teachers and professional reporters, with many recognising that it is a difficult concept and ideal to attain in practice (Chalaby 1998; McQuail 2005; Tuchman 1972; Schudson 2001). According to Skovsgaard et al, 'adherence to objectivity is a highly treasured feature of journalism's professional self image' (2013, 23). In this author's professional journalistic experience, and based on the interviews with participants in this study, individual journalists try to mediate between traditional notions of objectivity that suggest they should disengage themselves from their own emotions and opinions as they try to separate fact from value (Usher 2009, 217) and a more modern understanding of impartiality based on accuracy and fairness (Ward 2004). Skovsgaard et al note that the utility of objectivity has been challenged on several grounds, including claims that it forces journalists to be detached from what and who they are covering, which leads to debate about value judgments and the introduction of bias (2013). In a disaster such as the Canterbury earthquake, journalists are likely to be placed in a position where they will reappraise their connection to the story and those they are writing about. Therefore, Christchurch journalists are unlikely to stand detached from the story, as the Canterbury earthquake did not differentiate between reporters and their audience.

A theory of collective trauma helps to explain why journalistic detachment becomes a particularly difficult achievement for journalists in such conditions. Journalists collectively

share the experience of the disaster with their community. But they do this as a ‘carrier group’, helping to make meaning of the event through their news selection and portrayal. The theory suggests that journalists will acknowledge they are earthquake victims, too, and they will, firstly, view themselves as key actors in the disaster response; secondly, recognise a collective suffering and their responsibility to help other people (through their reporting and on a personal level); and, thirdly, acknowledge that their relationship to the community and sources has changed. Because of the collective trauma, journalists are likely to see themselves as closer to their audience and more representative of their needs than traditional notions of journalistic distance allow for.

Method

This article is based on qualitative analysis of one-on-one interviews with 33 Christchurch-based journalists, which took place from April 2012 to July 2012. The author constructed a list of all Christchurch-based journalists working for broadcast and print outlets during the 22 February disaster. They were then emailed, with a description of the study’s basic goals, and invited to take part. Twenty-one participants came from a print background and 12 from broadcast media. The semi-structured interviews, based on 11 key questions, were exploratory and allowed the researcher to canvass a clear set of issues and capture a ‘conversation where knowledge is produced through the interaction between interviewer and interviewee’ (Kvale 2007, xvii).

First, journalists were asked about their experiences on 22 February and then how they coped with the event and whether it altered their news reporting and relationship with sources. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Key quotes were then identified inductively from the data to form themes. This grounded approach was based on a system used by King and Horrocks (2010) and Kvale (2007) for analysing interview data. The quotes were first categorised into 19 interpretive categories and then into three common themes that had distinctive traits.

These themes are that reporters saw themselves as advocates, part of the story, and attached to the audience. Acting as advocates, journalists had a desire to help their readers/viewers with issues or suggest a solution to a problem. The advocacy category is formed by a bundle of factors, which highlight that journalists in this study believed they had an important intermediary and fiduciary role to help people post-disaster (Carey 2011). Reporters in this study described what might be considered standard modes of reporting – providing important disaster information, describing people’s experiences – as the starting point from which their advocacy journalism evolved. When considering themselves as part of the story, journalists viewed their own experiences as being a significant factor in their understanding of the news event. Emerging from this position, journalists were also attached to the audience, acknowledging a closer relationship with

their community and audience. The themes are intertwined with each other. For example, the 'reporter as advocate theme' is influenced by being 'part of the story' and 'attached to audience', and vice versa. These themes will be discussed in more depth in the findings section of this paper.

Interview Findings

All of the journalists in this study discussed how their own personal trauma affected them and consequently their work. Individuals found varying ways to cope, whether by talking to a counsellor, colleagues or friends; leaving the city for a time; leaving their job, as three participants had done at the time of this study; drinking and eating more; or exercising more. What is notable is that all the study participants acknowledged having difficulty trying to comprehend and report such a big story while dealing with their own problems at home, including upset families, damaged houses, a lack of basic facilities and the ongoing rumble of aftershocks. In effect, there was no escape from the stories they had to report. The interviews show that, when journalists feel they are 'part of the story' they are covering, they cannot detach themselves from the event. In essence, they are grappling with a different mode of reporting from when they cover a routine news event.

For example, *Press* illustrations editor Richard Cosgrove faced the multiple stresses of dealing with a wrecked home and the death of a friend, as well as trying to organise the newspaper's pictorial coverage of the earthquake:

I didn't get to my house until Wednesday afternoon [a day after the quake]. To do that, we had to go to my wife's work, borrow a four-wheel-drive, (then) drive through the various neighbourhoods. We actually had to drive through some of our neighbours' front yards to get there. I was still wearing the same clothes I was wearing the day before. When we got there, there was more liquefaction than we had in September, the house was on a bigger lean and there was shit everywhere. Stuff we thought had survived and we'd got away with was smashed. By then my whole perspective on things had changed because I'd got a text from a mate, Derek, that asked if I was at the PGC building and I said, 'no I've left there'. And his wife was killed in the PGC building, so we were still trying to find her.

Cosgrove's quote highlights the extent to which the personal lives of local media workers were affected. Cosgrove said his experiences gave him 'a more human approach' to his work, an understanding for others and a motivation to help them: 'I wanted to do more human stories. Being red-zoned¹ and all of that gives an insight into the newsroom in that you have a job to do for other people in the same boat and you have to be an advocate for them'. Therefore, his approach to news was directly affected by his personal and collective

experience of the disaster in that he keenly felt a desire to help and advocate for people. To him this was a more valid mode of reporting than remaining detached from what was happening.

TVNZ news reporter Joy Reid says she also felt that she was personally part of the earthquake story: 'I've always been able to put up a wall in the past reporting crime and those things, but with the earthquake there was no way I could put up a wall because my life was part of the quake story'. Being part of the story raises questions about the extent to which journalists can, or should, try to separate their own experiences from their news selection. A comment from former TV3 journalist Juanita Copeland highlights this issue further: 'There is no other story where you live it like this and objectivity sort of went out the window'. Copeland's comment suggests that being part of the story has consequences both for how the news is told and the reporter's sense of how to do their job. It also illustrates that journalistic detachment becomes a particularly difficult achievement for journalists in such conditions.

Then *Press* deputy editor Coen Lammers says that it is 'almost impossible' to separate the personal from the professional in such circumstances. Such a position calls into question whether traditional notions of the detached journalist are suitable, especially from the perspective of local journalists, for meeting the demands of reporting a traumatic event. This study shows that journalists viewed their connection to the story in a traumatic situation as a more valid influence on their work than traditional notions of dispassionate professional judgment.

Importantly, the February earthquake imbued Christchurch journalists with a sense they were in a unique position to both understand and help people through the disaster experience. In that environment journalists moved beyond being mere 'carriers' of trauma messages in their news stories; instead, they tried, on a more personal and emotional level than in times of routine news, to help themselves and others understand what happened through their reporting.

The 'reporter as advocate' theme highlights that post-quake journalists experienced a reawakening with regard to the belief that their journalism could help people and the community. In effect, the Christchurch journalism culture changed, reporters believed, to amplify the role of journalistic advocacy. According to the interview participants, this advocacy evolved from the start of the disaster period. For example, senior *Press* editor Ric Stevens says the newspaper and print journalists realised they were a key conduit for the vital information people needed to get by. From this starting point reporters developed a belief that they should advocate for people more: 'Even on that very first night, on page 2, we started printing essential information. Things that we felt people were going to need to know. We realised not everybody would have power and internet, etc. We realised very

quickly we had a public duty to fulfil that was beyond telling news stories, that people needed to know where they could get clean water'. Stevens' comments are interesting because they show that in some instances 'news' was supplanted by 'informatio'.

Christchurch journalists' increased emphasis on advocacy, then, emerged from a bundle of factors, including journalists' belief that they were doing a public good through their work (Carey 2011, 85). A heightened belief that their journalism could help individuals, and the community, motivated reporters to take a greater advocacy role as the quake recovery period moved on. Joseph found that when journalists told the stories of those who had experienced trauma they formed a 'a type of advocacy journalism – in the public interest' (2013, 1). Coen Lammers says there is a journalistic thrill in realising the important role that the media play in disasters: 'It was like being in a war zone and it was such a fantastic chaotic situation. . . Our role has very much changed because we have become the voice of the people'.

But how did 'becoming the voice of the people' influence news selection and relationships with sources during the recovery period? Journalists in this study believe that their personal experience increased their motivation to highlight an individual's problem or issue for coverage because they had a greater understanding of what people were going through. In times of routine news it would be unusual for a journalist to have the same of level of shared experience with those they are reporting on, which helps to foster a sense of detachment. Lammers says, 'I've had issues with EQC [The Earthquake Commission] and insurance and you know so has everyone else and the stories that we are writing about Jim Smith being stuck in limbo and not getting his payout – I mean everyone in Christchurch relates to that but no one in Wellington or Auckland can. They've got no idea'. This position contrasts with views of news professionals as being able to make decisions because they are distanced from the event. Instead, in the Christchurch earthquake, local journalists came to view themselves as sharing a collective experience and common cause with their community. In such circumstances it was a natural extension for journalists to see themselves as advocates for fellow earthquake victims.

It was apparent to many journalists that by focusing on the issues faced by one person or group they could highlight a problem that needed fixing for their wider audience. *Press* reporter Marc Greenhill says that advocacy role developed from the day after the quake:

It went in stages. [At the start it was] probably stories that helped people find out information in the immediate aftermath of the quake and then it went more into telling stories of people who had been affected and why. Now, more so, it's about people who don't have the opportunity to individually challenge CERA [Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority] or EQC. We're doing stories holding them to account and getting action for them. And I'm

not saying that we're working for them individually to try and get them solutions, but if you have an example of an elderly woman who needed an emergency repair on her house and she couldn't get through to EQC and got a lot of problems [because] her roof is leaking, she comes to the media [and] we hassled EQC about it and they get embarrassed and fix it up. . . Just by highlighting issues, we are getting action.

Greenhill's comments show that after the Christchurch earthquake journalists viewed being an advocate for the public as a dominant influence on their work. News media, from time-to-time, do take up an advocacy role, but in this instance the traumatic event helped to amplify the significance of advocacy in journalists' reporting. His comments are indicative of what many journalists in this study said with regard to the importance of advocacy.

The desire to advocate for people stemmed from complex interactions Christchurch journalists had with the earthquake event itself and the aftermath, and their consequent dealings with quake victims. Significantly, in a situation where journalists were straining to help people, there were repercussions for their relationships with sources, especially officials.

Martin van Beynen says the relationship with officials became a lot more 'antagonistic' in the recovery phase: 'There have been so many delays and frustrations and mistakes and cock-ups that we have got a much more antagonistic relationship with a lot of people now. We've often got them on the backfoot, they're often stressed and tired and it's a much more difficult environment anyway'. This was a position representative of most journalists in this study. Christchurch journalists say their attitude towards and use of sources changed in two ways. First, they played a more aggressive watchdog role with officials. Second, they felt a greater motivation to include comments from individuals who did not belong to organizations – the 'man on the street' – in their stories.

The final major theme identified from the interview material was that journalists felt attached to their audience. Christchurch journalists felt more personally involved in their reporting of the earthquake than news in a more routine environment; they, to some extent, were no longer standing outside looking in, but were in the middle of events. All those interviewed indicated that they felt in some way closer to their audience, and the barriers that they once thought existed between the 'media' and the 'public' were pulled down in the immediate quake aftermath. The interviews indicate, however, that those perceived barriers would be slowly rebuilt over time, but still not, in these journalists' minds, to the extent they once were. According to Christchurch journalists, the earthquake acted to reconnect them with their audience and they felt a strong sense of validity about that renewed relationship because their news work helped the community.

For example, Martin van Beynen says members of the public were easier to deal with post-quake. They were grateful for the media's efforts in getting out information and that helped his journalism: 'It made it easier for me as a reporter because people realise we've all been through the same thing, which is quite important, I think. I think we had a better response because people thought "no-one has escaped this, we've all been through much the same experience"'. Many of the interviewees repeated similar sentiments: journalists felt closer to their audience and the public who, according to reporters, saw the value of what local journalists were doing and respected their working through difficult circumstances. As a result, local journalists said they took more time to talk with people, ask them questions and hear them out. As one journalist, who declined to be identified, noted, they acted more akin to counsellors and helped people to sort their problems out. As a result, interviews would take longer because journalists felt it important to give people a chance to have their say.

TV3's Hamish Clark, highlighting the increased closeness with the public, says he appreciated the compliments from strangers who thanked him for his efforts: 'The public, most people you bump into say "thanks for the coverage". They may be confusing us with someone else, but that is fine; the coverage has been good. We've been voicing their concerns. They also know we live in Christchurch as well and have been going through the same things. We are here to try and help'. However, as noted above, that closer relationship with individuals faded over time. For example, one journalist, who declined to be named, offered what might be considered an extreme view 14 months after 22 February: 'I think the public's attitude to *The Press* has gone back to that more normal "nosey bastard" kind of opinion of us. . . There was a honeymoon where they thought we were great and then it has returned to "all journalists are scum"'. For a significant number of the journalists interviewed, the February quake highlighted notions of 'community' – what binds a city, society or group and how that can be sustained in a disaster environment. For example, then CTV reporter Emily Cooper observes, 'You sort of have such a sense of community now, more than you did before'. That sense of community, says Cooper, guides what a journalist is interested in covering. In the post-quake period, journalists, she says, had an increased desire to help people solve their problems.

Conclusion

The interview results show that Christchurch journalists were open about how their earthquake experience influenced their reporting. The major themes illustrate that journalists can sit at the centre of a collective trauma feedback loop that has the power to influence them and their approach to stories and sources. They are bonded to the event and the people they share it with. The evidence suggests that journalists viewed their connection to the story in a traumatic situation as a more valid influence on their work than traditional notions of dispassionate professional judgment. Because they viewed

themselves as part of the earthquake story, they reappraised their role. They saw themselves as being among the key actors in the earthquake recovery and, by their account, had a sense of wanting to advocate for ‘their community’. At times, information became more significant than traditional notions of what makes up news – indicating that helping the public recover became the driver for much of the journalists’ work. *The Press* journalist Kamala Hayman provides an astute summary of how the February earthquake changed the newspaper’s reporting culture: ‘I think we are much more seen as instead of just a witness to events, a reporter of events, that we are part of the community and we have a responsibility to help both with information and with leading issues and taking a stand on issues. We’re a player, a leader and participant’.

In the immediate post-disaster environment, journalists who felt part of the story and were more attached to their audience wanted to advocate on their behalf to solve issues, push officials harder and help the disaster recovery. Nonetheless, that enhanced connection with the public is likely to diminish the further away that reporters and the community get from the initial event.

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