

The good, the bad and the ugly

Hard lessons for young journalists
coping with trauma



Why this title?

- The good: Christchurch coverage
- The bad: After effects
- The ugly: Pike River mining disaster



The ugly: Pike River

- “They spilled from the Greymouth Civic Centre on that beautiful sunny day, with their faces twisted in grief. There was anger at the media. Maggots. Vultures. An ambulance arrived. Superintendent Knowles fronted the first knots of reporters and his words echoed around the car park, as the statement was phoned back to newsrooms. Journalists crouched over laptops on the asphalt. Within seconds, the world knew the Pike River workers were gone.”





- Iain McGregor/The Press



The bad

- 24-hour news coverage/social media
- One young journalist and videographer filmed the after-effects: six months later, they had still not talked to each other about what they saw
- Only one journalist on a daily newspaper sought counselling: pressure of time?
- Are we allowing our students to become frogs that slowly boil to death? (Young, 2011)



B'grd: Teaching trauma in NZ

- Ranges from no content, or a carrot, to a Death Week but generally there are no set modules: just deal with it when it comes up or if time allows
- Our responsibility or industry's?
- Are we doing our students a disservice?
- Lack of resources



Common response

- “The big difficulty we face as teachers, of course, is not having more hours in the day, not to mention the week!”



Industry attitude

- Ranges from ‘should be taught by industry’, to one of our two biggest publishers admitting it is not addressing trauma yet: It’s a “neglected [area] and we need to get on with it”.
- Most offer occasional workshops/Dart visits/confidential counselling sessions...



Day to day accidents

- “As for workplace support... The company provides two free counselling sessions when needed. The problem is this might be useful if you were seriously traumatised, but what about the run of the mill trauma we have to deal with all the time.”

- “I do think students need to be aware that when you are a journalist you are exposed to trauma; it comes with the job. And although you can’t really prepare anyone for what happened on Feb 22, you can give them key tools and advice to cope with the trauma.
- “Let them know it is okay to freak out and be a human being - before a reporter - if a tragedy hits.



Dilemma

- New Zealand needs its own material, our own champion/s here who has standing in the industry
- Resources: Ch 12 *Intro* inappropriate now
- We have our own horrific 'tragedies':
- child abuse; suicides; car accidents.



- NZ has the fourth-worst child murder rate in the OECD, with an average of eight children a year killed non-accidentally.
- Research shows dealing with children's deaths most traumatic.

Stories last week

“James, known as JJ, died at an Orakei house after suffering severe injuries caused by blunt force trauma to his abdomen last Monday. He was struck so hard in the stomach that one of his major internal organs split in half.”

"Hemana is alleged to have grabbed the baby by the front of his stretch-and-grow pyjamas.

"He violently punches him back and forth repeatedly before dropping him on to the bed."

Mr Shaw said Hemana also picked Cezar up by one leg and again violently shook him before dropping him on the bed."



Suicides:

- NZ has the second highest male youth (15-24 years) suicide death rate (after Finland). And the second highest female youth suicide death rate (after Japan).

Car accidents:

- Almost 400 people die on our roads each year: high-risk drivers make up 35% of all at-fault drivers in fatal crashes. Most high-risk drivers are male (83%) and young, with 52 per cent under 30.



What we know

- Research shows most reporters encounter death or violence early in their careers (Johnson, 1999)
- Inexperienced reporters are often assigned to interview family members after fatalities (Maxson, 2000)
- Results showed those fresh out of ‘school’ were most susceptible to strong emotional and psychological reactions (Johnson, 1999)



- Youngest reporters are often casually dispatched to these scenes.
- Left untreated, PTSD can lead to permanent mental and physical disability, increased sick leave and loss of productivity.
- ...while nothing can be done to completely shield someone from developing PTSD or its symptoms, training can help less the blow of a traumatic experience. (Dworznik & Grubb, 2007).



- Profession of journalism is at a crossroads; a changing ethical landscape (Linda Kay et al, 2010)



"The main thing that keeps me sane is accepting that it's my job to put the story in the paper - then going about that job in an honest and fair way.

"For example, a trick I was always told to get people to talk was pitching the story to them as "a way to pay tribute to their loved one". I stopped doing this because it was hard to sleep at night knowing you had lied to them to get the interview - as you know, the story that makes the print will very rarely be "a tribute". It will usually be 90% blood, guts and a description of the cause of death, with a line tacked on about how the person loved to fish, had a beautiful smile etc."



Pressure, pressure, pressure

- Journalists arriving at the scene of a disaster have little time to prepare. They are expected to react as events unfold. Pressures are compounded by conflicting interests of career progression, commercial imperative and personal ethics...

- Berrington & Jemphrey, 2003



- “Journalism schools spend a lot of time teaching leads, interviewing skills, video editing and database searches. It’s imperative educators take time to talk about the emotional aspects of telling the world’s worst stories.”



Where to from here?

- So what works? What doesn't?
- How can we make up for lost time?
- What about lack of empathy/revictimisation?

