

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE ¹

the challenges of reporting about trauma and the value of reflective practice for journalists

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Journalists are caretakers of the public interest. But when a community experiences a devastating trauma, lines of responsibility are less clear-cut. Are journalists responsible to the news consumer or the community experiencing the trauma? Which notion of public interest assumes precedence? How does journalistic responsibility translate into action when residents experience pain, but editors clamor for on-the-spot coverage? Creating spaces for reflective practice can assist journalists in considering principled ways of covering trauma. This paper examines the reactions and reflections of seven journalists who responded to research exploring the impact of media coverage on a rural community where a high-profile murder had occurred. These journalists, using reflective practice, pondered the challenges of covering trauma, the evolution of journalistic responsibility and the implications for journalism educators teaching students who will inevitably cover traumas when they are working in the field.

KEYWORDS: ethics, journalism education, journalistic responsibility, media coverage, reflective practice, trauma

Introduction

Journalists are frequently considered caretakers of the public interest (Iggers, 1999). But when a community experiences a devastating trauma, the lines of responsibility regarding the common good are less clear-cut. Which notion of public interest assumes precedence: a community experiencing a trauma or the news consumer as a member of the general public? How does journalistic responsibility translate into accountable action when residents experience pain, but news editors clamor for 24-hour coverage and new leads? The answers to these questions are linked to a deepening capacity for professional reflective practice by journalists.

Schön (1983) identified two dimensions of reflective practice: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. One engages in *reflection-in-action* while doing something. The capacity to reflect on professional action allows journalists to engage in a process of continuous learning. One engages in *reflection-on-action* after having enacted it. This type of reflection links thought, action, and reflection and allows journalists to critically analyze behavior with the goal of improving practice. Engaging regularly in both types of reflection, which augment each other, develops reflective practice as a “habit of mind,” thus becoming an adaptive response to situations and problems whose answers are not immediately known.

We contend that reflective practice can assist journalists in considering these difficult questions when covering trauma and in extending their reporting competencies as they balance issues of responsibility and public interest. We created a contemplative space for seven journalists to consider the impact of media coverage on a rural community where a high-profile murder had occurred and asked them to engage in a process of professional reflective practice.

This paper examines their reactions and reflections on the challenges of covering community traumas and the implication for journalists.

Literature Review

Violent and traumatic events are staples in the media. Murders, kidnappings, traffic accidents, and airplane crashes often lead television and radio newscasts. *If it bleeds, it leads* is a well-worn newsroom adage. At some point in their careers, most journalists will cover a violent or traumatic event, thrusting them into a community still reeling from emotional aftereffects – a community of victims who may still be in shock, experiencing a sense of loss, sadness, anger or turmoil, or trying to come to terms with what has happened and begin the healing process (Simpson and Coté, 2006).

Soon after Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 students and wounded others before turning the gun on himself at Virginia Tech on 16 April 2007, national news media descended on the town of Blacksburg turning it into a veritable “media circus.” The constant media presence had an overwhelming effect on the community in mourning. “Weary of cameras and microphones and determined reporters, Tech students posted signs asking the media to go home, to let them heal ... Some members of the media—particularly those who swooped into a community they knew nothing about—were reportedly callous in their quest for stories” (Alvis-Banks, 2008, p. 88). Students in Montréal has similar reactions after a 25-year-old man entered Dawson College carrying three guns, killing one young woman, seriously wounding 19 others, and terrorizing a community of 10,000. Students reported that Dawson was under siege by reporters eager to stick cameras and microphones in their faces, preferably when they were crying. Most often, they reported that this behavior compounded the trauma. “They were literally chasing people who were in tears... At one point, there were so many reporters, me and my friends starting taking pictures of the people who were taking pictures. They didn’t like it at all and told us to stop” (Hays, 2007: ¶ 10).

As journalists set out to do their job in the name of public interest, gathering the news, competing with one another for a unique take on a story, and exposing important social issues, where does the community’s interests fit in? News coverage can impede a community’s ability to heal after a traumatic event. The mere presence of the media alone can add to the trauma. As the number of reporters at the scene grows, so does the frenzy; the emotional intensity and chaos can become viral. After the Jonesboro school shooting in 1998, parents and students on their way to receive counseling at the school were faced with streets lined with television vans and reporters looking to get their stories (Simpson and Coté, 2006). Interviews may also further harm trauma victims, especially when reporters fire off questions without displaying any empathy, or rely on interview clichés, such as asking victims “how they feel” about the trauma or violence they experienced. The treatment victims receive from the media during the vulnerable period following a traumatic event can have a profound impact on their recovery (Sykes et al., 2003).

Inaccuracies in news reports (misspelled names, distorted chronologies, and factual errors) can shatter the trust and confidence survivors need and crave, leading them to feel victimized all over again (Simpson and Coté, 2006). Additionally, being subjected to images and reminders of the traumatic event during the aftermath can re-traumatize those directly or indirectly affected. A study of New Yorkers who witnessed the destruction of the World Trade Center reported that they were further traumatized by the televised images of people falling or jumping from the

towers, and also reported higher percentages of symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder or depression (Ahern et al., 2002).

But journalistic coverage of trauma is not inherently traumatizing. The media can help a community's healing process following a tragic event. Having their stories told sensitively and accurately can help survivors reconnect with their lives and community, and validate their feelings about the event (Sykes, 2003). What distinguishes and shapes the two diametrically opposed outcomes (either harm or help) are the practices and methods of reporting that journalists enact. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (Hight and Smyth, 2003; Kawamoto, 2005), as well as Simpson and Coté (2006), offer practical guidelines on how to sensitively treat survivors and effectively write about traumatic events. Sykes et al. (2003) suggest journalists use the "golden rule" of treating victims of violence and trauma as they would their own family and friends. Simpson and Coté have advocated the adoption of the physician's motto, "First, do no harm." We have suggested that journalists incorporate an ethic of care, forming the foundation for ethical decision-making, along with characteristics of empathy and positionality (Kay et al., in press).

Several authors (Kay et al., in press; Niblock, 2007; Sheridan Burns, 2002) have suggested journalists can use reflective practice as a tool to evaluate their actions in order to understand the decisions they have made and improve the way they perform their jobs on a day-to-day basis. This reflexive stance is central when reporting on trauma and violence. By creating reflective spaces to explore the impact of media coverage on individuals and communities, journalists can engage in a serious and systematic examination of their professional actions.

Creating a Reflective Space to Examine Professional Practice

The Traumatic Event: Media Coverage of the Murder of Shanna Poissant

When a teenaged girl vanished from a small town on the Quebec-US border on her way to visit friends on 11 July 2005, provincial police quickly suspected foul play. Twenty officers joined the search for Shanna Poissant, last seen getting into a red truck near her home in Hemmingford. Police utilized all-terrain vehicles, police dogs and a helicopter to comb the farms and wooded areas around the tiny rural town, population 2,000. While the search was in progress, journalists from both sides of the border converged on the small community to track every move made by police and to interview residents. News coverage was intense and relentless. Two weeks later, Shanna's body was found off a bicycle path not far from town. A 23-year-old neighbor was charged with the crime, and his parents were charged with being accessories after the fact.

Documenting the Impact of Media Coverage of a Trauma

Fifteen months after the murder, our research team went to Hemmingford to investigate what types of social supports residents might require in order to restore a livable balance in their community. We collected data through in-depth interviews conducted over an 18-month period. Seventeen participants were interviewed, including a town official, an investigating police officer, a community worker, a pastor, teachers and a local journalist. During the interviews, a common theme emerged: the media's impact on the quality of community life and on the residents' ability to heal. We decided these comments could not be ignored. Although we did not

start out by asking questions about the media, it became an emergent objective of our project to explore it. In analyzing the data, five themes arose from interviews: *alienation from the community, anger at the media's public construction of the community, intrusion on community life, intrusion of the private processes of grief and renewed feelings of loss and grief*. We concluded from our findings that journalists must become more aware of the dynamics of symbolic violence and secondary trauma, and must incorporate new practices into their reporting repertoire (See Kay et al., in press for an in-depth description).

Objectives Of This Research Project

As we analyzed the findings described above, we were curious to see how journalists currently in the field might react to these themes. We wanted to explore with practitioners their beliefs, experiences, and recommendations with regards to a journalist's responsibility when covering communities that have experienced a traumatic event. We were particularly interested in knowing how their notions of serving the public interest meshed with the idea of adversely impacting a community experiencing trauma.

Modes Of Inquiry: Documenting Journalists' Reflective Practice

Methodology. We selected a qualitative methodology since this approach is conducive to exploring and illuminating the meaning attributed by participants to certain events, actions, relationships or social phenomena. It can also facilitate the identification of unanticipated trends (Maxwell, 1996).

Method. We decided to gather data by using a focus group method in order to create a collective reflective space. Public reflection (Raelin, 2000) makes individual learning explicit; reveals implicit assumptions and beliefs that guide actions; creates shared meaning and knowledge, the foundation for practice-based learning; and promotes reflective practice.

Since focus groups are a socially oriented method for capturing real-life data (Morgan, 1997), we thought this was the best setting to illuminate journalists' personal and professional reactions to the data concerning the impact of media coverage, and collective conceptions about public interest and the common good. The strength of this method is that it would: 1) elicit perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas concerning the themes of the Hemmingford research; 2) gain the assistance of the journalists in interpreting the results as it applied to practice; and 3) provide a versatile, interactive, dynamic source of data. Focus groups are particularly useful when the purpose is to explore concepts, sample opinion, and identify trends, rather than explain something in the definitive sense. Focus groups also take advantage of the power of group synergy and collective and collaborative thinking and problem solving (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The focus group session lasted approximately two hours, and was audio taped (to record the conversation verbatim) and videotaped (to accurately attribute contributions and to capture the social interaction).

Participants. Typically, focus groups consist of 8 to 15 participants. Eight Canadian journalists living in a major city in central Canada, 5 men and 3 women, representing radio, print, and television news outlets, accepted the invitation to the focus group. Unfortunately, because of a national breaking story, one male journalist had to cancel. Participants were

selected based on their relevancy to the topic: all were currently involved in the news industry, representing a range of experience from three to thirty years. There was no expectation that these journalists be statistically representative; rather they were viewed as a “blue ribbon” panel of professionals working in the field, and were consulted in order to articulate knowledge and practices currently in use. The moderator (Linda) was also a veteran journalist and known to these reporters in that context and as a journalism teacher.

Research Design. One of the researchers (Rosemary) introduced the context and reviewed the ethics protocol. Then the moderator outlined the focus group process and the questions. In order to set the norm of interactive exchange where participants were free to talk with other group members, she suggested that participants allow the conversation to flow; a round robin format would not be used. She suggested that a more spontaneous conversational approach would be most useful.

Focus Groups Questions. Four questions were posed to the focus group. Each was fully explored before moving onto the next.

1. What were some of the most memorable situations that challenged you as a journalist when covering communities that have experienced trauma? What was difficult? How did you resolve this?
2. Here are some of the themes that emerged from a research project we conducted with a rural Quebec community that had experienced a devastating trauma. Residents attributed these effects to the kind of media coverage they experienced:
 - alienation from the community;
 - anger at the media’s public construction of the community;
 - intrusion on community life;
 - intrusion on the private processes of grief; and
 - triggering renewed feelings of loss and grief.

We have identified the following dilemmas journalists face in their role as caretakers of the public’s interest:

- The public’s need to know *versus* the privacy of those who’ve been traumatized.
- The media galvanizing social action by its responsible coverage of a tragedy *versus* the media desensitizing the public to horror.
- The profit motive of media outlets *versus* the public welfare.
- The media doing the *job* of reporting an event *versus* being sensitive to those in pain.

Which do you think are the most salient? How do you personally resolve these tensions? What guides you? What do you think should guide most journalists? What would be the exceptions?

3. What can journalism educators do to instill a sense of public responsibility in students who will inevitably cover community traumas when they are working in the field?
4. In closing, what does journalistic responsibility mean in this era when covering community trauma?

Data Transformation and Analysis

We created a general framework for processing the data, and used it consistently across the cases (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We provisionally categorized the focus group text into similar

inductively derived thematic concerns (Aronson, 1994; Ely et al., 1997). A thematic concern captured something salient about the data with regards to the research objective (reactions to the research and conceptions of public interest), and represented some level of meaning within the data set at a semantic level (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We formed propositional statements (a definition of the category) to characterize the key themes, and developed rules for categorizing the data (what was included or excluded) to keep each theme internally consistent. The "keyness" of a theme was determined by examining whether it captured something important in relation to the overall research focus. We then gave each one a title that attempted to capture the essence of the theme. We proceeded with this process until the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were fulfilled: exhaustion of data sources, saturation of themes, emergence of regularities, and overextension.

Findings

Key themes that emerged from the creation of this reflective practice space regarding the challenges of covering trauma were the following.

A Transition Within Journalism Practice: The Range of Reactions

One of the most interesting patterns of response to the data from the Hemmingford research project was the range of reactions. For some, like Amelia², it was no surprise. *"It's exactly what I go into an event thinking they feel. It doesn't surprise me. That's how I perceive people to view the media... I definitely approach people thinking that they already think this about me."* There were also reactions that typified the traditional view of journalists and their responsibility. This was evident by comments such as Maggie's assessment: *"I think the issue that's coming up here is not so much are we doing harm, but are people going to like us. It's very Canadian... you really have to have a tough skin..."* Making people uncomfortable, yet not being disturbed by it, is what one might think is the typical hard-nosed reporter. As Archer remarked, *"I think it's a truism in journalism, that if everyone loves you, that you're probably not doing a great job. You know what I mean?"*

Covering trauma frequently means coming face-to-face with aspects of society that need to be illuminated. Significant social issues are often compounded with dimensions of violence, abuse, mistreatment etc. And in the words of Maggie, this is the higher purpose of journalism.

People can't stand to have those stories, to hear them. But I'm sorry, that is our world and that is going on and unless you hear the reality of it, it's not going to change. So read it, listen to it, watch it, learn about it and do something about it. It just really bothers me when people say, "You know, why do you write about all these horrible things?" Well, because that's going on in your backyard.

Archer concurred.

I certainly agree with Maggie on this, that there are stories that we have to tell... even if people tell us they don't want to read about it, that our role is to shine light and to say, "Look, you may not want to hear about this

and maybe we don't have to do this five days of the week, or have our whole paper or broadcast filled with this. But, here are some things in your community that you do need to know about."

Katy had an interesting point that concerned the problem of representation, especially when this representation illuminated a social issue with unsavory overtones.

People like to tell their own stories... I would rather tell my own story than have somebody else talking about me... that's normal for people not to like representations of them by outsiders. But there is a certain shoot the messenger thing, I think in this. I think a lot of this is about, they don't like what happened [Shanna's murder] and then they don't like to see what happened represented.

To some extent, when journalists fulfill their responsibility to further the public good, their work becomes a mirror to the evil that is enacted in our society: hatred, cruelty, genocide, torture, and exploitation from a small to a grand scale. No community wants to behold its own ugliness. And journalists can become easy targets. As Archer remarked, "*...by the nature of what we do... we're out there.*"

But journalists' attitudes, especially when covering trauma, may be in the midst of a transition. Amelia's belief that the public sees the media as intrusive has played a role in shaping how she as a journalist covers trauma.

I take that approach to every tragedy that I've covered. At the end of the day, I have to look myself in the mirror and to me, that's very important... I think there are better ways to do it and I approach every tragedy that I've covered with a very sympathetic attitude and that has worked well for me.

William was perhaps the most affected by viewing these research results. He observed that, "*... I mean, alienation from the community, renewed feelings of loss, that does give me pause. I'm sorry, it does.*" The creation of this reflective practice space had prompted William to re-examine his thoughts about the media's approach to covering trauma.

For Archer, having this reflective practice space gave him the opportunity to increase his awareness of the effects some media coverage may have.

The other thing that I found really interesting coming from a psychological perspective, is the boomerang effect of the repeated events. I mean, it's one thing for the trauma to be happening, and then it's how we bring things back, by re-showing the images.

William had similar reflective reactions about the effect of the media in the aftermath of an event and how journalists are implicated.

There was peace before the traumatic event. There's a traumatic event and then there's the aftermath. We are actually part of that event. We are in

that aftermath... and then we amplify the aftermath with our reporting. So, in my opinion, make no mistake, we are part of the event, the aftermath...

We, the researchers, believe this range of reaction reflects a shift that journalistic practice may be undergoing with regards to reporting about community trauma. Maggie, a veteran, noted that, *"I don't think I know any journalist who actually arrives on a scene like this and shoves their microphone in somebody's face."* Journalists who engage in practices that went over the line were seen as unethical, irresponsible, and culpable for the media's bad reputation, as Ryan noted, in the case of the Dawson shooting:

And then you look at something like what [a TV reporter] did, which was harass the family at the hospital. They had to move rooms and then he snuck up to the room... very clear illustration of the way not to do things. It does irreparable harm, because that family would tell all their friends what vultures the media are.

As well, journalists believe, rightly so, that the public's appetite for sensationalism creates a market for products gained from the insensitive and intrusive tactics that some journalists employ. As Maggie observed,

People feel like they're in the spotlight. It's an intrusion of their privacy, and yet these are the first people that will go home at night and turn on their TV to watch it. So, you can't have it both ways. You can't have your privacy and have news as well.

This places journalists in a double bind: on the one hand, people accuse them of insensitivity and invasion of *their* privacy, yet clamor for juicy tidbits of *other people's* lives and tragedy.

An additional complicating factor was the directives given to frontline reporters by managers and editors. There were constraints regarding how a reporter could approach trauma coverage, as Katy declared:

Because certainly in broadcasting, you don't have a lot of choice about what you do... I think to a greater extent than in newspapers, you're sort of marched around and told to do this and then to go here and then do that. And so it's very helpful when the organization as a whole takes a stand on an ethical issue.

Constraints are not always embodied in a particular person's directives; sometimes it is the nature of the news beast, and the pressure to produce for deadline. Julio mused:

I'm not saying there is anything wrong with pressure or anything like that. I think that it's always been a part of journalism, but there're more and more pressures, right? You file a couple of stories to the web and, if you're doing video and audio, things like that... it's immediate, you have to have it right away.

Amelia and Julio, younger journalists, and Ryan, a seasoned one, talked about times when they took personal stands against the constraints placed on them by newsroom managers. Covering funerals and pestering grieving family members for interviews seemed to be where many are now drawing the ethical line.

Amelia: I said no to covering the funerals the next day...

Linda: And, how was that received?

Amelia: Well, I mean, they accepted it. They had to. I still have a job there so, that's good. But yeah, they went on to the next reporter.

Ryan: I've said no to calling back... if they really want you to see if the family... That's the A list of intrusion. If you try it once and you get a no, then you'll lay off. But, if they're [editors] really pressuring you, so that's something you might say 'no' to... what's the point of being at the funeral? To intrude on the grief?

Reporters, like Julio, who have to provide a visual component to new reports, face unique dilemmas, since visual images play such a powerful role shaping both the public perception and survivors' perceptions of the media's comportment. According to Julio:

Some cases, people ask for a funeral not to be covered, I mean, that's something that's come up a couple of times. Like, the media stay out, not just the TV cameras, but they want nobody in, like a private funeral, of something that happened. We've had that debate, whether to sneak in or not and if you do sneak in, what we should use or not. Or do you wait outside and respect their wishes... I've waited outside, yeah.

The Transition Concerning Journalists' Professional Identity

Creating and using this reflective practice space also afforded us the opportunity to see an emerging transition in the professional identity of contemporary journalists. For Ryan, his connection with people is what has meant the most to him.

What's been most memorable for me on all the big stories I've covered, have been those moments where you connect with the people who you're reporting on. You're always thinking about what kind of creep am I to be here, when they're mourning something. In every story I can think of, I can think of something that happened or several things that happened, along with being chased out of the neighbourhood... where people somehow were touched by or you were able to help them, either in some physical way or by getting their information out.

This is counter to the usual view of the journalist as the outsider, objective and dispassionate, and is more indicative of the current conceptualization of journalists creating junctures of connection (Usher, 2009).

Amelia provided an example of a more compassionate empathetic approach to covering trauma in communities. When covering a tragic accident in her hometown that resulted in multiple deaths, she redefined in the moment her role and responsibility as a journalist.

I was definitely more sympathetic in the way that I didn't run up to them and shove microphones in their faces. I knew the son of the family was walking by, nobody else knew, I didn't point that out. Because I knew that they wanted their privacy at that point.

Issues Regarding Journalistic Responsibility

Journalists are charged with truthfully collecting, synthesizing and disseminating information on behalf of the public. This role engenders significant power, and with this power comes a responsibility to use it for the good of society. Therefore, traditionally, journalistic responsibility has meant: accuracy of information, protection of confidential sources, fair and comprehensive accounts of events and issues, and boundary issues of pragmatism versus deceit. We believe that creating reflective practice spaces to examine journalistic responsibility has illuminated the broadening of this notion with regards to trauma reporting. William cites the customary dimensions of professional behavior as he defines responsibility: "... *we have some kind of responsibility in the way we, individually, conduct ourselves.*" However, Katy stressed a more expansive, community-oriented facet that has only recently been incorporated into newsroom practices.

There was a decision made not to talk about Kimveer Gill (the Dawson College gunman) very much. After he was identified and his story was told, essentially we didn't talk about him very much afterwards. And, an attempt not to use his name, because there was a perception—there's an idea that... after Columbine, that these guys are kind of glorified on the Internet...

Ryan saw reporting on individual trauma was one way to connect to larger underlying social issues and, in this way, journalists enact their social and professional responsibility.

I think we err on the side of intruding, because you don't know what you're going to get. But, there was a story of a soldier who committed suicide. We wanted to do this story on PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder]; we heard about a soldier who committed suicide. We tried to approach the family; they were grieving. He committed suicide after he came back... they didn't want to talk to us. So, then we might say, "Well, then we don't go to the funeral." But [a reporter] went to the funeral. She made some contacts there. She had just a very discreet image from far away of his urn being carried out and built the story around the contacts she made there and that picture, to do a fantastic story about PTSD. That in the end, after the fact, we heard from his family... you come out of it with people respecting you.

The important point that Ryan makes is that this individual tragedy was covered discretely and sensitively, but the overall emphasis of the coverage was on what this loss meant in a larger social context: the armed services were in denial about the high rate of suicide among its returning war veterans. And this larger focus, then, shapes the changing notions of public interest; not the salacious or tragic details, but what this sad event says about the way we conduct our lives and constitute our social structures. Campbell (2001) calls for the journalistic community to not just assume responsibility, but to assume moral responsibility. He contends that moral responsibility is to cover significant threats to well being, *substantively*, such as the soldier's suicide, and that salience without substance is pandering.

Boundaries of This Inquiry

Since this inquiry occurred in a particular time and place, under particular circumstances with unique individuals (Wolcott, 1990), the themes should be viewed as atypical; however, limited transferability may be warranted. At the very least, the thoughts that emerged in this reflective space expand and enrich the repertoire of social constructions about journalistic responsibility when covering trauma.

Discussion

These focus group themes suggest that things are changing when it comes to covering trauma, at least on the frontlines with reporters. Reactions from the journalists demonstrated that there has been an increase in awareness of trauma and its impact on a community. Recent media coverage of the devastating earthquake in Haiti illuminates this transitioning role for journalists. In the past, journalists didn't think much about the impact of their coverage (Simpson and Coté, 2006). They pushed such thoughts aside in an effort to be tough, professional and objective. The movie image of the hard-bitten reporter is a cultural icon. But these findings, which emerged from the creation of a reflective practice space, suggest that this stereotype is starting to change, and the coverage from Haiti indicates that the trend transcends our data. In the focus group, we found a higher level of empathy (Maggie: *I've heard reporters say, "We're really sorry for what happened to you."*) and a higher awareness of ethical boundaries (Amelia: *I won't sacrifice my integrity for being the first to get the story*), both of which were on display in Haiti, where TV journalists were seen as actively participating in rescue efforts. Montgomery (2010) noted that she simply could not keep the story at arm's length. She expanded her news reporter role to include food distributor, counselor, messenger, missing person locator and refugee advocate, contending that far from compromising her journalistic integrity, this role expansion led to the most rewarding, inspirational two weeks of her life.

Interestingly, the enlarged role of journalists in Haiti drew both praise and criticism. The Society of Professional Journalists [SPJ] warned journalists in Haiti not to become part of the story. The organization, representing nearly 10,000 members, applauded the efforts of journalists working tirelessly to report the story in Haiti, but reminded them of their responsibility to gather news objectively and to report facts (Romenesko, 2010). The SPJ urged caution to avoid blurring the lines between being a participant and being an objective observer. Kevin Smith remarked, "No one wants to see human suffering, and reporting on these events can certainly take on a personal dimension. But participating in events, even with the intention of dramatizing the humanity of the situation, takes news reporting in a different direction and places journalists in a

situation they should not be in, and that is one of forgoing their roles as informants” (Romenesko, 2010: ¶ 4).

This warning was issued on the heels of a story published in *The Washington Post* noting that major TV networks in the US had sent doctor-reporters to Haiti, producing a dramatic form of participatory journalism. Reporters were providing medical treatment and delivering babies on camera (Farhi, 2010). Traditionally, reporters shy away from direct involvement to avoid affecting the outcome of the news, and to maintain the distance necessary to report accurately and fairly. Canadian journalism ethicist Stephen Ward noted that emotion-based reporting could become manipulative, obscure the larger picture, and be self-promotional (Farhi, 2010). Network executives, on the other hand, contended that firsthand accounts brought home the crisis in a way that straightforward reporting could not. We believe this debate about ethical boundaries and professional comportment represents a flux and transition in journalists’ identity and practice norms about trauma reporting.

Creating spaces for journalists to reflect on their professional practice with regards to covering traumatic events can be an effective way to contemplate these contentious issues. When confronted with the Hemmingford results, William said, *“This should give us pause,”* while Ryan acknowledged that, *“Sometimes... we leave a good footprint... and sometimes (we) leave... a very bad one.”* Reflections on practice also allowed Archer to see the influence of context on reporting practices: *“Where we leave a good footprint, tends to be when we’re not working as a pack.”* Using this reflective space allowed him to make a key realization: it is easier to retain your humanity working as an individual. It also allowed him to admit to his peers that sometimes he is torn between the impulse to *“tell them stop talking to me”* in order to protect his sources and the need to get the job done.

Perhaps the most potent use of reflective practice is in illuminating what is in the public interest, and how journalists are serving it, or not. While in the midst of gathering information for a story, Katy observed that, *“...you can’t really know what the greater good is...”* This is something that is clear in hindsight, or in examining the larger picture. As Archer noticed, *“...there’s almost incalculable amount of data to process in a really short time...”* Creating a public space for collective reflection can allow journalists to develop more refined notions of the ever-evolving concept of public interest. Katy, for example, pointed to local coverage of a school shooting as an example of how our collective understanding of public interest has changed.

... it showed, I think, a certain amount of thought around this issue [glorifying school shooters] and I think that media organizations can do that. You know, where they can, if they start to look into some of these issues, can kind of find ways that they can try and mitigate the harm to the community. ‘Cause I think one of the big issues with shootings and things like that is the whole copycat issue.

There was an additional benefit to this process: journalists were able to also clarify and contextualize some of the deeper and more complicated issues underlying trauma-reporting practices. Reflective practice can serve the profession of journalism by bridging the knowledge-practice gap, resulting in new knowledge and new thinking. It can lead to the exploration of the authentic issues facing contemporary journalists when it comes to reporting a community trauma.

Implications for Journalism Educators

The profession of journalism is at a crossroads with regards to its practice concerning the treatment of traumatized individuals and communities. This shift is indicative of a broadening ethical perspective with regards to the “how” of reporting about trauma. Ethical principles evolve as society and professional communities become more aware of the ramifications of their actions. Ethical reporting is not something that is cut-and-dried, as Archer observed:

And the problem with this, I think is, that this is not applied mathematics, right? I mean, everything is a case by case basis and, it’s not like you can open the manual and say, “Okay, here’s a situation and, okay, refer to page B or ten, subsection A, what I do in this circumstance,” right?

This adaptation of journalism practice has been prompted by more detailed knowledge about the impact of certain types of media coverage on survivors. Public interest and ethical reporting has now come to mean consideration of community members, and the community as an entity, as part of the equation when reporting on a trauma. In order to prepare future journalists for this changing ethical landscape, we suggest incorporating reflective practice as a regular classroom routine, emphasizing the following elements in the journalism curriculum so that they can be carried into the newsroom down the road.

1. **Create processes and curriculum to build student skills for reflective practice as a salient dimension of journalism education about trauma.** Journalists are taught to reflect on their practice in journalism ethics courses. But until now, those reflections have mainly been built around issues such as the use of: deceptive practices to obtain access or information; “sting” operations; anonymous sources; and sensitive material that a governmental body asked be withheld. We suggest that this notion of reflective practice be broadened to explicitly include concerns about the ethics of trauma reporting as a topic. An important dimension of any classroom activity or task would be developing the skill for *reflection-in-action* while covering trauma, interviewing survivors, or creating news items about communities where trauma has occurred. This would entail having students, as part of any educational experience or field assignment, periodically stop and reflect on what they are doing, and how they might change their behavior *in the moment* to be more effective. As Archer noted, “... *you have to make instantaneous decisions on some weighty issues and sometimes we’re going to be right and sometimes we’re going to be wrong.*” Developing *reflection-in-action* abilities would allow this to be a more conscious, explicit process. This would include having students explicitly vocalize in advance how they intend to cover a story, approach a survivor, or present sordid or disturbing details in their coverage. It would also have them analyze how they might impact a community’s reputation or quality of life through their reporting, and what steps they might take to do no harm.
2. **Develop student capacity for collective public reflection that can be brought into future newsrooms.** Public reflection involves periodically stepping back in order to ponder and make explicit the meaning, to self and others in the immediate environment, what has recently transpired, been planned, observed, and achieved in practice (Raelin,

2000). This activity promotes *reflection-on-action*, an important skill for workplace learning and expertise development (Reilly, 2005). This would entail creating simulations that would tap into the dynamics of trauma reporting (Kay, 2008) or using role-plays or case studies of traumatic events. As well, having students, as part of any educational experience or simulation on trauma reporting, explicitly engage in a public post-experience critique of what they did (enacted practice), the impact of these actions on others, how effective or ineffective this was, what others did, and what could be done differently in the future. Collective public reflection provides students with potential action possibilities when exploring the plausible futures of covering traumatic events, serving as a cognitive rehearsal for the real world of news reporting. It can also provide a learning space for exploring ethical dilemmas and frameworks, and professional values. If used as a routine dimension of thinking about one's work effectiveness, public reflection could begin to be a standard undertaking in future newsrooms to encourage organizational learning in journalism contexts. This was, in fact, a suggestion echoed by William, who recommended, "*I think it would be good to have post-mortems of news coverage, you know, following traumatic events and we say, did we cross the line? What could we have done better?*"

3. **Encourage the norm of reflective research relationships between journalism researchers and journalism professional communities beginning with emergent professionals.** Archer suggested that research be one way that journalists support the evolution of their practice.

But, it would be interesting to send instead of a research team, to send journalists back to the community, not reporting, after... or the journalist association and to do this research and talk to groups... like this after the fact and see if we could come up with a template on how things worked. You know, what worked, what didn't work and their perceptions... if only just for our own knowledge of how we're perceived and... I mean, because we have a vested self-interest in that too, right? I mean, if we can do anything to improve how we're seen in communities and, then we might have more community support in terms of readership and viewership.

This is an interesting proposition. One way that professionals have used research to become reflective practitioners and improve praxis is through action research (Stringer, 2007), a systematic reflective process of progressive problem solving led by an individual (who may or may not be working with others as part of a community of practice) in order to improve the way he or she addresses issues and solve problems regarding work practices. Action research can also be undertaken by organizations with the aim of improving strategies, work habits, and knowledge of the environments within which they function and work.

4. **Use action learning sets in the newsroom.** This essentially was an idea proposed by Ryan.

I think that the best thing would be for newsrooms to have some more overt kind of discussion about how to proceed in that kind of case. Basically in the same way they now tell us that it's okay to go for help.

Action learning is a workplace learning process whereby a participant studies his or her own actions and experience in order to improve performance (McGill and Brockbank, 2004). Action learning is most effective when done in conjunction with others, in small groups called action-learning sets. It enables each person to reflect on and review the action they have taken and the learning points arising. This then guides future action and improves work skills and performance.

Conclusion

These are challenging times for journalists as the profession changes with lightning speed. The way journalists do their job is evolving on a daily basis as the profession undergoes cataclysmic change, and reporting becomes even more pressurized with the widespread use of mobile devices that make the newsgathering process instantaneous. As evidenced by the results obtained in this focus group, as well as the recent reporting from Haiti, journalists and their editors are just beginning to consider new ways of approaching the coverage of community trauma. Professional reflective practice can and should play a role in this evolution, providing a space to improve practice, which can serve both the public good and the profession of journalism.

Notes

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² The names of all participants are pseudonyms.

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