Gathering visual images of the 2004 tsunami: Journalists challenges and ethical issues

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Abstract

This paper tackles a relatively unaddressed area of journalistic ethics by offering insights from working journalists into the conditions they face when reporting disasters. It covers the disaster reporting context in general, but with particular emphasis on the witnessing of disaster and subsequent impact on the journalist, and the processes of collection of visual imagery for print or broadcast. This research provides a complement to the large body of output-related analysis of photojournalism, by examining the sometimes messy and traumatic circumstances of the initial gathering of photojournalistic imagery and by foregrounding the role of the journalist not as objective news conduit but as feeling human being. Arguably, no attempt to judge the ethics of photojournalism is complete without some understanding of the conditions faced by journalists at the scene of a disaster.

Introduction

This research identifies, and makes a contribution to address, a significant gap in the scholarly literature on photo-journalistic ethics. There are strong traditions of research into the ideological consumption and appropriation aspects of photojournalistic images, such as readings of a particular photos dominant semiosis and ideological cooption (for example, Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Zelizer, 2005), content analyses of photographic images on a particular topic (for example, Coleman & Wasike, 2004), and critical analyses of the role of such images in general (for example, Debrix, 2006). There is also research into production aspects such as ethical decision-making processes in the newsroom (for example, Borden, 1997; Lowrey, 2003), and a growing body of work on the ethical impact of digital manipulation (for example, Gladney & Ehrlich, 1996; Wheeler, 2002; Reaves, Hitchon, Park & Yun, 2004). There are studies of journalists personal ethics as an abstract quality (for example, Coleman & Wilkins, 2004) and there are numerous prescriptions and guidelines for journalists generally (such as those in the special issues of *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* devoted specifically to journalistic ethics in 1998 and 2004). There is also commentary on the absence or inadequacy of ethics guidelines covering the publication of visual imagery (Keith, Schwalbe, & Silcock, 2006).

Little research, however, has examined the ethical questions which arise in the moment ?at the coal face when the photojournalist must make (often split-second) decisions about what, who, and how, to photograph. Indeed, it seems that the claim by television news director Jeffrey Marks that TV news photographers are often treated as pieces of equipment whose insights and judgements are not taken into consideration when newscasts are produced (1986? 87, para. 1) might arguably also apply in the research field. Journalists own challenges, perspectives, needs, and contributions (particularly their own needs as feeling humans who are impacted by what they report) appear to be under-represented in the body of scholarly knowledge on photojournalism. This article, in drawing on the authors personal experiences as a photojournalist and interviews withother journalists who also worked on the 2004 tsunami, takes a tentative step towards opening up the data journalists themselves can provide for greater emphasis and inquiry in the study of photojournalism.

Nagapattinam, December 2004. Photo: James Hollings.

Context: Disaster Reporting

Covering a disaster like the 2004 tsunami is probably one of the most interesting and challenging tasks a reporter may face in their career. Apart from the likely problems of operating in a disaster-struck area, there are many difficult and unusual ethical issues to negotiate while still trying to meet the expectations of editors, readers, listeners, and viewers. Some of these are the traditional dilemmas of when and what to report and represent, such as how graphically the media should reflect death. Others are less well-known in the journalistic community, let alone the wider one. These include the way in which journalists interact with their interviewees in order to minimise trauma, particularly for children. Another issue not well understood within the media is the risk to a journalists physical and mental health in witnessing a traumatic event, and the effect this can have on the kind of coverage they provide. This article draws on the experiences of the author and other journalists who covered the tsunami, the literature on disaster reporting, and an interview with a psychologist working with tsunami survivors, to provide insights into the way journalists in the tsunami-hit areas approached the coverage of this disaster.

Nagapattinam, December 2004. Photo: James Hollings.

One story among many: Nagapattinam

At first glance, Nagapattinam is just another one of those towns that dot the southeast coast of India. It lies on the coast of Tamil Nadu province, a few hundred kilometres up from the southernmost tip of the continent, facing across the Indian Ocean towards Indonesia and Australia. Like many of the towns along this coast, it seems a fortunate place. Situated on long curving, palm-fringed beach, fanned by the coastal breezes, it is blessed with a small harbour to shelter a fishing fleet that feeds the town and much of the surrounding hinterland.

The town itself is not big, by Indian standards; maybe a few hundred thousands, the usual mix of low-rise concrete buildings, houses, a few apartment blocks, most of it set back a kilometre or so from the beach. But it has an open, prosperous air, buoyed by the wealth brought in by the hundred-odd fishing trawlers that use its harbour and feed the local fish market. The fishermen and their families live on the seaward side of the town, in a string of hamlets built from the plentiful palm fronds that give this coast some of its striking natural beauty. The hamlets, each with a population of several thousand people, have their own identities; there are Akkarapettai, Kallar, Velankanni, and Kameswaram, among others. The most important of these villages on Nagapattinams beachfront, at least for this story, is Keechangkuppam. As it is the closest to the harbour, it hosts the towns weekly fish market. Thousands of people travel every Sunday from the surrounding area to Keechangkuppams beachfront for this event, and Sunday, December 26, 2004, was no exception.

December 26 began as a fairly normal day, with the usual mild winter temperatures. By 9am the market was busy; it is estimated there were an additional 4,000 people gathered around Keechangkuppam, as well as the villages own 4,500. If anyone knew that a few hours earlier an earthquake, thousands of kilometres away, had ruptured the earths crust and sent two giant waves racing across the ocean towards them, certainly no one here was aware. There were later reports that a woman in a nearby village had noticed the water in the wells behaving strangely, and she had warned her people. Others said they noticed elephants heading for the hills, and followed. But none of those warnings seemed to have reached Keechangkuppam and the other villages along Nagapattinams beachfront, or the tens of thousands of people gathered along its shore.

The first wave struck at about 9.30am. With no natural barrier, it came in at over 10 metres high, witnesses told me, and it continued almost a kilometre inland. A few of the more sturdy concrete buildings withstood the onslaught, but most of the residents did not. Many of the villagers were drowned in their homes; others died in

streets or were sucked out to sea. Many of those who survived returned to look for friends or relatives, only to be carried off by the second giant wave that rolled in 3 hours later.

Of Keechangkuppams 4,500 inhabitants, at least 1,800 died; in addition, uncounted visitors there for the market also perished. All along the coast in the fishing hamlets, the story was the same: Waves pulverised the villages and killed up to half the inhabitants. Akkarapettai, the next hamlet along the coast, lost 2,300 of its 11,500 people. In all, Nagapattinam lost 6,500 men, women and children, almost half the total Indian toll of 15,000. This horrific casualty rate gave it the dubious distinction of being the single worst affected place in India ? Indias Ground Zero.

I arrived in Nagapattinam about 10 days after the tsunamis struck. I happened to be on vacation in India at the time, so when the impact of the tsunamis became apparent, I undertook to represent New Zealands Fairfax newspaper chain in India, and Nagapattinam was the obvious place to go. The towns position as the Ground Zero of the tsunami meant that it had received instant worldwide exposure, as local and international media descended. The spotlight probably helped ensure it received the majority of the initial relief effort. By the time I arrived in Nagapattinam, most of the bodies had been buried ? those that could be found ? and much of the debris cleared away. The towns Commissioner, Mr V.L. Chakarapani, told me they had buried 3,000 bodies in the first 3 days after the tsunamis struck.

When I arrived, the ground where Keechangkuppam had once stood was just a muddy field, criss-crossed with bulldozer tracks and occasionally fresh white lines of bleaching powder, laid to contain the threat of epidemic. Its tang hung in the air, mixed with the smell of mud and seawater. Survivors wandered about, many still in obvious shock. In the harbour itself, the towns once busy fishing fleet lay wrecked. Half of the boats had sunk, some were beached, and the rest were crushed together on the landward side of the harbour like sardines. A few of the 15?20-metre ocean-going boats had been flung half a kilometre inland, and lay stranded in the streets of Nagapattinam itself. They looked terribly forlorn, like toys abandoned by an oversized child.

Survivors were crowded into relief centres, where they were given what seemed barely adequate rations of rice and kerosene for cooking. One such relief centre was the local temple; sited just a few hundred metres from Keechangkuppam, it at least had the advantage of being close. But it was jam-packed with people and several survivors told me that it did not have adequate latrines. Worse, they said, was that it was only a couple of hundred metres from one of the mass graves dug to bury their relatives and friends.

The people gathered there had astonishing stories of survival. A fisherman named Souresh told me he had run for his life from the fishing boat he was working on when the wave arrived; later, he went back to help look for survivors when the second wave arrived. Though he managed to climb onto the roof of one of the few remaining buildings, many of his relatives were not so lucky. Other survivors told of being washed out to sea then back again. One elderly woman was dropped virtually back at her own doorstep after being swept away by the waves. All around the Indian Ocean littoral, similar stories were unfolding. In India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, villages and towns were coming to grips with the most devastating natural disaster they had faced in hundreds, if not thousands of years.

As a journalist, I found being in Nagapattinam an almost overwhelming experience. Although many of the survivors seemed willing to talk, they were clearly grief-stricken or in shock, and seemingly desperate for some kind of comfort or assurance that it was beyond me to give. Many of those I did speak to insisted on giving me their postal addresses. They seemed to believe that talking to the media would somehow help improve their situation. It was hard not to feel guilty that I could not offer them more. I remember one woman, about age 30, standing near the remains of a house, with a look of almost indescribable grief on her face. My guide told me she had lost her entire family. I was deeply unsettled by the tragedy of what had happened there, the overwhelming sense of grief that hung over that place. Its presence was palpable. You could see it in the faces of everyone there; you could feel it in the air around you.

Nagapattinam, December 2004. Photo: James Hollings.

Reporting disasters

Probably nothing, except war, quite excites the media like a big disaster. It has all the elements of drama: tragedy, heroism, survival, pathos, even bathos. It can also produce powerful images and gripping human stories. And, it is of instant, incontestable importance. There are no discussions about whether it should be covered this week or next month, when some other big story has been put to bed; a disaster, by its nature, has to be covered *now*, as fully as possible. Perhaps for these reasons, disasters have become an increasing part of our news diet. Smallman (1997) has documented this phenomenon, finding a 75% increase in disaster stories carried by Reuters in the 3 years from 1992.

Tsunami 2004 was no exception to this trend. An analysis by Reuters of 200 English language newspapers found there were almost 35,000 reports on the 2004 tsunami to the end of February. This compared with 33,620 for the top 10 emergencies combined during the previous year. The conflict in Sudan, where two million people were displaced, attracted only one-fifth of the coverage in a whole year that was devoted to the tsunami in the first few months of 2005 (MacLean, 2005).

After 26 December, in Nagapattinam and other places like it right across the Indian Ocean basin, journalists set about going through the grim rituals of the disaster reporter. Arriving (usually in an unfamiliar place), establishing contact with local officials, viewing the devastation, gathering interviews with survivors, each faced his or her own problems. For some, it was trying to find accommodation, food, water, and communication facilities in remote places; for others, it was trying to find local authority representatives when a whole infrastructure had collapsed. One thing all had in common, however, was coming to grips with the scale of the disaster. The province of Banda Aceh, in Indonesia, was among the closest to the epicentre of the tsunami and one of the places worst hit. Journalists arriving there were met with scenes of nearly indescribable horror. Lee Cowan, a CBS news correspondent, explains:

For many of the journalists who covered the tsunami, the number of corpses, and the putrefying odour they produced were initially the most difficult things to deal with. One New Zealand journalist at Phuket, Thailand, describes the effect of seeing and reporting on so many dead bodies.

You can't not be affected when confronted with suffering on such a scale and when you see death and devastation on such a scale. It was truly horrific. It stunk to high heaven and they were people causing this smell. The piles and piles of rotting corpses was the most appalling thing I've ever seen. (quoted in Hollings, 2005, p. 161)

CNN anchor Aaron Brown has covered the September 11 attacks, the Columbine High School shootings, and the aftermath of the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster:

David Loyn of the BBC was in Aceh as well:

I've never been anywhere like it. I've covered several earthquakes and it is easily the worst thing I've ever seen happen to a community anywhere. Nobody there was left untouched. Everybody you met had lost somebody or had had some experience during the Tsunami itself. (Dart, 2005, Special Report: Covering the Tsunami, para. 4)

The experience of the indigenous journalists in Aceh was worse. The *Serambi Indonesia* newspaper, which operates out of the Sumatran regional capital Banda Aceh, lost 51 of its 193 staff in the disaster. The International Federation of Journalists estimates 70 media workers in Aceh died in the tsunami (Park & Jensen, 2005). Menuk Suwondo, head of BBC Indonesian Service, has covered disasters before, but says the scale of this made it much worse:

Before the Tsunami we knew quite a lot of reporters in Banda Aceh, particularly those who were helping us cover the Separatist Movement there. So when the Tsunami happened we didn't know the magnitude of the disaster and our first instinct was trying to get hold of those people. But of course, until the fourth day we didn't realise that actually, none of them were alive. I've never experienced covering something so bad that so affected the whole team. (Dart, 2005, Special Report: Covering the Tsunami, para. 10)

Injuries, and fear of disease, were another threat ? one photographers leg turned gangrenous and required several operations. Journalists also had to contend with extreme living conditions in Aceh. Udesen's colleague, *Seattle Times* reporter Hal Bernton, told of living in tents and enduring tropical heat and humidity, with an unreliable supply of food and water (Dart, 2005). Many noted sleep deprivation due to travel and difficult living conditions, which made dealing with the horrific nature of the story all the more difficult, as tiredness fed increased stress. In Banda Aceh, journalists, like others, also had to cope with unnerving aftershocks from the earthquake, and the fear of another giant wave.

As Banda Aceh was also the scene of a long-running civil war, journalists had to negotiate with nervous Indonesian military authorities who had until then managed to keep international media away. Michael Lev of the *Chicago Tribune*, one of the first foreign journalists on the scene, was briefly detained by the Indonesian military, until released after the intervention of US diplomats (Lev, 2005). The few flights allowed in had to be shared with aid and medical organisations, meaning journalists sometimes had to miss deadlines to help save lives ? not always an easy choice to explain to editors or producers thousands of miles away needing a new angle for the next bulletin. In northern Sri Lanka, again site of a long-established conflict, journalists tangled with the sensitivities of Tamil Tigers and Sinhalese government officials. In Indias Andaman and Nicobar islands, also a sensitive security area, journalists were dealing with local officials unwilling to admit the scale of the carnage.

For these journalists, there were other pressures, too. Indonesian media from Jakarta found themselves criticised for not putting aside nationalist agendas when reporting on Acehs plight. A report by Transparency International slated the Sri Lankan media for pursuing party political agendas ahead of survivors needs(Rhodes, 2005). India, struggling to assert itself as a first-world power, had its own nationalist agenda. It startled the world by announcing shortly after the disaster that it did not need any outside help. Journalists from outside the country found themselves having to deal with officials determined to preserve this faade of competence when the reality spoke differently. For some Indonesian journalists working in their home countries, the pressures were too much. Menuk Suwondo says some of his reporters, particularly those with children of their own, asked to be taken off the story (Dart, 2005).

In Thailand, as well as the local tragedy, non-local media were preoccupied with the large numbers of tourists who had died. The story was often the anguish of family holidays rent by the loss of family members. One of those in Koh Prathong (Golden Buddha Beach) when the tsunami hit was *The Australian*s Southeast Asia correspondent, Kimina Lyall. She witnessed the tsunami, and saw friends washed out to sea. After helping organise rescue efforts, she began filing reports for her newspaper (Lyall, 2005).

Nagapattinam, December 2004. Photo: James Hollings.

Ethical issues

The dilemma of deciding whether to report or put down the pen or camera and help is often the most immediate ethical choice for journalists at a disaster scene. Much has been written about the appropriate response, and the underlying teleological or deontological underpinnings of these ethical choices (see, for example, Hirst & Patching, 2005). Much journalism training prescribes that journalists should not report when they can act immediately to save life (see for example, the Dart Centers guidelines on covering disasters; Dart, 2005), although there are numerous well-documented examples of situations in which journalists have ignored this, such as the famous Kevin Clark photo of a vulture stalking a child famine victim. It is beyond the scope of this article to quantify the response of journalists covering the tsunami to this particular issue. For many journalists, a teleological, or utilitarian approach of doing the greatest good for the greatest number is a valid response; that is, the need to show the outside world how bad things were and how desperately aid was needed would have begun to outweigh any requirement to provide help to people at the scene, especially as relief efforts gathered pace. In Lyalls case, she balanced both by doing what she could afterwards to help with the rescue, then filing stories:

Unlike, say, a car crash, where there might be a choice to either give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation or take a picture, the urge to ?help wasn't an immediate issue because in almost every situation faced by the journalists I have spoken to (and I include me in the days to follow) there was simply nothing that a mere reporter could possibly do. (Personal correspondence)

Lyall says she felt a strong internal pressure to fulfil her professional obligations, but in subsequent days also felt grief from being torn from the community she had been with when the waves arrived, who were still going through their own terrible ordeals (Lyall, 2005).

Otherwise, the next most pressing issue may well have been the scale of the carnage, and how to represent it. To what extent did readers and viewers want to see endless pictures of corpses? As this

article is concerned with the issues faced by journalists at the scene, the ethics of what was actually presented on screen and page will not be dwelt on here; this article is more concerned with what kinds of thinking processes led to the pictures journalists captured. Studies have indicated that photographers tend to follow a shoot first and ask questions later approach in these situations, leaving issues of what to leave out up to editors back in the newsroom (Griffin, 1995). However, journalists covering the tsunami clearly also concerned themselves with these issues at the moment of encounter. TVNZs Southeast Asia correspondent, Charlotte Glennie, was aware that her station had a policy generally to use pictures of parts of bodies, rather than anything identifiable. This was in case relatives were watching for whom the sight could be the first confirmation of the death of someone they knew (Glennie, personal communication, June 17, 2005). CBS Tokyo bureau chief Barry Petersens network was another that did not show all it could have. He says many scenes had to be left out because of their potential impact on viewers: they could not, of course, be ?left out of what the journalists themselves were viewing: We get to carry all the images you will never see for the rest of our lives. (Dart, 2005)

ABC news correspondent Brian Rooney says that didnt necessarily mean viewers were protected from the truth. He says there is only so much viewers can absorb, and sometimes, showing a less-graphic image that is a reflection of what happened tells a viewer much more than an image of a decaying body (Dart, 2005).

Not all media were as tactful. In some areas, at least, the race to get the best coffin shots caused disgust among locals. In Nagapattinam, a reporter for the *New Indian Express*, Vani Doraisamy, was so affronted by the behaviour of international media, she wrote a piece which ran on her papers front page. She described camera crews asking survivors to cry on demand over their relatives corpses, demanding rescuers assume poses with corpses, and pestering authorities to be shown mass graves. Doraisamy compared the tactless behaviour of some media to the coverage of the September 11 attacks when civility and decorum were the order of the day: There was no such dignity for either the dead or the survivors of the Asian Tsunami, who are a different colour and race (Doraisamy, 2005, p.1).

The behaviour of the media during disasters has long been subject to criticism. Ewart (2002) noted the behaviour of Australian journalists during a series of disasters and found that bad behaviour and unethical practices were commonplace. She suggests that such behaviours are tried, tested and entrenched (2005, n.p.) during smaller disasters. In bigger disasters journalists dont use different techniques, but, to quote a television journalist: You dont use different tactics, but more of them at once (Ewart, 2005, n.p.). Ewart suggests that the unwillingness of journalists to censure each other helps these practices become endemic.

Bennett and Daniel, in their survey of British newspaper editors attitudes, found a preference for coffin shots which the aid organisations admitted they were only "too willing" to supply (Bennett & Daniel, 2002, p. 1). There were plenty of stories aboutunscrupulous behaviour bymedia covering the tsunami, but it wasnt just the media exploiting the victims via the camera lens. Another reporter said she saw Catholic nuns set up a photo opportunity in which rice was handed out to villagers, only to be taken from them again when the cameras had gone (Hollings, 2005).

Other ethical issues

Journalists and psychologists have commented on the way in which more emotionally engaged journalism such as Browns has become more commonplace in recent years (Dart, 2005). While many applaud his kind of emotional engagement, some argue there are limits around the extent to which journalists should engage. The tsunami experience certainly provided some telling examples. One area where this is most evident is in dealing with children. Psychologists suggest children who have experienced trauma need to be treated very sensitively. The Dart Centers guidelines for journalists covering disasters explain why:

Children are not miniature adults. Be aware of the impact witnessing traumatic events can have on children. Children are more vulnerable to trauma because of their size, age and dependence. Prior trauma, past mental health problems or a family history of such problems may increase a child's risk... Traumatized children may want to tell their story, but it may not be in their best interests to be interviewed, and in some circumstances it can exacerbate their exposure to trauma (Dart, 2005b).

While some of the journalists covering the tsunami may have read these guidelines, examples of coverage suggest many either had not or disregarded them. Television coverage in particular focussed on the plight of many orphaned children. Orphaned children at one relief centre in Phuket were repeatedly interviewed by

international media. Laura Conrad, of *Save the Children*, while approving of Browns engagement with the woman described above, was one of those who felt journalists overstepped the mark.

At one point, with Ben Brown and with another *BBC World Service*

A psychologist who has worked in Phuket since the tsunami agrees that the practice of interviewing children must be reviewed. Uruchat Panyawut described the negative effects on about five or six children, orphaned by the tsunami, who were repeatedly interviewed by the media. She said the children appeared to become numbed by having to repeat their experiences in superficial interviews which did not allow them to work through their deeper feelings fully. She said even adults appeared mildly traumatised by the media, because being interviewed created an expectation that they would receive help. When this was not forthcoming their feelings of loss were reinforced (Panyawut, 2005).There is very little in the literature about the effect on interviewees of having to tell their stories repeatedly, especially to the same journalist to meet technical or visual requirements. However one psychologist who was himself severely burned has noted the re-sensitising effect of repetitive, inappropriate interviewing by medical professionals (Fulcher, 2004).

My survey of 13 New Zealand journalists 5 months after their return from covering the tsunami found they appeared to be unaware of these issues. One said s/he believed interviewing child survivors had no effect at all. They had seen hundreds of journalists before I got there but also, they just weren't affected by recounting their stories or telling how mum and dad were now gone. Another said: This may sound odd, but I think it possibly helped some children. Clearly, some were too traumatised to speak. (Quoted in Hollings, 2005, p. 164)

It should not be construed from the above that ethical lapses were typical of the tsunami reporting. The data from my survey of NZ journalists working on the tsunami tends to support the belief that most were very considerate of their subjects wellbeing:

Remember this is the single worst moment of a persons life and we should take a step back and put ourselves in their shoes before we begin the interview.

Nagapattinam, December 2004. Photo: James Hollings.

Longer term ethical considerations

For many of the journalists who witnessed the aftermath of the tsunami, this was a defining moment in their career. The sheer scale of destruction, the extent of world-wide interest, combined with the third-world conditions in which they worked, made it at once the most demanding and rewarding event many had ever worked on. However, such events take their toll emotionally, and Cote and Simpson suggest this can affect the quality of journalists work (Cote & Simpson, 2000). Hence the management of the emotional toll of covering a disaster can be an ethical consideration not only for those responsible for journalists welfare ? their employers ? but also for the journalists themselves, in that the kind of story they write may reflect their own state of emotional health.

The extent to which journalists and other disaster workers are affected by post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a subject which is still under researched. PTSD is usually defined as an anxiety disorder characterised by intrusive reminders, avoidance and hyperarousal. It is usually contracted either by direct exposure to a traumatic stressor, such as seeing dead bodies, or in the case of secondary traumatic stress, from indirect exposure, such as being exposed to the grief of primary victims. PTSD has been found in war journalists (Feinstein et al., 2002). Secondary traumatic stress (also called vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue) is less-researched, but is likely in journalists who report on disasters (Palm, Polusny, & Follette, 2004) and, as a recent New Zealand study by a former journalist showed, exacerbated if the person engaging with trauma victims has unresolved experiences of trauma themselves (Hargrave, Scott, & McDowell, 2005).

Clearly, in the case of the tsunami, the horrific images and stories many journalists were exposed to may well have contributed to any PTSD they suffered. Lyall, writing 2 months after the event, noted clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in her colleagues. She has her own explanation of the source of most stress:

The survey of New Zealand journalists 5 months after their return found varying levels of reaction. Some described having dreams, others being emotionally detached, while one said the only negative feelings were from no longer covering such an exciting story. As one said:

It was truly horrific... But it was also a privilege to be there. It was history. It was heart-warming too. In Thailand people were incredibly welcoming and generous despite it all. I half-expected sleepless nights when I got back

but it didn't happen. That's not to say you don't think about it and see images in your head sometimes, but it hasn't been a problem as such. It gives life a new perspective. (Hollings, 2005, p. 161)

While workplace pressure and traumatic material may be two sources of stress, Castle has noted another:

It is difficult to gauge to what extent journalists experienced this kind of reaction while covering the tsunami. Some said the reaction was indifference, from people who clearly had far more to worry about.

We left behind scores of teenagers who, with nothing more than rubber gloves and paper-thin masks, were tasked with the back-breaking job of loading body bags into pick-up trucks as if they were collecting trash. Some were their neighbours, their friends, perhaps even their parents. These teenagers were the ones who never talked, never waved, never acknowledged we were there. Not once. (Cowan, 2005, para. 9)

Others, in the survey of New Zealand journalists who covered the tsunami, were struck by the spirit of the survivors:

The victims I spoke to were all in Thailand, mainly in the worst hit region of Khao Lak. They were - as were all Thai people - matter of fact about the destruction. There were no tears, no laying blame ... no wishing for anything different. This is the way they see the world. (Hollings, 2005, pp. 163? 164)

The emotional toll the tsunami took on journalists is probably only a fraction of that, at least in quantitative terms, felt by those affected directly by the disaster. It is not necessary here to describe that; suffice to note that there is some evidence to suggest that victims of natural disasters in Third World countries suffer more than victims of other kinds of disasters, in wealthier countries (Norris, 2002). If this is true, the tsunami victims must have suffered more than most.

In turn, the sheer scale of destruction, and the challenge it presented to journalists to portray it, seems to have had an effect on the kind of journalism that was produced. CNN International's managing director, Chris Cramer, himself a former BBC journalist, suggested this less than a month afterwards:

What has been different about much of the reporting, particularly on TV, has been that the emotional attachment between reporter and victim has been obvious. Gone is the professional, some might say artificial, detachment ... Now, for the first time, media professionals are starting to tell us how they feel about some stories. And it will probably make them better journalists. (Cramer, 2005)

This same phenomenon of emotional engagement has been observed during reporting on the Hurricane Katrina disaster (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). Lyall, for one, is in no doubt about which style she preferred, at least on this story:

Being tough, gruff and disconnected from the story might work well in political reporting, but those attributes dont serve a story of such widespread despair as the tsunami. For my money, the best journalism from the tsunami came from reporters that allowed themselves to feel inside and outside of their copy. (Lyall, 2005)

The fact that journalists and others are now talking about the trauma of fieldwork and its effects on themselves and others is not to suggest this is a new phenomenon; but at least one which deserves more rigorous consideration than it has had. Some disturbing findings from the survey of tsunami journalists quoted above underpin this observation. First, none of the journalists consulted ethical codes while reporting on the tsunami. Not that the codes would have been much help; the New Zealand ethical codes provide little guidance on reporting of many of the issues covered above. More seriously, only two of the 13 journalists had post-disaster counselling, despite clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in their responses to the questions. Under New Zealand law employers can be held accountable for post-traumatic stress disorder suffered as a result of employment.

Lessons

What are the lessons of the Asian Tsunami for journalism? It may be too early to draw definitive conclusions, but perhaps some tentative lessons can be sketched out. Clearly the way journalists interact with the grief-stricken is an area that will benefit from further research. In particular, the practice of interacting with children for photographs, filming and interviews needs clarity. Those managing journalists should also consider the level of support and training they give those they send to cover disasters. While there have been great strides made in setting aside the stereotype of the heroic macho reporter who needs no counselling or support, this image is still far from disembedded in some newsrooms (see for example MacArthur, 2005). Many media organisations offer

their journalists training and post-event counselling; it is equally clear from surveyed journalists that many do not (Hollings, 2005). The implication of this for the quality of journalism produced is a subject worthy of further research.

The way in which the media interact with governments and aid organisations during disasters is also an area that will be teased out. These relationships can be symbiotic but sometimes also fraught with tensions and conflicting agendas. While there will probably always be conflicting agendas, the management and boundaries of these could be further refined.

Finally, the tsunami has underlined once again the importance of the media in disseminating to the world what is going on. Decades-old rivalries and nationalist agendas were swept aside as the nature of the disaster and the needs of the survivors became apparent, and this could not have happened without the hundreds of journalists who put their own health at risk to tell those stories and supply those images to the world. In turn, this helped generate the enormous outpouring of aid and support. That some overstepped ethical boundaries should not obscure this bigger picture: most journalists can be justly proud of the role they played in this.

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