

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

School of Journalism

Victims and the Media

Educating journalists of today and tomorrow about victim issues

THE VICTIMS AND THE MEDIA SERIES

TIPS ON INTERVIEWING VICTIMS: The Anniversary Story

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9/11. Oklahoma City. Columbine. For most people, these anniversaries evoke a range of disturbing memories. For victims and their families, reliving the tragedy can be excruciating. For journalists, these events mean dealing with the challenge of producing yet another anniversary story. Will victims be willing to speak? What does the community want and need from the coverage? Where to find a fresh angle to localize the story?

The dynamics of the Act Two story

Reporting on victims of violence and catastrophe ranks among the toughest assignments. It takes courage to approach a person in pain to ask for an interview. Even the most articulate reporters can find themselves at a loss for words when confronted by a person in obvious anguish. Many editors say they nervously give these stories an extra read, through the eyes of the victim's family, just to make sure.

In Act One/breaking news stories, the reporter's goal is to gather as many facts as possible, as rapidly as possible, from victims and witnesses who may well be in shock. The dynamics of

an Act Two/anniversary story are quite different.

On the plus side, reporters and editors can anticipate the story weeks or even months in advance, which allows more time for research and planning. The luxury of time also means that journalists can schedule a series of interviews and spend extra time on the writing and editing.

At the same time, however, expectations are higher. The story must do more than just report the facts. The challenge is to tell a coherent story, a story of healing and recovery. Readers and viewers want to know how the survivors are coping, emotionally, physically, financially, even spiritually. Let other articles deal with the causes, the politics, the failures and the underlying causes. The purpose of the anniversary story is to acknowledge past pain and loss, while answering the fundamental question: how are they -- the victims and the community -- doing now?

Done well, these stories rival the best literature, helping us better understand the human condition. Done poorly, they make us cringe. How can reporters and editors produce stories to be proud of?

Aiming for the truth

The first issue to resolve is the mission of anniversary stories. One of the biggest pitfalls editors and reporters face is the temptation to make anniversary stories fit a predetermined formula. The inspirational version features noble victims, the kind who bravely wipe away a single tear before quickly and bravely putting their lives back together without a backward glance. The flip side is the tearjerker, where victims are portrayed as so damaged and pitiful that they will never be able to smile again.

Real life rarely follows a pat story line. A few victims do seem able to rise above personal adversity almost immediately. Lisa Beamer, author of **Let's Roll**, and Christopher Reeve immediately come to mind. But most victims instead experience a varying mix of good days and bad, often with a few that border on unbearable.

Readers and viewers benefit from understanding that recovery is rocky and healing is never guaranteed. None of us can really know the inner lives of the victims being interviewed. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi seemed to embody the indomitable human spirit, yet he took his own life without warning. The goal is not to shoehorn facts to fit the story line, but to find fresh ways to tell anniversary stories as completely and honestly as possible.

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Responses to loss and pain

While it is true that victims are far from monolithic in their response to trauma and loss, there are some common responses. Psychologist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross outlined five stages people go through when faced with a terminal illness – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Her schema is controversial. Some critics feel that Kubler-Ross was too judgmental and put undue pressure on people to “achieve acceptance” or be adjudged a failure. Others acknowledge that many victims experience these states but that they are not sequential; rather, people move back and forth into and out of them over time. However, the list offers a useful guide to many of the responses reporters can encounter when interviewing people who endured trauma themselves or who have lost a loved one:

- **Denial** – It is quite common for a person who is told that a loved one has died to try to shut out the news. People will literally move back, throwing their hands up, saying, “No, no, no,” as if they can physically hold the bad news at bay. Trauma experts say that this is our brain’s way of protecting itself from severe emotional assault. Letting all the bad news in at once can be so devastating that people will go into shock or pass out. So people try to let the information creep into their consciousness in small doses.

Reporters need to understand the perils involved in pushing a person to accept the full extent of what has happened before they are ready to do so. In most cases, the person simply shuts down, unable or unwilling to say more. Even years later, you may find that people are still struggling to

accept the loss. Family and friends will often say that they still expect to pick up the phone and hear that familiar voice.

- **Anger** – When the military trains people to break bad news to families about casualties, trainees are told to expect that some people will lash out, verbally and even physically. Over time, many victims try to channel their fury into activism. When I conducted a workshop with Marc Klaas a few years ago, I was struck by the intense anger he sustains in his work to prevent other kids from suffering the same fate as his murdered daughter Polly. A recent profile in *Vanity Fair* of three women who lost their husbands in the World Trade Center included a portrait of Kristen Breitweiser, who appears to have found meaning in channeling her anger into demanding an investigation of how 9/11 was allowed to happen.
- **Bargaining** – A classic example of this response is the parent who promises to devote his or her life to God if the abducted child is returned alive. This dynamic can also fuel activism, the idea that the bargain struck is that working hard for a cause confers meaning on what happened, as if to make sense of the pain.
- **Depression** - Depression is a clinical term that is not a synonym for sadness. It describes a constellation of responses, ranging from feelings of hopelessness and despair to the possibility of suicide. People in the throes of depression may seem exhausted and detached, but it would be a mistake for

reporters to confuse that with not caring.

- **Acceptance** – In Kubler-Ross’ view, acceptance is the ultimate goal, akin to when people ask victims if they have reached “closure.” The implication is that acceptance and closure are superior states and that the noblest and best people will strive until they attain them. It is tempting to confer secular sainthood on someone like Bud Welch. His daughter was killed by the bomb blast in Oklahoma City, yet he met with the McVeigh family, offering his help in fighting against the death penalty for Timothy McVeigh. While it invokes awe when a survivor can offer forgiveness in the face of such a horrible crime, it is an unfair standard to demand of all victims. Survivors like John Walsh, founder of America’s Most Wanted, may never find it in their hearts to forgive, but this does not detract from their contribution.

As this brief analysis suggests, reporters would be wise to avoid any hint of being judgmental. Victims have already endured suffering beyond what most of us can comprehend. They must also confront society’s ambivalence about victimization. Are victims survivors or losers? Do they deserve our respect or our pity? Adding to that burden by portraying them as failing to fulfill our narrow expectations only adds to their burden. Best to avoid loaded words like *acceptance*, *closure* and *forgiveness* and focus instead on the reality of how the survivor tries to cope and contribute.

The dynamics of PTSD

Estimates vary, but roughly one out of every 10 people in our society suffers from some form of

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as a result of enduring a traumatic event. According to the diagnostic manual DSM-IV, a person who experiences a trauma that induces fear, horror or helplessness is at risk of PTSD if certain symptoms persist. These can include re-experiencing the event, through intrusive recollections, flashbacks and dreams as a result of exposure to triggering cues. They also include “persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness.” PTSD sufferers also experience “increased arousal,” which manifests in difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger, problems with concentration, hypervigilance or an exaggerated startle response.

These dynamics matter to reporters because many expect victims to respond with tears and anguish, when they are instead confronted with someone who seems anxious, irritable or devoid of emotion. For PTSD sufferers, life is often drained of all color, as their world turns to grey. Again, it is important not to confuse the numbing of PTSD with not caring.

What to expect and how to respond

Reporters need to know that victims who agree to being interviewed for an anniversary story will almost always pay a price for their participation. Dredging up painful memories exacts a cost, if not during the interview, then later, whether it is tears, sleeping and eating disturbances or flashes of anger. So it is important to acknowledge that you understand how fortunate you are to be granted an interview.

The purpose of that admonition is not to scare you away from doing these challenging interviews. These stories often rank among the most meaningful work a reporter can do. The goal is to reinforce the importance of

careful preparation. Six tips that can help:

- ❑ **Do the research** – While it is important to verify information, in case errors crept into previous coverage, do as much advance preparation as time allows. Making sure the facts are accurate is the minimum standard for such stories. Your goal is to capture insights, color, expressions and nuance, so you will want to know the basics of the story before you arrive. You don’t want to have to interrupt a poignant moment to verify the spelling of a name.
- ❑ **Be empathic** – It is respectful to acknowledge the person’s trauma or loss up front. Doing so also sets the tone that this is a safe environment in which to express feelings. At Michigan State University’s School of Journalism, in the Victims and the Media Program in-class presentations in our reporting classes, we tell students that it is always safe to say, “I am sorry for your loss” or “I am sorry for what happened to you.” Better to stick to these tried-and-true expressions of concern than to blurt out something that might be inadvertently hurtful.
- ❑ **Focus on active listening** – Most victims want to tell their stories. Make sure to give them a chance to tell their stories their way. The best stories often emerge from silence as much as from probing.
- ❑ **Be prepared for tears** – While much of the foregoing is designed to warn you that victims who do not cry can still be suffering, the fact is that many victims will burst into tears, weep quietly or sob inconsolably at some points during the interview. Our culture is generally uncomfortable with emotion. We view tears as something to avoid, not as a normal part of grieving. But your job is to let the person feel and experience the moment, as you capture it. Zeroing in for a close-up can be exploitive, but the honest expression of grief deserves respect. Just remember to carry a box of tissues and a bottle of water for each of you.
- ❑ **Understand survivor guilt** – Another caution when interviewing victims is that some experience “survivor guilt,” which means they hold themselves responsible for events beyond their control. “It was all my fault.” “If only . . .” Particularly if there are civil or criminal court cases involved, reporters need to be careful not to mislead readers or viewers by including comments that leave the impression the victim is actually at fault.
- ❑ **Think twice about touching** – Seeing someone in obvious pain often makes us want to give the person a hug or at least a reassuring squeeze of the hand. However, this is one time where it makes good sense not to cross the line from professional to friend. Remember that victims of sexual assault in particular will not want their personal space invaded. Even asking permission – “May I give you a hug?” – makes it hard for them to say no, even though they may want to. Victims may also have suffered a painful injury that can remain sensitive years later. You can offer non-verbal support through body gestures and facial expressions, but touch can be unwelcome or

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misinterpreted, particularly by members of the opposite sex.

- **Ask “when” questions –** Asking basic fact questions risks getting nothing back but “yes” or “no” answers. John Brady, author of the venerable **Craft of Interviewing**, says that “when” questions – when did you first notice you were in danger? – prompt people to tell a story. “When” questions are also a good choice when you find yourself so moved with emotion that you find yourself at a loss for words.
- **Consider allowing an advance reading –** This advice is controversial among journalism academics, editors and reporters who believe that you never do more than read back quotes for accuracy. Yet we have discovered that many of the reporters who have done stellar work with victims let their subjects read the entire story in advance. The story was shared with the clear understanding that the ultimate decision about what the story said still rested with the reporter and editors. But the reporters said that such stories often contain such personal and sensitive information that they wanted firsthand assurance that no errors or hurtful statements had inadvertently crept in.

New ways of storytelling

The best journalists are, at heart, storytellers. They are the inheritors of the grand tradition that dates all the way back to the earliest caveman who stood in front of the fire telling tales to the rest of the tribe. Kurt Vonnegut says that storytelling is easy – just make sure each word either advances the action or reveals character -- simple advice that can take a lifetime to master.

Anniversary stories challenge reporters to find fresh ways to give victims their voice. These are the stories that can call for literary techniques – similes, metaphors, vivid imagery, what a former editor once called “making a word pie.”

Move from the general to the specific and back again. Weave in statistics and cultural and historical information that adds context. Include a sidebar that identifies sources of help for fellow sufferers. Remember pacing: short sentences and fragments advance the action quickly, while complex sentences slow it down. Find ways to SHOUT and to *whisper*. Be vigilant in ensuring that the illustrations do not detract from your themes.

Again, these are stories where every word matters. As Mark Twain wrote, the difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between *lightning* and *lightning bug*.

One bit of advice that worked well for me was using a tape recorder to capture the words, so that I could take written notes about the details – how the woman cocked her head whenever she talked about her late husband, the color of the light streaming through the window. Over time, I developed a system where I could key those notes to the counter on the recorder, so that I could always add the telling detail to the right quote.

A fresh approach

Storytelling also requires imagination. What do readers learn from yet another trite story of the noble victim? What important information do viewers gain from yet another airing of the planes crashing into the towers or the gurney with the body bag sliding yet again into the ambulance?

Michele Stanush of the *Austin American-Statesman* won the Dart Award in 1995 for a two-part series entitled *Test of Fire*. She and photographer Lynn Dobson

spent more than a year trying to do justice to Emmett Jackson’s story. Emmett’s job as a baker had brought him to the brink of being able to move his wife and baby out of public housing. That dream died the night that a drug deal gone bad resulted in a disgruntled customer returning to throw a Molotov cocktail into the courtyard in front of his apartment. As the flames approached Emmett’s door, he and his wife Diathia, who was holding their baby, had no choice but to try to walk out through the flames.

His wife dropped the child. “Dee” made it through but died two weeks later.

Emmett went back to try to find the baby but never did. He was burned over more than 80% of his body. He lost his ears, lips, fingers. People with burns like his are not expected to survive.

When it seemed that Emmett might pull through, Stanush and Dobson told their editors that they wanted to tell his story of recovery. At first, they just visited Emmett and talked. Eventually, he allowed them to bring out the cameras, notepads and tape recorders.

At one of their sessions, Stanush, who has gone on to become a screenwriter, found a solution to the problem of hearing all about Emmett’s recovery. Even though she gave Emmett her home phone number, she knew there were many times he was awake half the night, unable to sleep, wanting to talk, but she was asleep. So she gave him her tape recorder and told him to pour out his thoughts whenever he wanted. It was up to Emmett whether he would let her use any of the material or not.

At the end of his nine months in the hospital, Emmett had filled many spools of tape. As playwright Paddy Chayevsky wrote, there are things you will say in the dead of night that you would never say at noon.

Emmett let Stanush use almost any quote she wanted from those

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hours of tapes. She interspersed her story with his quotes in Italics, a way for us to hear his inner voice. About his loss, Emmett said:

I can't go to the library.

I can't make it there.

I can't go shopping.

I can't make it there.

I can't go by a friend's house.

I can't make it there.

Stanush found a way to capture Emmett's personal poetry by empowering him with the tape recorder. It meant that she had to spend additional hours listening to and transcribing the tapes, but it was the only way she could capture those private moments that made her story real.

A numbers game

Incidents like Columbine, Oklahoma City and especially the World Trade Center attack pose a special challenge because of the sheer numbers of victims involved. The "Portraits of Grief" that helped the *New York Times* win the Pulitzer Prize for its 9/11 coverage set the standard for using illuminating anecdotes and personal details to bring each victim to life. Yet that was a massive undertaking beyond the ability of most news organizations to do and do well. A more common solution is to focus on a few victims at most. Stalin said that a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic. To personalize the tragedy, people need to connect with the victim as a flesh-and-blood human being, not through a single quote or five-second sound bite.

Identifying trends over time

Penny (Owen) Cockerell of *The Daily Oklahoman* spent years reporting on the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing and the subsequent trials. "Reporters who have covered anniversaries for the same event often pick up on trends," she said. "They may see that the city has healed

considerably from last year, that more victims have remarried, had more children, or have simply moved away. They may notice a backsliding, such as the third year after the Oklahoma City bombing, when rescuers began emerging with their pent-up trauma. Look for these trends and point them out."

A matter of time

Which brings us to the issue of time. Doing anniversary stories well takes lots of it. For six years, the MSU J-School's Victims and the Media Program judged the annual Dart Award for excellence in reporting on victims of violence, which awarded the winning newspaper team a \$10,000 prize. Most of the winning entries involved many reporters and editors working together for weeks, even months, or a reporter and photographer duo who spent a year or more on their stories. A one-time interview, no matter how well done, is simply insufficient to tell a victim's story in depth.

A particular quandary that editors face is how to find a way to allow a talented reporter like Michele Stanush the year or more it took for her to produce the two-part series on Emmett. This is not a commitment that most news organizations can afford to do or do often. Yet it takes time to craft the quality stories that honor victims and help the community heal.

Just before the six-month anniversary of the rampage by murderous "day trader" Mark Barton, editors at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* found themselves caught in the middle of a different dilemma. On one side were victim families who felt the anniversary demanded honoring the dead. On the other side were those who insisted any coverage would rip open wounds that had barely begun to heal.

"One thing *The (Daily) Oklahoman* learned early on was that readers had a threshold for

reading about the Oklahoma City bombing, then they shut down," said reporter Penny (Owen) Cockerell. "Too much coverage, no matter how good, wears a community down and dilutes the overall tragedy."

Listening to the community

Journalists know that no story will ever make everyone happy. But the issue becomes, who decides how these stories should be handled? As news organizations grapple with strategies to bring themselves closer to their readers and viewers, they might want to host periodic sessions where editors can talk with victims, victim advocates, trauma experts and journalism instructors. Some editors worry about compromising journalistic objectivity, but the real challenge is to find ways to learn what people from all walks of life want from these stories.

When the Victims and the Media Program hosted a workshop on campus two years ago, it was obvious that journalists need to hear from victims about what matters to them – and victims and their supporters need to learn more about the role of a free press. Victim advocates can also help reporters understand trauma and its impact on victims – and on the journalists who hear and tell their stories.

Reporters who do these tough stories also pay a price. Joe Hight, managing editor of the *Daily Oklahoman*, talks about the 'wall effect.' He sees journalists absorbing the pain and grief that victims emit, like a tennis ball bouncing back after it is thrown against the wall. "The effect causes the journalist, especially the ones who are more sensitive to emotions, to feel the victim's pain and loss. The isolation. The guilt feelings." Reporters and editors need to learn how to do these stories well, while taking care of themselves in the process.