

Survivors and the Media

Gift From Within serves survivors - human beings who have suffered, often at the hands of others. The last thing a person who has been victimized needs is an encounter with an insensitive journalist. But reporters are currently learning more and more about PTSD and about listening to and learning from survivors. Elaine Silvestrini is a leading example of the new generation of media professionals who have taken the time to learn with us. She won a national fellowship, along with five other mid-career journalists, that involves intensive training in the science of trauma studies. The Dart Fellowship also explores ethical issues in covering crime and catastrophe. This year, journalists discussed their own victimization and tragic losses. Some revealed personal struggles with PTSD. Elaine was selected to be "Senior Dart Fellow," which means she will help organize and moderate the next year's program. I asked her to write to the GFW readers in an attempt to close the gap between survivors and reporters. We should help one another do our jobs. The survivors' job is to not just be alive, but feel alive in the fullest sense of that word. And the reporter's job is to tell painful truths without diminishing the dignity of survivors. Elaine does that job well --very well.

-Frank Ochberg, MD

The image many people have of journalists reporting on tragedies is that of a predator stalking vulnerable prey, intrusively wielding a camera and shoving a microphone into the face of the bereaved, asking ridiculously obvious questions. These oafs are more interested in selling newspapers and gaining notoriety than in recognizing, -- never mind minimizing -- the harm they are inflicting on their vulnerable story subjects.

Like many stereotypes, this image is partly based on fact; Most everyone has seen such reporting broadcast on the news and depicted in print.

But many journalists cringe at such displays, mostly out basic compassion for the story subjects, but also because it diminishes our profession every time it happens. We know that the public perception of the media is often shaped by how we deal with human suffering, and that, too frequently, some of our colleagues are found wanting. But we also believe that those of us who strive to deal sensitively and humanely with trauma survivors are in the majority.

We know it is important to tell their stories in ways that humanize and illuminate. We know we can provide an outlet, a sounding board, an education and a forum for a community to come together. And while victims frequently want to be left alone, some are grateful for a chance to tell their stories and want to have some input into what people know about what happened and how it affected them. It is our job as journalists to facilitate that process and to do our best to back off when a subject is fragile.

At the same time, we are neither therapists, nor advocates. We are not trained or equipped to treat mental illness. And we are bound by standards of impartiality and truth, as well as competitive pressures, that sometimes clash with our best intentions toward the suffering. With this in mind, and though we sometimes misstep, we are trying to do right by other human beings, and not inflict further pain.

As a reporter for the Daily Oklahoman, Penny Owen-Cockerell covered the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Owen-Cockerell was part of a team of journalists at the paper that won a national Dart award for its compassionate reporting of the tragedy. "I don't know any reporter who is deliberately insensitive to a victim," she said. "I think we all want to treat them with the respect they deserve, though we don't always succeed. Some of our questions may seem strange or trivial. But we ask them in order to get the story right. I think one of the worst things a reporter can do is get their facts wrong about someone's loved one, and believe me, those errors, no matter how small, are zeroed in on with a vengeance once in print."

"I would hope that the victims/survivors/families we interview in a tragic situation realize that the interview is difficult for us as well," she said. "Interviewing someone in their raw grief can be very intimidating. Emotions are everywhere, and everyone is different. So it is hard to know how open to be, how matter-of-fact, how sympathetic, etc. "We sometimes stumble all over ourselves trying to gauge the right level of sensitivity and directness in these situations, and we only have our instincts and experiences to rely on."

For some journalists, those experiences include personal trauma that helps reporters better connect with other victims. Dart Fellow Frank Smyth, a Washington-based freelance reporter, covers foreign affairs. While reporting on the Gulf War, Smyth saw his partner executed. And Smyth was taken prisoner by the Iraqis for 18 days. While captive, Smyth saw others, including a 16-year-old boy, tortured. The experience affected Smyth for years, and he now works to help other traumatized journalists. But even before his own ordeal, Smyth said his reporting led him into situations that sensitized him to the not always obvious needs of trauma victims.

"When I was in El Salvador in 1989, there was a firefight going on during the November 1989 offensive," he recalled. Working at the time for CBS News Radio, Smyth was near a poor shantytown where guerillas had taken up positions. A helicopter fired a rocket into a cluster of homes, and Smyth ran to the destroyed shantytown. A woman and one or two of her young daughters had been killed. "It was a terrible scene," Smyth said. As he walked away, he came upon a man with blood on him.

The man was "entirely calm," Smyth remembered. Assuming the man was a neighbor, Smyth said, he introduced himself and asked the man if he could tell what happened.

"Yes, I can do that," Smyth said the man calmly responded. When Smyth again asked what had happened, the man answered, "They just killed my wife and family."

Smyth said he looked into the man's eyes, trying to determine whether he was telling the truth. "Being a journalist, my first instinct was, is this man lying? It seemed incongruous that he was so calm."

Realizing that the man was telling the truth, Smyth dropped his microphone and hugged the man, and they both started to cry. "The interview was over," Smyth said.

"What I realized later was that the man was in shock." He felt helpless, wanting to do more, knowing he couldn't. He came away from the experience realizing he needed to respect how people react differently to tragic situations. "That gave me a desire to understand better the whole notion of how people respond, how to approach them with the dignity and respect that I think all of us deserve." Smyth said his experience in Iraq "gave me a deeper awakening for these issues and a desire to learn more," which he said has made him a better reporter.

Most reporters don't face the harrowing experiences of a war zone, but still are moved by the violence and suffering encountered on the job.

John Curran, Atlantic City correspondent for the Associated Press, said he is sometimes personally affected by the stories he covers. "When the crime or tragedy involves children, the reporting is especially painful," he said. "You want to cry sometimes – for the victims, for the survivor, for yourself as the prying news media vulture making money off someone's pain – but you can't. It's taboo. Sometimes the story is so big, the pressure to keep up with your competition is so intense, you have to knock on the front door of the survivor's house, or call the grieving mother, or dig for detail and 'the story,' and you hate yourself and the business you're in...But I only ask once. If the answer is no, or the grieving survivors don't want to talk, I don't press."

Sometimes, being sensitive means deciding not to report at all, Curran said. He related how he was assigned recently to make arrangements for a photograph to be taken at the funeral of 2-year-old twins who died in a New Year's Eve fire at their grandmother's house. AP had covered the tragic story, and Curran said he called the church the day before the funeral to gauge the feelings there about the publicity. "The pastor told me it was a good time to give the family some privacy," Curran said. "I told Trenton News Editor Bill Newill, and we agreed the tragedy and the family's need for privacy outweighed the news value of the photograph. I was thrilled that we didn't do it. But I know that in another circumstance, we may be compelled to. When there is a feeding frenzy on a story, you do not want to be the one raising your hand to say 'Enough.' It's not the tough guy reporter thing to do."

While some may find it hard to believe, journalists know that these types of conversations go on all the time in newsrooms. Editors and reporters are called upon every day to decide whether a story should be reported at all and, if it should, what is the best approach. In general, our job is not to withhold information from the public. But sometimes, when the circumstances allow, we do decide the pain a story will create outweighs anything to be gained by telling it.

Likewise, during interviews, reporters often cut slack to subjects who are not used to dealing with the media, including most trauma victims. Sometimes, a bit of information that an interview subject wants kept private is not important to the reporter, who will agree to keep it out of the story in the interests of focusing on what really is important. But these negotiations have to take place in an environment of some level of trust established between interviewer and subject.

As a court reporter for the Asbury Park Press in New Jersey, Carol Gorga Williams writes about the experiences of crime victims. She said she frequently struggles with editors to put the brakes on when the appetite for information and competitive pressures threaten to trample on victims' need for privacy. "Journalists must abandon their own traditions of sensationalism and irresponsibility to present fully informed and dignified news accounts of breaking events" she said. "I know many regular reporters who often embark on a story with those goals in mind, only to be overruled by someone sitting behind a desk whose name does not go on the story."

As we will readily admit, journalists do make mistakes. And when this happens, we want to do what we can to make things right or, at least, avoid a repeat.

Addressing her comments to trauma victims, Owen-Cockerell said, "If I say or do something insensitive, I want to hear about it. If my story offends someone, I want to know that, too. Feedback from victims and survivors can be immensely instructive and may help to avoid the same mistake in the next tragic situation. I am also interested in how you heal, not just the initial grief. Some of the best stories come in following up on victims and survivors of crime."

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