

SPECIAL EDITION OF JOURNALISM EDUCATION

Abstract:

Even hardened journalists can experience psychological strains when covering harrowing news stories of conflict, disaster and human suffering. Over the past 10 years, incidence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in war correspondents has been well documented and awareness among mainstream news organisations of the dangers to mental health posed by prolonged exposure to such reporting has risen. But how does a group of student journalists – the next generation of news professionals - cope under pressure when confronted with a realistic role-play scenario depicting the chaos and personal trauma of a natural disaster? And what are the implications for the learning and teaching of the core skills of journalism and story telling? This paper, based on observation and questioning of a cohort of postgraduate journalism students taking part in a complex exercise built around the 2005 Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, explores two main areas: firstly, the personal experience of students interviewing actors portraying victims and survivors of the hurricane; and secondly their practice of journalism when confronted with interview subjects themselves displaying symptoms of distress. The exploration is complemented by an analysis of the multi-media reporting produced by students taking part in the exercise, assessing the extent to which journalism's objectivity norm is upheld under pressure and the way in which the students frame reporting of the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

WHERE'S GEORGE BUSH? UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WEATHER THE TRAUMA STORM OF HURRICANE KATRINA

It is the instinct of a journalist to show the unvarnished truth of an event; hovering over suffering and snatching portraits of grief, in order to try to convey a story as accurately as possible and get a visceral reaction. There's an old, rather disturbing adage from American TV news; "If it bleeds, it leads". Any feelings of guilt, for asking an intrusive question, or filming someone else's horror, are suppressed until the job is done. Once home, uncomfortable memories are often filed away, not to be laid bare and unpicked. – Sian Williams.

Shania is trembling, huddled in a blanket and has been unable to sleep for days. A gaggle of reporters are crowded around her, pressing their microphones and cameras into her face. She says little until one of the journalists places a comforting hand on her shoulder; biting back the tears, she starts, fitfully, to tell her story, of how the floodwaters surged into her New Orleans home, of how she sought refuge on the porch roof as the torrential rain beat down; and of how her eight-year-old daughter Felicia slipped out of her arms into the rising tide and was lost to the torrent of waters gushing down the street.

Realistic as this may seem, Shania is in fact a professional actor, taking part in a complex recreation of a scene from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, one of the five deadliest hurricanes to strike the United States, claiming more than 1,800 lives. The reporters are postgraduate students of journalism at Bournemouth University taking part in an exercise to introduce them to reporting on what in the jargon has become known as a "traumatic news event." Over the past 10 years, incidence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in war correspondents has been well documented and awareness among mainstream news organisations of the dangers to mental health posed by prolonged exposure to such reporting has slowly risen. Most recently, the focus has shifted to those journalists working on social media hubs in newsrooms, the so-called "digital frontline", handling the graphic images that today make up a large proportion of user-generated content. But this paper explores a different group of journalists – those who are still students and who represent the next

generation of news professionals. How do they cope under pressure when confronted with a realistic role-play scenario depicting the chaos and personal trauma of a cataclysmic natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina? And what are the implications for the learning and teaching of the core skills of journalism and story telling? The paper is based on the observation and questioning of a cohort of 17 postgraduate journalism students¹ and explores two main areas: firstly, the personal experience of the students interviewing actors portraying victims and survivors of the hurricane; and secondly their practice of journalism when confronted with interview subjects displaying symptoms of distress and trauma. The investigation is complemented by an analysis of the multi-media reporting produced by the students taking part in the exercise, assessing the extent to which journalism's objectivity norm is upheld under pressure and the way in which the students frame reporting of the Hurricane Katrina disaster.²

Still a taboo subject

There is a sense by which talking about trauma is still a taboo subject, not least because of journalists' fear that admitting to their own distress will be interpreted as a sign of weakness in the highly competitive and macho culture of news and will harm their career. As Phillips observes (2014: 47), journalists operate in a field where their news organizations are competing with others and where they themselves are competing with their peers (for the attention of audiences and for the attention of those who can boost their careers). The fear of admitting what could be construed as mental weakness as a journalist was highlighted in a recent survey conducted by Eyewitness Media Hub³ into the dangers of suffering secondary trauma from working with graphic user-generated content in the newsroom (2015). The survey quoted anonymously one social media journalist who said:

¹ The students are part of Bournemouth university's School of Journalism, English & Communication

² The author ran the exercise in conjunction with Gavin Rees, the Director of the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma in Europe, together with academic staff from the School of Journalism, English & Communication at Bournemouth University.

³ The survey, released on December 10, 2015 at the BBC in London, focuses on user-generated content and its impact on journalists. The survey is based on 122 responses from journalists around the world.

“I feel uncomfortable talking about trauma to the management because I don't want to appear as if I am not coping and I don't like to admit I have been changed mentally. I am in a vulnerable place in my career. The bosses say ‘impress us, impress us’, I feel like I cannot say ‘no’ to looking at stuff because I want to do well in my career and I can only do that if I say ‘yes’ to everything. I feel my career would be jeopardized if I raised this with my managers.”

In fact, there is nothing that says only foreign correspondents sent to cover wars in distant places or those now working on social media hubs are likely to be exposed to traumatic news stories and material. On the contrary, as Simpson & Coté (2006: 2) point out, almost every journalist, whether working on a local newspaper or for a domestic broadcaster, can expect to interview those caught up in violent or traumatic news stories during the course of a career, including car crashes, child abuse and domestic crime. Put simply, many journalists find violence on their doorstep on their local news beat. And as Sian Williams⁴, the experienced BBC foreign correspondent and news anchor has observed, there is something deeply ingrained in journalism that pushes death and destruction to the top of the news agenda and about the thirst for what she calls portraits of grief (2014).

While the ravages of the Balkan wars during the 1990s put physical safety or “hostile environment” training on the agenda for the larger news organisations, so the news agenda of the past 10 years has set in train a period of reflection on how the news industry should be addressing issues of trauma – from pervasive international conflict (the Arab Spring, Iraq, Syria and the graphic propaganda images of al-Qaeda and ISIS) to the harrowing domestic crimes of sexual abuse (engulfing the Catholic Church worldwide and, in Britain, the BBC). The damage that exposure to such story telling can wreak on individual journalists is now well documented, thanks largely to the pioneering work of South African psychologist Anthony Feinstein and the U.S.-based charity the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma.⁵ Feinstein’s first major study

⁴ Sian Williams is perhaps best known for her time spent hosting BBC television’s morning breakfast news magazine from 2001 to 2012 but it was a stint reporting on the Asian tsunami in 2004 and the Kashmir earthquake the year after that prompted her to reflect on her profession.

⁵ The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma is a U.S.-based charity housed within the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. It functions as a resource for journalists and journalist students

of 140 war journalists found that they had significantly more psychiatric difficulties than journalists who did not report on war. In particular, the lifetime prevalence of PTSD was similar to rates reported for combat veterans, while the rate of major depression exceeded that of the general population (Feinstein et al, 2002). Another study found that around one third of journalists questioned had had to announce news of death to family or friends of a victim (Pyeovich et al, 2003). Such investigations have tended to focus on the mental wellbeing of individual journalists or types of journalists and has paid less attention to the potential impact of such issues on the editorial decisions journalists make, whether they reflect their own emotions and, in short, on the actual practice of journalism. That role has been filled mainly by the Dart organization, which has paved the way for training in newsrooms and issued a series of best practice guidelines focusing on how to cover traumatic news. Mainstream media organizations, and some universities such as Bournemouth, have gradually begun to take seriously the idea of training journalists in how to interview those caught up in traumatic news and how they can best maintain their own mental wellbeing.

Devising an exercise for trauma journalism

The idea to bring these concepts into the realm of Higher Education was based on a series of factors. Increasingly in Britain, and historically in the United States, entrants into journalism are coming from undergraduate or postgraduate university courses. The days when journalists were hired “off the street” are becoming rarer and so it seemed logical to build provision into degree programmes. In addition, a benchmark study conducted by Richards and Rees⁶ in 2011 highlighted clearly the gap in the provision of such training on offer for students of journalism and what they called generally across the profession “a striking inattention to questions about the emotional impact of journalists’ work” (2011: 851). Those who work for the emergency services, or first responders as they are called in the United States, have long had comprehensive training programmes. But often journalists are on the scene first or at

addressing two aspects of trauma: how to report well and responsibly on traumatic news and how to cope with stress and pressures stemming from that news. The author of this paper is a trustee of the Dart organization and chairs its operations in Europe.

⁶ Bournemouth University’s Prof Barry Richards led an Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) -funded project entitled Emotions & Journalism to investigate attitudes towards emotional literacy in conjunction with research fellow Gavin Rees, now the director of the Dart organization in Europe.

least at the same time as emergency crews. So it seems extremely odd that journalism has been left out of the equation. It was out of these considerations that the idea of a role-play exercise for journalism students was conceived, a form of problem-based learning that would require the students to make decisions on the run as they would in the real world of news gathering (Burns, 1997: 60). As Meadow's observes in reflections on education in Australian journalism schools (1997: 100), this prompts students to confront and solve practical problems faced in the reporting of everyday stories.

A first attempt at creating a role-play scenario by the Dart organization's Rees and the author of this paper has been used several times at Bournemouth University and was based loosely on a growing fear in the UK following the July 7 bombings⁷ in 2005 that terrorism was about to become a commonplace event on the streets of London. In this scenario, a bomb explodes at a London football game between rivals Chelsea and Arsenal. Chaos ensues and, in the role-play, journalism students are tasked to interview the injured, rescue workers and a security guard (all played by professional actors). As Rees observed in a reflection on this exercise, for many of the journalism students this was, however "unreal", their first professional encounter with extreme distress (2007: 65). And he concluded that one thing clearly worked: by the end of the exercise, those students who had shown the most emotional "savvy" collected the best material. The aim of the workshops that ran on the football stadium scenario was not to give definitive answers or rules on how to cover trauma. Rather, the aim was to introduce the ideas and allow the journalism students to learn for themselves what worked and what did not work when interviewing victims and survivors of trauma.

But there was something unsatisfying about this first scenario. If anything, although challenging emotionally for the students, the story was too simple: a bomb explodes, there are casualties and – if the right questions are asked of those caught up in the attack – it quickly becomes apparent how the bomb was smuggled into the stadium. Not all the students uncovered the truth, often they were too flustered or simply failed to listen to the clues emerging in their interviews. But as authors of the project, we decided we needed a scenario that was far more complex and afforded a far greater

⁷ The incident known as 7/7 was a series of suicide bomb attacks on the London underground and a bus during the morning rush hour. 52 people died and more than 700 were injured.

span of emotions.

The opportunity to pursue that came through a chance encounter with a former BBC journalist turned academic, Kate Wright, who had worked on the Hurricane Katrina story as a news producer.⁸ Together with Rees, they crafted a scenario based on her first hand experience in the Houston Astrodome, at first sight bizarre in that it is located some 350 miles away from the scene of the disaster. But in fact 25,000 inhabitants of New Orleans were evacuated to the giant stadium in Houston where conditions quickly became difficult in the extreme. Not only were many of the evacuees suffering from the trauma of the flooding after the levees had burst in New Orleans, there was a spate of scare stories alleging theft, violence and rape at the Houston Astrodome. It is into this emotionally charged scenario that the journalism students are plunged⁹. And instead of there being one simple story (how was the bomb smuggled past security), there are many different strands to pursue, all of them revolving around four main characters with complex backgrounds – Chantelle Green, a 46-year-old New Orleans resident, alone, abandoned and her hard earned home under water; Aaron Jackson, 19, an African American mechanic, often in trouble with the police, he had scraped together money for a car workshop, also now under water; Shania Williams, a 23-year-old African American woman who has lost her child Felicia, 8, to the flood waters but managed to rescue her younger daughter Nerese; and finally Nisha Mitra, a young Asian-American woman who used to live in New Orleans and who is working as a volunteer in the Astrodome for an evangelical church movement. Added to this cast of characters is the feckless John Temperley, spokesman for FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency that was so heavily criticized for its slow response to the disaster. The complexity of this scenario is vastly more demanding on the organizers and on the actors, but, as the subsequent analysis shows, it is capable of generating an emotional intensity that can be extremely challenging for students of journalism with little depth of reporting experience.

Part of devising such a complex scenario required a clear understanding of the aims of

⁸ Dr Kate Wright is a senior lecturer in Journalism & News Media at the University of Roehampton.

⁹ The scenario is set on September 2, 2005, two days after the first evacuees began arriving in the Houston Astrodome from New Orleans.

the exercise and articulation of the learning outcomes. The academic team felt that after completion of the workshop, students should aim to:

- Identify a range of responses which traumatized people may exhibit in interview scenarios;
- Consider and begin to apply appropriate interviewing strategies according to the needs and reactions of different kinds of interviewees, incorporating active listening techniques;
- Evaluate when it might be ethical to terminate an interview, or refrain from using interview material, because of risks to the interviewee's well-being or legal considerations;
- Understand the importance of remembering journalistic norms, such as checking out allegations and/or rumours for veracity, evaluating sources' reliability, and attributing source statements clearly and accurately, even when under emotional pressure;
- Be aware of the need for self-care during, and following, interviews with traumatized people;
- Experience, and begin to evaluate, ways of “opening” and “closing” interviews with traumatized people, bearing in mind the need to obtain informed consent from an interviewee; their own personal and professional boundaries; and issues regarding their own and others' emotional well-being;
- Consider some of the reasons why journalists might approach aid workers and officials in crisis or disaster scenarios – as valuable interviewees themselves, and as ways of “fixing” other interviews, or obtaining other kinds of information;
- Be able to select interviewing strategies to cope with aid workers and officials which might be different from those which are used with survivors of an incident;
- Make sound editorial judgements about the form and content of journalistic pieces based on interviewing experiences and the needs of specific outlets; exhibit a grasp of different kinds of journalistic form (e.g. news stories or human interest pieces) as well as professional practice regarding attribution, selection of quotations, story ordering and factual accuracy;

- Show an understanding of mistakes made or difficulties encountered during the exercise and reflect upon ways in which lessons could be learnt from these in future.

While this set of learning outcomes is comprehensive and ambitious, the team felt it was appropriate for postgraduate students and that it was important to have a basis on which to evaluate, and if necessary adapt, the scenario for future use. It was also felt that postgraduate students should be able to engage in a debate about the merits of taking an “objective” or more “engaged” stance towards crisis reporting.

Logistics - throwing students in at the deep end?

The Hurricane Katrina workshop was played out over two half days during term time. In the first session, the students reported on the scenario, interviewing the characters in turn and covering an impromptu press conference by the FEMA spokesman. They then had four days to produce broadcast news bulletins before the second workshop to evaluate their work and reflect upon their practice. The first question posed to the academic team was whether to throw the students into the deep end (a “sink or swim” strategy) or to brief in full on trauma and journalism before starting the exercise. The team settled on a halfway house, concerned that the students needed to be advised of the potentially distressing material they would be handling. This was based on experience from running the football stadium scenario which, although less complex and more of a “straight” news story, clearly had unsettled some students who took part in it. It was made very clear to the 17-strong cohort of postgraduate students that they could set aside the exercise at any time if they felt distressed. A handful of the students had worked professionally as journalists before, but the vast majority had come onto the course after studying a different discipline at undergraduate level. The 30-minute briefing included basic information about trauma, including the fact that it is normal for journalists to feel disturbed when working on traumatic material. It also couched the workshop and subsequent discussions firmly within the framework of sound journalism practice and how best to report on victims, perpetrators and communities caught up in traumatic news. In the final analysis, the students were told that it was about good, responsible storytelling.

As a prelude, the academic team asked the students to fill out a short pre-workshop questionnaire exploring their ideas about how they might handle such news stories. In their 2011 paper, Richards and Rees drew attention to what they called the talismanic status of objectivity and how emotion was widely viewed in normative journalistic discourse as contaminating objectivity (2011: 863). Clearly, five years on, little has changed if measured by this cohort of students where such attitudes appeared to be deeply ingrained. When asked generally about the main role of news reporting, the majority responded with the need to inform the public, often using words and phrases such as balance, impartiality, objectivity and freedom from bias. When asked more specifically about how they would report on a train crash (as an example of a traumatic news story cited in the survey), the majority felt it would be important to uphold the principles of objectivity and that a journalist should cut him or herself off from their feelings and be detached. The actual practice of the role-play exercise would prove that this was not quite as easy as it sounded on paper and, in fact, would prove to be counter-productive.

The students were then divided into four news teams and briefed on the basic facts of Hurricane Katrina. As part of this, they were shown a bulletin from the BBC 10 o'clock news on September 1, the day after the first survivors were evacuated to the Houston Astrodome and the day before that designated for the role-play exercise. By this time in New Orleans the waters had stopped rising but there was a surge in looting and Louisiana's governor Kathleen Blanco called on the White House for help. The BBC's correspondent Matt Frei portrayed in almost apocalyptic terms a city on the brink of collapse. "This place," Frei said, "looks and feels like a Hollywood disaster set, but it is very much for real, there are a lot of people on the streets with guns who shouldn't have them." At one point, the BBC news package shows an inhabitant breaking down in tears as she pleads on camera for President Bush to send in help:

"We need somebody to come into this city to help us, we need the National Guard Mr Bush, please send somebody down here to help us, they're raping babies, raping women, killing people, we got no food no water..."

The BBC report reflects the rising criticism of the American president at the time for failing to visit New Orleans earlier, citing the inhabitants refrain of “where’s George Bush?” (he actually arrived the next day), and sets the scene for the evacuation to the Houston Astrodome.

With the background established, and a sense of the magnitude of the disaster portrayed through the BBC News bulletin, the students were divided into four teams, each equipped with cameras, given a reporting task by their “news editor”, one of the academics. Two of the teams were asked to investigate the highly inflammatory quote contained in the BBC report that women and babies were being raped. Did the story stand up? They needed to deliver their own take on it. The other two teams were given a different brief, asked simply to come up with a fresh angle on the story which by this time was moving into its second week.

Learning very quickly on the job

Of course, any such exercise requires what Samuel T Coleridge called the “willing suspension of disbelief.”¹⁰ Needless to say, it is difficult to recreate a superbowl stadium crowded with 25,000 hurricane survivors on a university campus in a corner of southern England. But a cavernous room and a few props (blankets, mattresses and cardboard boxes) helped convince all but a couple of the students to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the exercise. Each of the teams was accompanied at a distance by an academic tutor or a member of the Dart team – they were close enough to monitor the interviews but had strict instructions not to intervene. Each team then approached one of the four actors and conducted an interview for no longer than 10 minutes. There followed a quick debrief with their tutor before they rotated on to interview the next character in the scenario. After the second round of interviews everyone was brought together for a quick check that the tasks were understood. The teams were then plunged into an impromptu press conference (suitably cramped and chaotic) with the FEMA spokesman before moving on to cover their remaining two characters and a final debriefing.

¹⁰ The poet and philosopher Samuel T Coleridge coined the term in 1817. He maintained in his work *Biographia Literaria* that if a writer could inject “human interest and a semblance of truth” into a story, the reader would suspend judgement about its plausibility.

So how did the students cope with the task of interviewing those caught up in a traumatic news event and what were the lessons learnt? What follows is based on the author's observations of the news teams in action, coupled with feedback from the students, the actors and the Dart Center's Rees.

Clearly, in the first interviews the lack of some basic craft skills hampered the teams. Time spent huddled around an interview subject fiddling self-consciously with cameras and tripods, and staring at equipment (and *not* the subject), led to predictable problems – valuable time was lost and the teams found there was little appetite to be interviewed. Each of the teams learnt this lesson quickly, sorting out the technology well ahead of their second sets of interviews and introducing themselves properly to those they were interviewing (the “opening” referred to in the learning outcomes). It is remarkable how quickly the basics can be established in a “live” reporting exercise when the first attempt ends in frustration with little usable material.

But the real learning was to come in the practice and subsequent discussion of interview technique. Although today the interview is seen as core component of modern journalism, it wasn't always so. It was only during the first half of the 20th Century, as the profession of journalism emerged, that a number of practices, techniques and unwritten rules developed. Waisbord lists these as including the inverted pyramid form of writing, bylines, clear attribution of sources, the use of shorthand plus the *interview*¹¹ (2013: 133). These practices established a norm in Anglo-American journalism that is captured (though often poorly defined) by the word objectivity (Maras, 2013: 5). The interview quickly became an essential tool of the journalist, alongside and complementing the reporter's eyewitness account (Simpson & Coté, 2006: 98). And as part of that transition, ordinary people joined celebrities as subjects of interviews, particularly if they were swept up into suffering through fires, earthquakes, crime and other tragedies (ibid).

Reflecting these norms, the students had generally agreed in their survey responses before the exercise that that they needed to uphold principles of objectivity and maintain a detached stance in their interviews. But they quickly realised that the

¹¹ My italics.

actual practice of interviewing survivors or victims of trauma might be different. Indeed, this clearly requires a different approach from when prising information from a reluctant politician or holding a tight-lipped government official to account. The students learnt that only by building a rapport with their interview subject could they elicit a response from the characters. They learnt to build an element of trust in a variety of ways, always introducing themselves and their organisation, often kneeling down to be at the same level as the interviewee and asking open questions. Some of the characters, such as Aaron, were intimidating at first and the students were visibly shocked. Other characters, such as Shania were reluctant to relive for a stranger the story of how her daughter died in the floodwaters. Only those teams who were able to establish an empathic rapport succeeded in breaking through the anger or gaining an insight into the personal grief of the character. For Rees, the concept of objectivity is a clear barrier to interviewing and the perceived tension between detachment and personal feelings is not an “either-or choice”. Journalists should realise, he maintains, that an interviewer should not attempt to block out the human connection:

“I think when people start their career they have zero guidance on how to (conduct interviews). And that’s partly because of the traditional notions of objectivity are so solid. So a journalist who’s entering the career tends to get stuck in this dilemma of, ‘Oh my God. What am I going to be? Am I going to be a professional journalist or am I going to be a human being?’ As if somehow entering the profession means that you need to cast off a certain kind of empathy¹², a certain kind of emotional awareness, and become some sort of objective recording machine. But real journalists who are doing this job know that doesn’t work. And so they might not have a theory about it but that’s not what they do in interview situations, so they tend to be empathic.”¹³

The exercise was designed explicitly to explore such issues around interview techniques and to tease out some of the ethical questions. This was done in discussion with the students immediately after the exercise, taking in the views of the actors (as those who had been interviewed) as well. One of the key lessons was that witnesses or

¹² Simpson & Coté (2006: 102) define empathy as being the capacity to walk in someone else’s shoes and to appreciate what the other person is enduring.

¹³ In discussion with the author.

survivors of trauma may well be in shock and in no fit state to be interviewed. Certainly the character of Shania, as played during this exercise, was deeply distressed and arguably should not have been interviewed or, if so, with extreme sensitivity. The actor portraying Shania said she would only “open up” if she felt the team were treating her with respect and not “sticking a microphone in her face.” Sometimes traumatised witnesses can be confused and unreliable, this was certainly the case with those characters talking about the rape story (in fact the scenario was written in a way that *none* of them had witnessed anything directly). Sometimes the smallest gestures helped to establish rapport. Students learnt that they were able to give the survivors a little bit of control back over their lives by allowing them to determine *where* they would be interviewed.¹⁴ Equally, a reporter demonstrably showing their ability to listen builds rapport and can often open up a “better” story. Some students missed Shania’s story because they were so intent on pursuing their news desk brief that they didn’t listen properly and failed to spot the clues in her narrative (she spoke of her two children but said only one was with her. So where was the second one?)

Producing the news bulletin

When it came to converting their interview material into a 90 second broadcast news bulletin, the teams had several days to reflect and construct the final product. As such, there was no deadline pressure, something that could easily be built into a future running of the exercise and would have markedly increased the nervous tension. The students were helped in their production task by being able to incorporate “B-roll” footage from the Associated Press (AP) so long as for copyright reasons it was not posted online into the public domain. None of the teams chose to present to camera and all used a mixture of footage from their own interviews and the AP, introducing their own captions to designate those they had interviewed. Setting aside again some of the craft skills (which included sometimes poor sound quality and lighting), the students showed a sound grasp of journalism and avoided the most obvious trap surrounding the story that there had been widespread cases of rape. The two teams that had been asked to test these rumours decided to their credit that they did not have

¹⁴ Typically, someone caught up in such as natural disaster feels they have lost control over their lives, contributing to the sense of distress.

enough evidence to “stand the story up” as a result of their interviews. The evidence had, at best, been at second hand and based on rumour and hearsay. Instead, the two teams each settled on a more straightforward – and more responsible - angle, reporting on how women had voiced widespread fears for their safety and relaying criticism of the authorities inability to reassure them. Both stories were, however, presented in a tentative style, reflecting what the students reported as nervousness at challenging the expectations of the news desk. The scenario had been deliberately written to highlight the atmosphere of the time which was rife with rumour and scaremongering. But none of the four main characters, or the FEMA spokesman, had any first hand evidence of such violence. In fact, many of the news reports of the time later proved to be inaccurate or wildly exaggerated and were partly based on emotional television appearances by the New Orleans police chief Eddie Compass. He later conceded that he had heightened fears by repeatedly talking about crime being out of control. With hindsight it was clear that he was under intense professional and personal pressure. He said:

“There were reports of rapes and children being raped. And I even got one report ... that my daughter was raped. In hindsight, I guess I heightened people's fears by me being the superintendent of police, reporting these things that were reported to me...but there was really no way for me to check definitively ... so I repeated these things without being substantiated, and it caused a lot of problems.”¹⁵

There were two key lessons for the students here. The first underscored the need to uphold solid reporting of fact rather than be sucked into rumour. The second highlighted the reality that interview subjects suffering from stress and trauma are not always reliable witnesses. The other teams had been asked to seek a fresh angle and recounted stories of personal tragedy, one of them producing a moving piece of radio alongside the television bulletin. There were also stories that were missed, not least plans to close the Houston Astrodome because of overcrowding and to charter cruise ships as alternative temporary accommodation for the evacuees. Nobody picked up on the absurdity of relocating traumatised flood victims on water...

¹⁵ Cited in the New York Sun newspaper: <http://www.nysun.com/national/police-chief-says-he-exaggerated-post-katrina/38268/> Compass resigned as police chief at the end of September 2005.

Conclusion

This exercise was borne out of a conviction that more needed to be done in university journalism education to highlight the need for responsible coverage of traumatic news, both in terms of the impact on those caught up in such events and on the journalists reporting on them. Although such exercises are clearly not “real” and have limitations, some of the students who took part in the Hurricane Katrina role-play were clearly taken back by the intensity of the emotions generated. That in turn justified the decision to preface the first day with some caution and a discussion of self-care. When measured against the learning outcomes, the actors succeeded in exposing the student journalists to a wide range of emotions from extreme distress to desperation and anger.¹⁶ For their part, the students realised through the hands-on nature of the exercise that a slavish adherence to the norms of objectivity and distance did not always work and that a more empathic approach was sometimes needed to build a rapport with the interview subject. That in turn generated a better story. Challenging the normative assumptions around detachment and the need to calibrate interview strategies to take account of the emotional state of the subject turned out to be one of the key lessons. There was a common assumption that all the interview subjects, because they were on hand on the day, were actually in a fit state to be interviewed. To their credit, the students posed that question in the debriefing session afterwards which led to a wide-ranging discussion of ethical issues, including, for example, when it might be appropriate to touch a person you are interviewing. Several students did in fact attempt to comfort those they were speaking to by placing a hand on their shoulder, a gesture that in some cases did create a more trusting atmosphere.¹⁷ At the end of two sessions even those students who had been sceptical agreed that they had a better understanding of trauma and had gained at least a basic insight into how to interview vulnerable people. And what had started as an exercise in covering trauma, turned out to have been a task that underscored the importance of core journalistic skills and the art of story telling.

¹⁶ The ability of the actors to engage the students in the exercise was key. Poor acting in one run of the football stadium scenario conducted with a previous cohort had undermined the impact of that exercise.

¹⁷ In the author’s experience there is no simple answer to this question. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not and each situation has to be assessed on its merits.

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