

Submission by Dart Centre Europe

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In November, Dart Centre Europe submitted some brief thoughts to the Inquiry on how trauma is covered in the UK media, as part of the Inquiry's investigation in the culture and the practice of the press under Module 1. This more detailed submission replaces our earlier one. It expands the previous discussion of ethics in journalism and offers recommendations for the modification of codes in line with the Inquiry's request for comment under Module 4.

We hope that our comments will be useful to the Inquiry.

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1. ABOUT DART CENTRE EUROPE

Dart Centre Europe is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to fostering informed, innovative and ethical news reporting on violence, conflict and tragedy. Based in London, it is the regional office for the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism based in New York.

The Dart Centre advances its goals through running in-depth workshops and fellowships for working journalists and filmmakers; with shorter briefings and seminars; through interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed research; and through developing curricula and innovative teaching approaches for Higher Education. The sharing of working experience that happens during these events shape the specialist resources that the Dart Centre makes available for the journalism community, be they local journalists, human rights reporters, war correspondents or others with a focus on such topics as child protection issues, intimate partner violence or the justice system.

To give a sample of some of our activities, over the last twelve months we have participated in discussions with journalists in Northern Ireland on relevant lessons that can be learnt from political violence in the province, briefed Norwegian journalists in the aftermath of the July terror attacks on trauma-appropriate interviewing skills, produced detailed resources for reporters covering sexual violence and political violence, and held consultations with individual journalists who have been covering such diverse stories as traumatic child protection cases and armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Centre is a journalist led-organisation that works in dialogue with other trauma professionals, including those who work with first responders in the emergency services and those with mental health and victim support backgrounds. Over the last ten years, it has drawn on these connections to develop freely available trauma literacy materials for the journalism community. Dart Centre Europe is currently represented on the board of the European Society of Traumatic Stress Studies and the UK Psychological Trauma Society.

2. INTRODUCTION

The abusive reporting practices employed by certain news organisations revealed by the phone hacking scandal have damaged public confidence in journalists and journalism in the United Kingdom. These abuses raise a broad range of questions regarding privacy, technology, media ownership and accountability. But at the heart of the phone-hacking crisis lies the question of how victims of violence and tragedy are treated by news professionals.

Although phone hacking or other illegal or questionable practices directed at celebrities and public figures are of concern, it was the revelations of hacking aimed at parents of murdered or missing children and other private citizens (along with allegations of corruption in police agencies supposed to represent the interests of those victims) which spurred creation of the present Inquiry.

It is our view that distressing events such as the Dowler case do constitute legitimate and indeed important subjects for news reporting. The question is how, in an environment of robust freedom of the press and competitive media ownership, to best encourage reporting which respects victims; which is informative rather than exploitative; and which is both effective and ethical journalism.

Our approach proceeds from the belief that the way that violence is reported is of fundamental consequence to the public interest, and is a barometer of the health of any society. A responsible media uses its power to hold those who abuse their strength to account and it helps the public engage meaningfully with the causes and consequences of trauma and tragedy. While informed and accurate reporting can promote accountability and bolster the resilience of individuals, partial and inaccurate reporting is likely to compound distress, marginalise victims and survivors, and, in general, diminish a society's capacity to make informed decisions.

Victims and survivors of trauma often welcome attentive and accurate reporting. Newspaper coverage may give them a chance for their story to be heard and, potentially, to contribute to a wider public discussion. But journalists owe a special duty of care to people who have their lives turned upside down by sudden tragedy.

Sadly, since November 2011, the Inquiry has heard a considerable volume of testimony showing that the section of the PCC code which seeks to safeguard this has not been universally followed, and on some publications the failure to do this appears to be systemic, on occasions breaking even the most basic professional tenets of accuracy and fairness.

The accounts of Christopher Jefferies, Baroness Hollins, the McCann and Dowler families, and others have given valuable insights into what it can feel like to be on the receiving end of irresponsible media attention. While these will help the Inquiry frame its recommendations, we feel that the Inquiry's investigation into the ethics and practices of the press could benefit from more systematic discussion of the relevance of evidence-based trauma research and the need for journalists to receive adequate trauma-literacy training. While the inquiry has heard much on the subject of malpractice, it has heard little on the obverse - on what it takes for journalists to manage these interactions well.

The news industry needs to commit itself to formal training for reporters, editors and producers at all levels in basic trauma awareness, including the experience of victims, ethical responsibilities and effective reporting techniques. No news organisation - whether

public-service broadcasters or mass-market tabloids - would expect its team to cover a football match without knowledge of the rules of play; to report on financial markets without an understanding of stocks and other financial instruments. Yet reporters, crews and editors routinely make important news judgments without training in well-established, readily-available knowledge of trauma and its impact on individuals, families and communities and the implications of that for news craft and ethics.

3. FACTORING IN TRAUMA

Traumatic incidents typically disempower people. Bereavement, violent assault, sexual abuse or other forms of personal tragedy, can affect people's sense of security and of self in disquieting and subtle ways. And the effects can reverberate long after the immediate headlines have gone. Feelings of acute vulnerability may put people in a place where it is harder to make clear-sighted decisions. This is doubly true of those, who, compared to the famous, are disadvantaged by a lack of money, influence, and previous experience of the media.

How does one interview a mother who lost her son to a brutal gangland killing? Why are certain questions likely to render a rape victim ashamed and inarticulate, even many years after the original sexual assault? How does one respond if an interviewee breaks down into tears in an encounter that an interviewer may personally find frightening and guilt-making? Why do victims often become so enraged by even small, seemingly trivial, inaccuracies in published copy?

The classical approaches to journalism ethics currently taught in the UK are largely silent on these key practical issues, which are of real importance to both practitioners of journalism and those on its receiving end. The supplemental insight that a trauma-literate approach seeks to imbue emerges out of the experience of journalists who work extensively with the victims and survivors of trauma. It pays direct attention to the emotional consequences of violence, the impact that journalists themselves may have on the people they report on, and how perception, memory and judgment can all become distorted in traumatic situations. (This applies to journalists in such situations as well as their sources.) And importantly, it is one that is informed by research and scientific evidence, rather than gut instinct, hearsay or customary practice.

These understandings are similar to the ones that family liaison officers in the police develop, who are normally the first to contact the bereaved, sometimes only fractionally before journalists do. Family liaison officers receive extensive training, guidance and on-going professional development in how to work with people who have been bereaved; journalists, currently, receive almost none.

The relative silence on this topic at the Inquiry perhaps echoes the reluctance that most of us have, and not just the journalism industry, to inquire too closely into the nature of loss and acute distress.

It was telling that the discussion during the Leveson Inquiry seminars that preceded the formal sessions, whose purpose had been to scope the issues without any process of formal oath-swearing, became artificially constrained around a discussion of whether practices at certain newspapers had or had not strayed into clear illegality. i.e. whether phones were hacked or not. The nature of the direct human interaction between journalists and their

sources, a matter of enormous concern to both was barely aired. It took the evidence from the McCanns and others to open that door.

The common assumption that trauma journalism is the preserve of a small subset of war reporters and others who focus on disasters or highly traumatic human rights based content is not true. The subject cuts across much broader range of journalistic output that reflects many of the core issues being discussed by the inquiry. Similar understandings are needed by, for example, journalists working on local coverage of traffic fatalities in small communities, or coverage of suicides by celebrities on entertainment-focused publications. The issues may be particularly acute for home affairs and crime reporters who may have to cover murder trials and harrowing child assault cases in great detail and over many weeks.

Alongside adequate training, an important step in fostering trauma-literacy is to create opportunities for professional journalists to talk to each other in an open way about what it takes to work effectively with victims and survivors of trauma, and to encourage a culture of reflection and knowledge-sharing.

Unfortunately this is rarer than it should be: working journalists in the UK all too often feel they lack the time, space and permission to talk frankly with their colleagues about this dimension of their work. And that in turn makes it harder for the many journalists who are good at this work to mentor new entrants and junior colleagues.

4. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In offering recommendations, we are not in a position to offer precise formulas for a new regulatory or self-regulatory framework for the press. Nevertheless we note that the Press Complaints Commission as currently formulated has not been able to prevent the abuses that led to the creation of this Inquiry and that the status quo is neither desirable nor tenable. Our comments here seek to assist the Inquiry in identifying essential factors, such as gaps in the current training of journalists and approaches to the redrafting of codes, that we believe require attention and are an essential part of any programme for reform.

2. In our experience, encouraging greater discussion of trauma and its impact within the profession can be a powerful lever for meaningful change even in the most commercially driven contexts. We believe that if journalists are provided with timely, substantive, and evidence-based information about the impact of violence and tragedy, they will report on victims and survivors with greater care and understanding. We also so believe that greater awareness of the issues around trauma will make for better quality journalism that is more insightful and relevant to its audiences.

3. Formal codes, whether industry wide or internal to a publication, have an important role to play in guiding the culture and conduct of the press. The PCC code as currently drafted, however, is not in itself, sufficient to protect members of the public from unwarranted intrusion and other abuses. The section that refers to the treatment of victims and survivors, is too brief and its language is inadequately responsive to contemporary, science-informed understanding of the impact of traumatic events on individuals, families and communities. It is potentially misleading and should be redrafted through a process of open consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including victim and survivor groups and working journalists who have in-depth experience of covering trauma. We also believe that including a conscience code allowing journalists to reject or log disapproval of assignments that they consider immoral is worth further exploration.

4. By themselves, paper formulations cannot guarantee fair and appropriate behaviour. No code will be effective unless the environment journalists are working in supports individual journalists in the development of their individual and collective ability to make ethical news judgments. The majority of journalists from all sectors of the industry, be they tabloid, mid-market, or broadsheet, would prefer to work in a culture that encourages responsible journalism. This culture change, in those places where it is needed, cannot simply be legislated from outside the profession: It requires a strategic commitment from news organisations across the spectrum of media, and clear leadership from owners, news managers and directors.

Essential to this are:

A) **A commitment to promoting accountability at all levels of the reporting chain.** It may go without saying that newsroom leadership is responsible for ethical standards in reporting. But statements of ethical commitment from corporate executives or editors amount to meaningless platitudes if middle-managers – assignment editors, copy editors, line producers and the like – are not held accountable for day-to-day ethical decision making in assignment and presentation, and supported by leadership when making difficult ethical

choices. In our experience, many newsroom reform schemes stop just where it matters most: with those middle managers at the coalface of budget, deadline and production.

B) Continuing professional development. Good ethical decision-making requires space for reflection, free from deadlines and the potentially deadening effect of daily routine. We particularly welcome the engagement of journalists in meetings and public events, where they are given an opportunity to meet with people who experienced media attention in the aftermath of tragedy. Unfortunately these opportunities are more rare than they should be. Moreover, very few journalists within the UK have received any systematic training in how to interview people affected by trauma. In most news organisations, even a base-level awareness of how trauma can impact upon individual journalists and news organisations, is currently lacking. Any such training should, though, be primarily led by journalist trainers within the industry. If it is out-sourced to non-journalism providers it is likely to become a box-ticking exercise and breed scepticism that it is driven by outside interests.

C) Peer-discussion and ownership. It is important that working journalists feel that they own the right to discuss their ethical concerns and to explore innovation in newsroom practice. Journalists have particular beats and specialities, and new technology and the casualisation of staff may increase the sense that they are working in isolated silos. It is noticeable that the voices of young journalists, in particular, have been largely absent from the public evidence at the inquiry. We would like to see far greater opportunities for rank and file journalists to air issues of concern and to contribute to decision making on ethical practice. In our experience, shared discussion between journalists from different organisations aids this.

5. Recognition should also be given to the potential for traumatic material to have an impact on the journalists themselves in ways that may not just impair their health but also their judgment and ability to report effectively and sensitively.

The dangers are particularly acute in situations where journalists feel that they are being impelled to work ways that they consider to be immoral. Research suggests that unethical reporting behaviour is potentially an occupational health issue for journalists themselves, as it increases the risk factors for depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. In turn, a newsroom that discounts the impact of trauma work on staff is likely to see trust corrode and create a culture more conducive to unethical behaviour. (Bullying would also be a significant and aggravating factor here, and firmer action needs to be taken in newsrooms to discourage it.)

6. New entrants to journalism need to be fully briefed on the challenges posed by reporting on traumatic events. These seminars should include detailed instruction on the craft aspects of interviewing and reporting on people affected by bereavement, trauma and loss. These understandings are currently not taught systematically across the range of UK journalism / media schools and universities. They should be. In addition, there should be some mention of the potential personal impact that working with trauma may have, and students should be made aware of the need for self-care and the role of peer-support when working with trauma.

Furthermore more, trauma awareness training for new entrants should be:

A) Practice-based as well as theoretical. The emotional complexity of real encounters with sources is often absent from conventional "ethics" training in journalism schools. Ideally, students should have opportunities to take part in realistic classroom exercises and to meet

with journalists who have a considered experience in this area of reporting. Again, we welcome the journalism schools that seek innovative ways of involving people in their discussions who have had mixed experiences of media attention.

B) Supported by informed educators. This is a demanding topic that often requires, frank and mature discussion of challenging needs to be led by journalists and tutors who are comfortable and experienced in this kind of work. Training of trainers may be helpful here.

7. Submissions have been made to the inquiry suggesting that a presumption should be made in the first instance that it is unethical to approach victims or those who have been bereaved. It has even been suggested that the police or some other statutory organisation should have a gate-keeping role. We are strongly opposed to any such blanket restriction, as it would decrease accountability for those whose actions may have led to injury or fatality, and would also run counter to the interests of many victims and survivors in other ways. The coverage of death in the regional press, in particular, has an important commemorative function and families often welcome intrusion into their privacy, if they feel it is carried out with due care and respect.

8. Personal channels of contact between individual police officers and journalists are often in the public interest, and are not inherently corrupting in themselves. Journalists need insight in the criminal justice system if they are to report on it effectively; and there are also occasions when police officers will feel impelled to alert the wider community about serious abuses of power and potential miscarriages of justice. We are concerned that a backlash against some of the abuses before the Inquiry could lead to a closure of these channels. In particular, we see no merit, and indeed great risk to press freedom, in the recommendation made by Dame Elizabeth Filkin in her report that all conversations between police officers and journalists should be personally recorded, for audit on a random basis or to be made available if required by a line manager. While there are dangers in unofficial briefings, if not conducted appropriately, the freezing of contact runs counter to a democratic society and would be a retrograde step.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

5. THE EDITOR'S CODE

The Inquiry asked for feedback on the Editors' Code issued by the Press Complaints Commission and whether it provided a good standard to work to.

In general, we believe that codes provide useful guidance. The extent to which individual journalists refer to them will vary, but we welcome the practice of a number of newspapers, often local ones, to display the PCC code or the NUJ equivalent prominently on newsroom noticeboard in a culture that encourages reference to them.

Nevertheless we have doubts about the wording of one specific section of the code and concerns about the procedures which might govern future drafting and revision.

Various sections in the code refer to vulnerable people; victims of crime are to an extent covered in the sections on the coverage of court cases and there are separate clauses that deal with children and sexual assault victims. Here we will focus on section 5, the most general category. It states:

5. Intrusion into grief or shock

i) In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. This should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings, such as inquests.

ii) When reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used.

This statement is too short and general to be useful. On a first reading it sounds helpful but we would argue that the wording is largely meaningless, and that it restricts the code's application to only a limited number of vulnerable people who have been adversely affected by trauma.

It is worth pulling it apart lexically to see why. Laying aside the issue of whether the paragraph may or may not be suggesting that, in the case of legal proceedings, journalists, in fact, owe no duty of care to victims with regard to further disseminating distressing details that have been given a limited public airing in a court setting, the words "shock", "sympathy" and "sensitivity" all have the potential to mislead working journalists.

A) Shock.

The word "shock" in some ways is a useful term to encompass a wide range of situations that could be psychologically destabilising. It is readily understandable and it has the merit, for instance, of covering situations in which people have been accused of serious criminal activity perhaps with an apparent sexual motive, prior to arrest or trial.

But it is a shorthand that is used with care in technical contexts by trauma and disaster management professionals because of the danger of muddling separate usages. In emergency medicine, "shock" refers to a loss of blood supply to key organs, resulting in such visible signs as reduced pulse, white pallor, fainting, etc, but that is not quite the same as the idea of the lay concept of "psychological shock", to which the clause presumably intends to refer.

The difference is more important than it might first appear, because the lay perception of shock is of something that is momentary and likely to be relatively short-lived. Traumatic events often have a long tail that continues to play out in the days, months and sometimes

years, after the initial headlines have gone away. Flashbacks, hyperarousal, numbing, intense fear and a range of other reactions can all persist for long periods after an event.¹ This is why re-visiting past traumas, be it in court settings or in interviews, can, in some cases, be so potentially painful for survivors and relatives.

The word “shock” then hardly seems an adequate word for capturing the potential frame of mind of a victim of a life-threatening knife attack where they are being interviewed months or years afterwards.

Apart from a proviso that victims of sexual assault should not be named, the PCC code seems to have nothing to say about the need for appropriate care with regard to people whose past traumatic experiences may be revisited by later exposure in the media. This category might include torture victims, adult survivors of child abuse, the mentally ill, or adults who are threatened by domestic violence or other forms of criminal assault.

Many journalists currently lack even basic information about the mental health implications of trauma. The media tends to over assume it with the military and underplay it with victims of domestic crime. It might be useful for journalists to know, for instance, that while one study of career war reporters found that 28.6 percent had experienced post-traumatic stress disorder at some stage of their career², a key study in the US found that 45.9 percent of women and 65 percent of men who reported rape as their most upsetting trauma developed PTSD.³

The Dart Centre has carried out detailed content analysis of 1256 academic articles about journalism practice that reference trauma. Mass casualty public events, such as war and the Boxing day Tsunami were all well represented, with more than half focussing on armed conflict and terrorism. Only 2.2 percent looked at sexual assault, which in terms of prevalence, is more common than large-scale disaster. This perhaps illustrates the society-wide tendency to discount the full impact of violence that lies close at home, buried within networks of personal acquaintance.⁴

The image of medical shock also invites the idea that one should be able to gauge from surface observation how people are processing traumatic experience. Many reporters, working in disaster zones will have witnessed situations where somebody who appears to be fine on the surface, has suddenly crumpled when subjected to insensitive questioning.

B) Sympathy. Again, at first sight this seems a reasonable term to include in such a code. The sentiment is laudable but the application potentially treacherous, particularly for somebody early in his or her career.

The code may be confusing empathy with sympathy. The former describes an unvoiced attempt to try and see the world from the standpoint of another and to understand where that might place them emotionally; the latter has two common meanings, either that one feels the same thing or that one subscribes to the same opinion. When covering perpetrators of criminal or political violence who themselves have suffered or experienced loss in some way, usually one would hope that journalists could be empathetic rather than necessarily sympathetic.

In the real world these small differences in definition can matter. Take the situation of a journalist who has to knock on the door of a family who has lost a child due to violence from a rival gang. Presumably the code is not suggesting that the journalist should necessarily agree with their sources, if, say, the victims brother calls for extrajudicial violence to be meted out against members of rival gang? Even pretending to agree with somebody's feelings as a white lie can be a very bad idea. Victims and survivors may find any kind of 'double-speak', or disparities between what a reporter says and what they end up writing extremely distressing.⁵

1 For a technical discussion see: <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevision/Pages/TraumaandStressorRelatedDisorders.aspx>

2 Feinstein, A. , Owen, J. & Blair, N (2002) a hazardous profession: war journalists, and psychopathology. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 159, 1570-1575.

3 Kessler RC, et al, 1995, Posttraumatic stress disorder in the National Comorbidity Survey, *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 52(12):1048-60.

4. Nelson, S., & Newman, E. (2010, August). Research and scholarship publishing trends: Journalism and trauma. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Diego, CA.

5 For a discussion of related issues around the impact of inaccuracies see: Maercker, Andreas and Astrid Mehr. 2006. What if victims read a newspaper report about their victimization? A study on the relationship to PTSD symptoms in crime victims. *European Psychologist* 11.2 (January): 137-142.

The intention, under the code, the code is presumably rather that the journalist should *express his or her sympathies*, but this is also potentially unhelpful. Approaching a bereaved family requires precise emotional understanding and insight into the experience of grief. For instance, the statements “please accept my sympathies” or “I can only sympathise with you” are all likely to sound condescending and cause additional distress, as can the impossibly gauche, “I can imagine what you are going through”, for example.

Family liaison officers in the police force and medical staff working in trauma wards spend considerable term working out approaches and forms of words that work in these situations. It would be far better if the code’s discussion of grief pointed out that it is important for journalists to understand how complex these situations are and had a duty to brief themselves thoroughly on reactions to bereavement and possible approaches.

B) Sensitively. This goes to the heart of the problem with such a brief code. Operationally, how does one define “sensitive”? Talking to people impacted by trauma is not so straightforward; it requires real skill and knowledge in addition to any innate or acquired attribute as sensitivity.

The danger, then, is that such a code encourages a box-ticking attitude. With limited knowledge, it is quite possible to walk away from an interview, publish one’s piece and believe that one has behaved perfectly responsibly, when in fact one may have inadvertently caused real distress and even lasting damage.

If other on the other hand, one has read some research on the distress that inaccuracies in reporting cause victims and survivors, or talked to people who have had experience of being interviewed poorly, one is likely to refine one’s technique and seek out further knowledge. One would certainly learn the importance of managing the expectations of sources. In our experience, people who open up and tell difficult, traumatic stories to the media are not prepared effectively for their story being dropped or their account being summarised to less than a paragraph. This can generate a sense of worthlessness and increase isolation. Editing a contribution down may, of course, be essential for the piece to work. The issue is a) whether or not the journalist has prepared the source adequately for that possibility before publication and b) whether the piece is accurate and fair. Similarly in the highly elevated emotional states that typically accompany trauma, sources are not necessarily clear about what they have just said to a journalist, and so issues of consent need to be handled with extra care.

There is also the important question of accountability here and the mechanism that governs the revision or creation of a new code. It is entirely proper for editors to take a lead in drafting any independent code of self-regulation, free of outside political influence, but we hope to see wider expert consultation and particularly the active involvement of reporters who have specialist expertise in working with vulnerable people, and outside parties, to be consulted. It might be helpful for it to be rebadged as a *journalists’ code*.

The PCC has made some supplementary guidance to the code available, on, court reporting, the handling of asylum seekers and a variety of other issues. It is hard to know how wide the take up of that material is, and it is important that the headline code frames the issues more comprehensively.

A national code could be redrafted in a number of ways. Certainly, a clearer referencing of trauma or traumatic situations in the code would be more useful. Unlike the vague rubric of “grief and shock”, trauma and its stressors have internationally recognised working definitions and a comprehensive literature that reporters and editors can refer to.

Although the relevant section in the Reuters code doesn’t advocate greater self-education about trauma reporting skills in the fullest way that we would advocate, we think its language and intent provide a useful model.

In questioning people **who have suffered physically or emotionally**, our primary responsibility is to seek news through witness statements. A complex story can be compellingly told through the experience of one victim. But we must avoid adding to

interviewees' peril or distress. We must always identify ourselves as journalists and be absolutely open about our intentions. Reporters should seek out those who want to talk. Interviewees must be aware that their comments and identities may be widely publicised.

When dealing with people who are unfamiliar with international media, we must take care to avoid placing interviewees at risk. In reporting on suffering, a restrained style is often the most effective. In matters of taste, whether in descriptions of violence or the use of language, the priority is accurate, comprehensive reporting. We do not sanitise violence, bowdlerise speech or euphemise sex. We should, however, exercise judgment to avoid appearing gratuitously offensive or titillating. Where a graphic detail or a profane phrase may offend, we should ask whether the story requires it. If it does, use it but send the story ATTENTION EDITOR with a warning line for readers (e.g. "Contains strong language in paragraph 6"). TV and pictures must exercise care in using graphic material that could damage the dignity of victims and cause their families distress. Ask yourself how you would feel if your clearly identifiable relative were pictured.⁶

(Emphasis added.)

Any code, whether national or in-house, is only a starting point for a discussion about ethics in reporting. Publications, if they have not already done so, should consider appointing an editor with a special responsibility to act as an ombudsman (or readers' editor) who is also charged with driving internal discussion and continuing professional development.

Internal leadership is crucial. As some respondents to the inquiry have noted, there is not an enormous degree of difference between the broad sweep of the PCC code and the Ofcom code, and yet, polling evidence repeatedly demonstrates that the public perceives broadcast journalism to be more trustworthy than print.⁷

This is explained partly by the more stringent requirements for political balance in broadcasting regulation. But more significant than the code in governing ethical standards is the leadership of individual media companies and the ethos that drives them. Broadcast news in the UK is provided by three big players, BBC, BSkyB and ITN. They all have a certain ethos and position that has developed in consort over a number of years with producers and correspondents moving between the major organisations and reinforcing some commonality.

If one looks at the documentary sector, which is fragmentary and not integrated very effectively into the vertical structure of the channel, a rather different pattern emerges. The individual production company is closer to sources than the channel can be; and thus it is a relatively small identity - and more specifically its leadership - which determines how responsible a production is in its dealings with vulnerable sources. In this sector, one finds variability as stark as anything to be found in the printed sector. At the high-end, there are specialist companies whose reputations are built on the considered and respectful approaches they take to working with vulnerable people, and at the other, companies that take a far more cavalier attitude. In our experience, some organisations are just more concerned about doing this well than others.

That said, as codes do play a role and their wording needs to be considered and to reflect contemporary understandings of the impact of traumatic events on sources. The current PCC code fails in this regard.

⁶ http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php/Reporting_about_people#Vulnerable_groups_and_easy_targets

⁷ Granatt, M. 2004. On trust: Using public information and warning partnerships to support the community response to an emergency. *Journal of Communication Management*. 8, 4, 354-365.

6. ETHICS TRAINING IN JOURNALISM SCHOOLS

The Inquiry has asked about the presence of ethics training in the preparation of journalists, and has heard from a number of educators and those responsible for setting journalism qualifications that “ethics” is a core part of journalism training in the UK.

Unfortunately, the presence of ethics-focused content in curricula, does not necessarily indicate whether or not students will leave these institutions with the skills and insight to work effectively with people who have suffered trauma, bereavement or loss. It may be worth stating again here that these are, of course, the primary issues that led to the creation of this Inquiry.

The content of journalism ethics courses tend to hover over two areas: rules (media law and the application of codes) and values (through broader introductory readings from moral philosophy or media studies.) This are all important: with the right teacher students will get the opportunity to explore such issues as fairness and accuracy, personal character and the importance of learning to develop an independent moral compass. These are the basic tenets of the classical reporting ethos.

But when a young journalist is faced for the first time with the hard contours of an interviewee’s real grief and distress, a knowledge of the codes and the themes outlined in an introductory reading of moral philosophy tend to slip into the mists somewhat. Guilt, embarrassment, and a floundering sense that, perhaps, they have not been trained for this are more usual.

It is not possible to teach trauma interviewing without giving students substantive information about how grief and trauma impact upon individuals. A traditional ethics course may draw reference to the importance of avoiding unnecessary distress, but the students need to know more about what distress is composed of and what is likely to aggravate it. Student journalists also need to understand how their own emotional reactions to their sources stories can affect how they behave with them. For instance, blanking out and cutting off, or feeling anger and aggression, are not unusual responses when listening to the distress of others. If the substantive issues around how both sources and journalists experience traumatic situations aren’t taken into account, the question of what responsibilities the journalist may owe those people he or she interviews or writes about, can’t be sensibly framed, and the real-world dilemmas that journalists face on the ground get lost. In particular, students benefit from realistic interviewing exercises. Failure to include these elements, is rather like teaching trainees to cook, without allowing them access to the kitchen.

Typically, the kinds of trauma-literacy skills and interviewing techniques that are appropriate for working with vulnerable people aren’t systematically taught to journalists either in the workplace or in journalism school. This is at odds with the approach that other professions, who find themselves at the sharp end of trauma work, such as police officers - especially those who regularly face victims or the bereaved - medical staff and some military personnel. These understandings get various labels - “soft skills”, “people skills”, “bedside manner”, “emotional literacy” techniques”, etc., none of which are perfectly satisfactory - but they are covered in training, and the culture of learning on the job, or “winging it” are now decried in these professions.

In 2006-8 the Dart Centre collaborated with the Media School at Bournemouth University in a 15-month long, Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project examining how well journalism training in the UK prepared journalists at all stages of their careers for working with people affected by trauma.⁸ A survey sent to all the major journalism schools and training establishments in the UK found that the mode curriculum time given to working with emotionally challenging material was between 1-3 hours, and virtually no courses explicitly discussed the effects of trauma on informants or journalists. Thirty-six journalism educators and editors were also interviewed in depth for the project, and of these, only three had received some form of specialist training in interviewing vulnerable people and none of them had so at the beginning of their careers. The sample was weighted towards the high-end of the media and comprised a number of people with long involvements on local newspapers. (This partly reflected the greater difficulty of recruiting those who worked on tabloid and mid-market publications to the study.)

Importantly, though, we found that the majority of those we interviewed were skilled and sensitive interviewers with a good appreciation of what it might like to be on the receiving end of media attention. Nevertheless, only a minority had a clear sense of how to teach that. It appeared that the habitual industry-widespread reluctance to talk about and share experience on what is like to interview victims of crime, the bereaved, etc. significantly hampered their ability to pass effective insight onto their students.

Many of the educators said, it was just a matter of common sense, either because it was innate to an individual or because one could only pick it up on the job. At the same time, when asked, those who thought that admitted that at the beginning of their careers they had felt out of their depth and made mistakes with vulnerable informants that they subsequently regretted. Common sense, then, in their personal cases was not innate but took time to develop and was acquired largely through trial and error. But surely it would be preferable for students to learn the basics before going out to practise on the public?

Given the variety of entry routes into journalism now and the casualisation of staff, tertiary education may be the only substantial training journalists get. New entrants now are less likely to benefit even from the informal and patchy mentoring that often took place on small local newspapers.

We should make it clear that we are not suggesting that no space in journalism education is given to trauma reporting, and it is possible that the situation since our study has marginally improved. Educators are becoming more aware that the traditional interviewing training approaches which work well with the powerful - politicians and people used to being in the media eye - are rarely appropriate with vulnerable people in traumatic situations. And there are signs of innovation in this field. A good tutor will talk to their students about their own experience of knocking at the door of a bereaved family, and some will find space in their timetables to invite victims with mixed experiences of the media in to talk to their students. That is something but it is rarely enough in itself.

As we have outlined above, students need more detail about how trauma may have affected their sources ability to tell their stories, and they would also benefit from gaining some experiential sense of what it might be like to work in a traumatic situation. Dart Centre Europe has developed two role-playing exercise that throw students into a simulation of a breaking news story, while giving them expert tuition in trauma interviewing techniques and news writing.⁹ The first involves the bombing of a football stadium. It is relatively simple and

⁸ Richards, B. and Rees, G. 2011. The Management of Emotion in British Journalism. *Media, Culture & Society*. 33, 6, 851-867.

⁹ Rees, G. 2007. Weathering the trauma storms. *British Journalism Review*. 18, 2, 65-70.

can be performed without the need for professional actors; the second richer scenario uses complex characters and original video news wires to simulate a reporting assignment based on covering an evacuation centre, which is housing people displaced by Hurricane Katrina. So far, we have run these training days on isolated courses at the following Universities in the UK: Bournemouth University, City University London, University of Leeds, Cardiff University, University Huddersfield and University of Roehampton.

Unfortunately the take up for these is patchy and they only reach a few students in a few places. When we have tried to introduce new tutors to this idea, we have been told on more than one occasion that their department would feel that it is more important for the students to spend more time working on learning new software skills. This is a pity, as feedback from students typically suggest that it is one of the most useful and rewarding components in their courses.

In order to introduce as many European educators as possible to teaching trauma journalism skills, we have organised train-the-trainer workshops in New York and Vienna, which have included a number of academics from the UK. We plan to do more on this in the future, but there is only so much a small organisation can do. We would urge UK universities to use our open online resources and to invest more time and thought in developing their own curricula in this area. (Other organisations, including MediaWise, Disaster Action and a number of other civil society groups which have produced thoughtful resources on specific reporting topics.)

As we have said above, it is important to remember that the vast majority of journalists working in general news will cover trauma at some stage of their careers. It is not just an issue for war reporters and foreign correspondents. Figures from the US suggest that, depending on the study, between 86 and 100 percent have witnessed a traumatic event as part of their work. At any time a particular cohort of young journalists could themselves disproportionately exposed to a mass casualty incident. What happened in Norway during the July 22 attacks in Oslo and the Island off Utøya, which left 77 dead, provides an instructive and unsettling illustration of this. 41 percent of a sample of 232 journalists who worked as field reporters during the attacks had less than five years of working experience; many were journalism school students doing the summer internships or juniors covering more senior reporters on summer leave.¹⁰

Importantly, many of these young journalists described interviewing victims, and not the general climate of fear as the most straining and concerning element of their assignment. There is evidence that months after the attack journalists from this younger and less experienced group were experiencing more traumatic stress reactions than their older colleagues.

¹⁰ Preliminary data presented by Trond Idås from the Norwegian Union of Journalists, at the Gull og Gråstein conference, in Sundvollen, Norway, 23 October 2011.

7. TRAUMATIC STRESS AND MORAL INJURY

This brings us to another issue that has received none or only the barest of mentions at the Inquiry is the extent to which intruding in the grief and distress of others is a potential occupational health hazard for journalists themselves.

The committee revising the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, whose definitions of trauma impact are used internationally, is proposing that working in journalism, along with working in the or emergency services, should be listed as a risk factor in DSM V, the new revision. This is because research worldwide have found possible rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, ranging between, 4.3 and 28.6 per cent, depending on the group studied. (War reporters are at the upper range, with high rates of PTSD, as well as depression and alcohol abuse.)¹¹

Important new research has just been published which has found a significant correlation between a journalist feeling guilt for their actions and developing post-traumatic stress disorder.¹² This is likely to hold true even for cases in which journalists are entirely blameless, for example, in a situation in which their reporting fails to inspire the authorities to aid a war or famine-hit community. In terms, of the matters before this Inquiry, though, one can only imagine the corrosive effect of insensitively blundering in and exploiting the lives of private citizens with no motive other than commercial profit.

Paul McMullan (spelling), who was Deputy Features Editor of the News World from 1994 to 2001, outside of the Inquiry felt compelled to speak on the radio of the effect he felt his exposé of the daughter of Denholm Elliott, Jennifer, as a drug addict and a street-beggar had on her, before her suicide. "I totally humiliated and destroyed her," he said. "And it was not necessary, and she didn't deserve it. She was having a bad time after her own dad died. And I went a step too far..."¹³ Others too in the debates around their Inquiry have suggested being caught up in this kind of exploitative journalism is not personally improving.

Further evidence specifically finds that insensitive or unethical leadership is deleterious to journalists' health. A recent study by River Smith, PhD of the University of Tulsa Department of Psychology, found that newsroom management perceived as insensitive and inconsistent was a significant predictor of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among journalists covering tragic events.¹⁴ This mirrors evidence from the military, where mental health researchers have identified what psychiatrist Jonathan Shay calls "moral injury" among soldiers: the corrosion of character which results when long-term, repeated trauma is combined with betrayals of ethical norms by leaders.¹⁵

Moral injury is a management issue and another important part of this jigsaw. Outside journalism, trauma specialists of all kinds, receive guidance and support on how trauma-related work may impact on themselves personally. In journalism, this kind of training is rare and largely confined to large broadcast news organisations.

¹¹ Newman, E. and Nelson, S. Reporting on resilience and recovery in the face of disaster and crime: research and training implications. *Australian Journalism Review*. In press.

¹² Browne, T., Evangeli, M., and Greenberg, N. 2012. Trauma-Related Guilt and Posttraumatic Stress Among Journalists. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. 25, 207-210.

¹³ Interview with Paul McMullan, BBC Radio 4, *The World at One*, 7 July 2011.

¹⁴ Smith, R. (2008). *Trauma and journalism: Exploring a model of risk and resilience*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tulsa.

¹⁵ Shay, J. (1994). *Achilles in Vietnam*. Touchstone

8. SOME FINAL REMARKS

In preparing for this submission, the Dart Centre convened a small consultative meeting with senior journalists as well as representatives from victim support groups and others with a policy interest in this area. There was, however, universal scepticism that the intention behind clause 5, that the code in any way guaranteed the sensitive treatment of victims and survivors in tabloid and mid-market newsrooms.

The principle pressure that worked against this was seen to be editorial pressure “to get the story” and the kind of culture that engenders in newsrooms. The journalism educators present felt that even if they succeeded in mentoring young journalists in ethical reporting skills that their work could easily be undone in the workplace. Many journalists in newsrooms feel isolated and unable to resist what they believe is expected of them. Although often explicit, it is enough for the pressure to be tacit.

The forum thought that a climate of fear exists on certain publications that inhibit journalists, and particularly junior ones, from talking openly about the issues that face the inquiry.

Anything that inhabits peer-exchange and frank discussion between colleagues, we believe, is a serious and perhaps determining, impediment to reform. We are sceptical that any form of regulatory or legislative framework would by itself stem the kinds of abuses that have led to public uproar and this Inquiry. It is not the letter of the law, but the intentions of those who work in news organisations which will have an impact.

Some of the most troubling allegations of ill-conduct have been made against practices, which would resist any form of statutory prohibition, or even any simple form of written definition. The ineffectiveness of the PCC code underlines this.

We are also sceptical of any claims that have been made during the Inquiry's sessions or their coverage that the abuses being examined are the product of human nature, an inevitable outcome of market pressures, or, to borrow a fishing analogy, an essential bycatch that one would expect to find in the nets of a free media. Reform is possible even in the most commercially-driven contexts. However, it is our belief, rooted both in - rooted both in free-press principles and the history of journalism – that substantive reform in news practice can not simply be legislated or regulated into existence. Whatever the regulatory framework change requires investment from within.

Newsroom leadership, pressure from consumers and most important changes in awareness by journalists themselves have historically played the key roles in culture change in the newsroom, particularly regarding ethical standards and practice. If any proposed revision of the regulatory framework is too intrusive or seeks to direct regulate content it is likely to not only run foul of the democratic commitment to an unfettered press, but also to foster resentment and shortcuts by working journalists under pressure from managers, competition and lack of training and support.

What is needed, then, is an impetus for change that comes from within publications themselves, and that is not going to happen if journalists, particularly junior ones, feel cowed or unable to voice their concerns. The vast majority of journalists want to work in an environment that allows them to work ethically. One that doesn't will fail both society as a whole, as well as those who work in the media.

Dart Centre Europe submission to the Leveson Inquiry, June 2012

A key question for the Inquiry is how to make recommendations that bolster those pre-existing tendencies within UK newsrooms that ally themselves to such beneficial reform, and diminish those which oppose it.

We are grateful for the Inquiry's attention to those issues.