

# Weathering the trauma storms

*Gavin Rees*

It looked like being the perfect day out, another classic championship tussle between Arsenal and Chelsea. But 10 minutes before play started, an explosion ripped through the Shed end of Chelsea football ground. The first reporters on the scene were journalism students. They could see at once that there were significant casualties. People were streaming out of the stands on to the pitch. Some, despite being wounded and disoriented, wanted to talk; others preferred to lash out at the media. For many of the student journalists, this was their first professional encounter with extreme distress. By the end of the day, one thing had become clear: those who showed the most emotional savvy collected the best material.

Of course, this never happened, at least not as suggested. There was no bomb at Chelsea football ground on that day, but a simulation of exactly this scenario was played out with students at Bournemouth University's Media School. Despite an absence of wreckage and body parts the scenario was incredibly lifelike. The survivors were played by experienced, professional actors who knew how to turn their attention on to the young journalists in a way that would lock them in. It felt real enough.

More on how the students fared later, but first a question aimed at the more senior journalists reading this: how many have ever received training in how to interview people who are especially vulnerable or have experienced significant trauma? Hardly any, I suspect. Here's another: how many have, during some stage in their careers, interviewed somebody suffering significant distress, perhaps a victim of violence or someone experiencing a recent bereavement? Far more, surely? And were those experiences easy, straightforward? Or did they miss something by ducking questions that at the time seemed just too difficult to ask?

In May last year, the Bournemouth Media School and the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, based at the University of Washington in Seattle, began a joint research project to explore this field and how we might train journalists and filmmakers in dealing with emotionally difficult material. The research is not yet complete, but some clear indications are emerging from my interviews with leading editors and educators around the UK.

Accounts of distress, loss and suffering are the daily meat of the news industry. Indeed, from nursery tales to Shakespeare, our cultural life has always been founded, in significant part, on the need to understand and face down the various horrors that can destroy life or limit its enjoyment afterwards. In one survey of 906 American print journalists, 96 per cent said that they had been exposed to work-related trauma. In a similar sounding of press photographers, the figure rose to 98 per cent. And yet, despite the fact that so many journalists are directly in the trauma business, there is very little formal instruction in the mechanics of traumatic experience or in how best to work with those who have been affected. This is odder than one might think. The medical profession, the police, and increasingly, the military, all get versions of such training.

### *Bluff newsroom culture*

Talking to editors and educators, it is apparent that trauma and its potential effects on journalists' well-being are now being aired as an issue in a way that they have not been before. Fifteen years ago, a more bluff, and perhaps more naive, newsroom culture would have laughed off the suggestion that the job could ever carry psychological risk. Damaging to relationships: yes, often. Damaging to the liver: probably. Damaging to the mind: no, don't be soft.

Those attitudes have not disappeared entirely, but are becoming more rare. In the past couple of years, the BBC here, ABC in Australia, and in Germany Reuters news agency and ARD – the country's public service radio and television broadcaster – have all begun ambitious programmes of trauma-awareness training for their journalistic staff. The London bureaux of most major U.S. networks also now have support arrangements in place. Appropriate training, it is hoped, can catch problems early and help journalists to recover, should they find themselves in difficulties.

When thinking of the word "trauma" there is still a tendency to distil it to the purest and most concentrated form and think of it primarily as a

health and safety issue. We think of battlefields and bombings, situations such as Liberia in the 1990s, the 2004 school siege in Beslan, or events today in Iraq. In other words, places where only specialists in war and foreign reporting – the big beasts of major organisations – are likely to go. At the same time another mental contraction happens: we think that being affected by trauma is about seeing things, particularly dead and mutilated bodies. The sense of sight is thought to be the primary aperture through which the toxicity of such situations gets into the journalist.

There is no doubting the impact that covering a war can have. Canadian neuro-psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein surveyed war correspondents and found that some 28 per cent – a rate similar to that reported by many studies of military combatants – had at some stage during their careers experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a potentially debilitating psychological condition. But if one sits down and talks through these issues in detail with practitioners from all areas of the profession, a number of other points quickly emerge. Very often journalists find hearing about trauma and talking to people about it difficult and troubling, and these incidents can be the result of events much closer to home.

Soham or Dunblane emerged often as stories that journalists found hard to process. The narratives of people in distress are not always as easy to keep at an emotional distance as current workplace theory would hope them to be. Court reporters, for instance, may spend hours listening to minutely documented accounts of abuse, where every act of cruelty, casual or premeditated, is dated and referenced. The cumulative effect can start to colour their relationships outside the courtroom.

Trauma lurks in all sorts of unforeseen places. One journalist I interviewed had been following the story of a self-made businessman who had built up a small empire. When it collapsed, she interviewed him again, expecting to find the same confident operator, now poorer, but as resilient as ever. Instead she found a man a hair's breadth away from mental collapse. Despite her experience of interviewing in traumatic situations, she had not factored in the extent to which the business had become this man's identity. Her surprise at this took her balance away, and in turn the interview became a messier experience than, she now feels, it need have been.

In a medical sense the emphasis on sight is understandable. Most specialists would agree that PTSD as the full-blown medical condition is statistically more likely to develop after seeing rather than hearing about terrible things, especially if the witness's own life is in danger. All well and

good then, some might say – it is a journalist’s job to carry out difficult interviews. They just need to toughen up a bit. But that very much depends on what is meant by the expression “toughen up”. It is certainly true that journalists need to withstand challenges to their person, to resist intimidation, and know how to push into uncomfortable areas when need be. However, if by toughening up it is meant that reporters in a journalistic sense should eliminate or cut off any difficult feelings that they might experience, that is not likely to help get the story.

Much recent psychological research suggests that the more people are aware of their own emotional processes and responses, the better they are at adapting their behaviour and reading others’ emotional states. As all good journalists (and most bad ones) know, rapport is key to a good interview. Those who have become expert at working with people affected by trauma have an additional insight: real rapport is built on learning how to listen – just being personable is not good enough. Many of the specialists in trauma journalism who were interviewed for the project described how they had acquired a range of techniques for building up a rapport and creating a safe space into which their interviewees might move. In fact, what they have learnt through experience to do is something psychologists call “non-judgmental listening”. It is a skill that is easy to understand, but tricky to acquire.

### *Fouling the water*

Once interviewees feel they are being judged, or not listened to, the channel can quickly dry up. Overly extractive questioning, badly disguised impatience at not hearing the answers one wants, the inability of the interviewer to digest the traumatic content of what he or she is hearing and, of course, that classic inhibitor, guilt, can all foul the water. But how would one train journalists to develop these necessary techniques? The acquisition of empathy, like acquiring any form of wisdom, is clearly not something that can happen overnight.

Returning to that Bournemouth workshop, its aim was not to equip young journalists with a complete set of psychological tools to be used in all circumstances, but rather to demonstrate why being attentive to these ideas can help aspiring journalists to develop their own working methods. In fact, the workshop amply illustrated how counter-productive an emotionally cut-off approach can be. Before the event, the students filled in surveys, asking

how they thought journalists should handle traumatic situations. Most replied that journalists should strive to put aside their personal feelings, remain objective and on no account become emotionally involved with the people they were interviewing.

In fact, the reverse happened. Confronted by actors behaving like real victims and survivors, and exhibiting a range of traumatic responses – dissociation, rage, fear etc – many of the students became overly solicitous and lost sight of the task they were charged with. In the exercise, each group had only eight minutes to interview each of the four witnesses. What they did not know was that one of the characters was hiding information that might have helped to explain how the supposed bomb got into the stadium. Careful listening should have picked this up. Sensitive questioning, along certain lines and with the right trigger words, may have led the witness to confide. In the end, nobody got there. The group of trainees who were unlucky enough to start the exercise with this witness as their first interviewee were flustered by his behaviour, and it took a full four minutes before most could look him fully in the eye. What the students had discovered is that when one encounters people who are in emotional distress, it can feel like an onslaught akin to experiencing bad weather. People affected by trauma often make emotional demands on bystanders that, like the weather, cannot simply be wished away.

Yamamoto Tsunetomo, the author of an 18th century Japanese training manual for samurai, urged his readership to think carefully about what they might learn from being caught in the street by a sudden rainstorm. One could try to stay dry by scuttling under the partial cover provided by the eaves of buildings. However, he suggests resolutely taking a direct route into the open would be a safer strategy. One would end up just as wet, but would not have become as distracted and agitated. In a traumatic situation, being able to accept the emotional weather for what it is allows the journalist to read more clearly the emotional states and intentions of bystanders. On a more general level, one could say the more aware a journalist is of his or her own emotional responses to a story, the more acute and detached their analysis is likely to be.

During my research into emotions and journalism I often encounter a worry that the reverse is true. Some fear that a journalist who becomes too aware of the emotions at play in an interview runs the risk of being transfixed by their interviewees, and becoming overly solicitous to their needs and perspectives. The misconception at work here is that sympathy and empathy are synonymous. But empathic listening is not about being “nice”. If one

thinks of professional psychiatrists and psychotherapists – people not normally seen in popular mythology as pushovers – their job is often to look behind what their clients say and at times confront them with uncomfortable truths. Listening to somebody does not mean one automatically agrees with the speaker.

One advantage of this approach to listening is that it helps to make the interview experience safer for both questioned and questioner. (The ethical question for the journalist then is how they should represent the information afterwards.) Those who feel well listened-to are less likely to feel damaged by the interview process. The converse can be extremely distressing, in most cases unnecessarily so.

Public attitudes to the expression of emotion have changed in confusing ways over the last two decades – one has to think only of the outpouring of collective grief after the death of Princess Diana, or David Blunkett's mawkishly sentimental diaries. Commentators such as sociologist Frank Furedi have used the pulpit of newspaper opinion pages to excoriate us all for losing our stiff upper lips and becoming over-emotional in public discourse – suggesting we need to be suspicious of any form of writing that pays special attention to people's emotions. But surely the Diana tragedy and Blunkett episode illustrate that as a society, and a profession that reflects it, what we may suffer from is not too much understanding of emotion, but inarticulacy regarding it. Emotions cannot be done away with; they need to be sorted into individual varieties, weighed and evaluated, just as any set of ideas or arguments need to be analysed.

In-depth trauma-awareness training may be the journalistic equivalent of what the military call a live-firing exercise, a situation that forces the development of professional skills – in the journalists' case, those of empathic listening and dispassionate reporting. It may even encourage better journalism across the spectrum.

*Gavin Rees is a research fellow in the Media School at Bournemouth University, working on the Emotions and Journalism project, a research initiative looking at how journalists might be trained to handle emotionally challenging situations. He is as a journalist and documentary filmmaker and has contributed to a range of media, including the BBC, Channel 4 and The Guardian.*