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BEREAVERSMENT UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT

Supporting people bereaved in high profile cases

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Bereavement and the media

• Research
• The news process
• Pros and cons of engaging with the media
• Advice on engaging with the media
Bereavement and the media: Research

- Mostly focusses on Duncan & Newton’s research, especially from forthcoming book, *Reporting Bad News*
- The ‘newsworthy bereaved’
- Stories of sudden death are considered newsworthy because of their dramatic content (i.e. the nature of the death), their high threshold as events, their bad news components, their potential for emotive treatment, their cultural proximity, the publication’s news agenda, and their “extreme negativity as interruptions to the smooth flow of the daily round” (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Hanusch, 2008; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001; Walter et al., 1995).
- When a journalist reports a tragic death they normally base their story on a distillation of an intensive interview where a close family member has expressed raw and intimate thoughts on the loss of their loved one (Duncan, 2012).
- The depictions created by words have the capacity to wound, particularly if they are inaccurate or lack attention to detail, but equally they have the ability to connect whole communities through their storytelling.
Bereavement and the media: Research

- Stories of road traffic incidents, murders, accidents at work and leisure, particularly those that are framed as “tributes” to the deceased, can provide a personalized way for the bereaved to display their suffering in an age when traditional modes of mourning appear to be diminishing.
- By sharing grief the loss will mean something (Germer, 1995).
- As Walter, Littlewood, and Pickering, observe: “One would expect intense interest in learning from others how to present grief, especially when the role-models are ordinary people who have only been catapulted into the glare of media attention as a result of extraordinary death” (1995).
Bereavement and the media: Research

- Stories of unexpected death perform several functions, not all of them related to informing the public of the facts of the report, for example providing emotional engagement with bereavement, which is specific to this story type.
- Through their statements about their grief, which contain a high proportion of intimate reflection and reminiscence, the bereaved tell us not only about their loved one but about themselves and how they manage their trauma.
- Their highly emotive statements articulate an account of unyielding anguish, emptiness and continuing loss (Duncan, 2012).
Bereavement and the media: Research

- Most journalists proceed with the utmost caution in such traumatic circumstances.
- Most contact between the bereaved and reporters is positive or at least harmless, particularly on a regional level where journalists are operating within established communities.
- Most sudden deaths occur in public places and those who die are part of a wider community who have a right to be informed of what happens in that community. Therefore, journalists have a duty to inform the wider community.
- Families define themselves as the primary source in the story of their loved one’s death (Newton, 2011).
- “Families of crime victims deserve the right to participate in news coverage of their dead family member” (Rentschler, 2007).
- Regarding photographs, the main emphasis in the UK press is on portraying the deceased as they lived, perhaps with family and friends at keynote stages in their life (Newton & Brennodden, 2015).
Bereavement and the media: Research

• We learn from people’s experiences of loss ... from wider discussions of how to avoid such deaths ... and can take action to avert repetition of the circumstances or reasons for their occurrence ...

• The increasingly participatory nature of journalism suggests relationships between the media, the bereaved, and indeed the audience, should be more inclusive and co-operative.

• Encouraging the bereaved to have direct contact with journalists, preferably face-to-face, would enable them to tell their story in their own way and could restore some control to them in a situation where they may feel powerless.
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

The information on this section is from interviews with Scottish Sun/Scottish Sun on Sunday journalists Gail Cameron, Lynn Kernan and Krissy Storrar, who all have extensive experience of reporting stories of sudden death/bereavement. I am extremely grateful to them for their contribution.

- The media report stories of sudden death because
  - they might involve wrong doing
  - they might be widely discussed on social media
  - they might be in the public domain/happened in a public place
  - there’s an expectation journalists will follow them up – public service/public interest
  - families want to pay tribute themselves rather than see a story constructed from social media posts from people who didn’t really know their loved one.
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

- The immediate family are the best source.
- There’s an assumption that when a reporter approaches a family that they are looking for scandal or there to “rip their lives apart”, especially if they are from the tabloids.
- Instead their purpose is to gather tributes, “say nice things about the person”, personalise the story and get a favourite photograph.
- Reporters seldom have a pre-planned angle in mind and prefer to let that emerge from what the bereaved relative tells them.
- Most news editors trust their reporters to take this approach.
- *Scottish Sun* journalists generally visit the family at their home rather than using other means of contact.
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

• The media hear about most deaths via Police press releases.
• These tend to be formal, factual and with limited personal input.
• A story will appear in the newspaper because a Police press release has been made available to the media, even if the family refuse to speak to journalists.
• Once a story is in motion the reporter has to see it through to meet their deadline and will need to seek other sources if the family refuse to be interviewed.
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

• Sometimes they have to use other, distant sources
  o “…the family will be less happy about that because they think ‘who’s been talking about us’ but if they engage with you on the doorstep they realise that you’re not digging dirt. They are in the very unfortunate position of having lost someone in newsworthy circumstances…”
  o “If you can get to the family direct they’re usually fine, even if they don’t want to do it [be interviewed].”

• Agreeing to an interview gives the bereaved relatives input to the story, allows them to put out what they want and gives them “a bit of control when their world has fallen apart”.
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

• There is also the pressure from competing media which can lead them to use distant sources
  – “As well as the pressure of deadline you’ve got the pressure of rival media and you’re concerned that another media outlet is going to get the tributes, the pictures. That’s a fact of life.”
• *Scottish Sun* journalists also have to make sure they get a refusal to be interviewed from an immediate family member.
• If not their news desk will ask them ‘how do you know they refused’ and the reporter could be sent back to the family’s home to clarify if they did say no.
  – “It would help if people understood we’re not there to give them a hard time. If they say no they’re not going to get harassed, but we want to give them the opportunity...we’re giving them the courtesy of letting them know a story is going to be in the paper. Once the Police put something out it’s going to be in the paper.”
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

- Some bereaved people feel they can’t talk to their family about how they feel so it can be therapeutic to talk to a reporter.
- Interviews are done in a very sensitive manner ... “would you like to speak about”, “tell us about your son”, “tell us your fondest memories”.
- The interview is informal, “make it as friendly as we can”, it’s “not a grilling”.
- “We will gently probe around the circumstances of the death but they can say no. We respect there are certain things they are just not ready to do yet.”
- “Even if they want us to come in and say two lines to us we’ll settle for that and understand that may be all they are ready to do at that time, and then we’ll build on that.”
- “We’re not out to upset people”
Giving grieving relatives breathing space is important. One journalist explained the relationship she had with a murdered man’s wife:

- “I was at her house every day for weeks without doing stories, just support, advising her, getting a rapport with her and eventually when she was ready we did a big piece and she was delighted to have done it because it made her feel like somebody cared. Because it went into the paper it made her feel like lots of people cared. People wanted to read about how fantastic a dad he was. She was able to express that about him and was glad she’d done it.”
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

- *Scottish Sun* journalists are not allowed to use any content from a private social media page, even if someone presents them with a screenshot from their pages.
- They have a responsibility to check if it’s from a private site.
- But, anything set to public is “fair game”.
- They also adhere to the Editors’ Code of Practice. If an immediate family member says they don’t want to be interviewed they won’t go back to their door.
  - “That’s part of the Editors’ Code and we just won’t do it.”
  - “The legacy of the red top tabloids is that journalists maybe in the past have been like that [irresponsible and insensitive]. Things have changed so much. We have to be so careful.”
The news process:
How journalists report sudden deaths

• Once the reporter has written the story it is passed to the production team who sub-edit the copy, write the headline and place it on the print/online page

• Sometimes things go wrong in the production process: an insensitive headline, a story reduced, a special quote taken out ...
  o “The family always direct their complaint at the journalist who has their name on the story, even if it is not your mistake...it’s like a kick in the stomach...you’ve tried your hardest to represent the family accurately...”

• At the same time the journalists recognise the complexity of the production team’s task:
  o “With headlines the subs [sub-editors] are trying to say in five words what we say in 900. The headline is the hard-hitting bit.”
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

- Sometimes a story will be cut down because of editorial reasons which can affect the reporter/family relationship
  - “They have poured everything out to you and the story is crunched down [cut down to a shorter word length] because it’s been a busy news day. You feel so bad when someone has made a big decision to come forward and talk and it’s cut down or put at the back of the paper. It’s out of our hands.”

- Sometimes a story intended for the Sunday edition will be cut to squeeze it into the daily edition because a rival news outlet has got wind of it and they need to beat the competition. The story loses its raw, emotional outpourings from the bereaved relative and becomes just the facts.
  - “You are the person they’ve had all the contact with so they can’t really detach you from what the final product is whereas we know it’s decisions made above our heads. At the same time that’s no comfort to a family.”
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

- Some pointers for grieving interviewees:
  - Don’t be afraid, be honest and say if you can’t talk about it. The interview can be done later when you are ready.
  - Be prepared that the reporter will arrive with a photographer to take your picture and to get a picture of your loved one.
  - The reporter will ask about what happened, how your loved one died. They will prompt you sensitively rather than probe but they need to know the facts of what happened.
  - They say the power is in your hands and if you want to get across a particular point you can. If you decide afterwards you wish you hadn’t said it you should phone and tell them.
The news process: How journalists report sudden deaths

• And, from one of the reporters:
  – “As an experienced journalist you don’t walk out [at the end of an interview] and that’s their last contact with you. You’d stay in touch with them, sometimes to ask additional questions and you’d always want them to feel they can call if they’ve forgotten to tell you something that they thought was important. You carry on the relationship with them after you’ve come away from their house.”
Cons and pros of engaging with the media

NEGATIVES:

• Some families are excluded from news coverage rather than intruded upon
  o Because of non-participation: such reporting can be damaging for the deceased’s relatives because they have been excluded from ‘their story’
  o Because contact with the media is seen to be intrusive
Cons and pros of engaging with the media

NEGATIVES:

• **Non-participation**: A story is likely to go ahead even if the family do not participate
  - Journalists are free to use any material that comes to them through external sources or is in the public domain e.g. Police press release.
  - They don’t have to seek permission from the deceased’s family or friends to publish a story that has come to them in this way.
  - Journalists need to have sources in the story so will seek out neighbours, acquaintances, distant relatives/friends.
  - The person they are quoting may have had an extremely limited or even no relationship with the deceased yet their comments/opinions are placed into the story as if they are the emotional outpourings of the closely bereaved.
  - Such stories might reflect negatively on the family without them being given the opportunity to refute such opinions (Skehan, Maple, Fisher, & Sharrock, 2013).
Cons and pros of engaging with the media

NEGATIVES:

• **Exclusion and intrusion:** Journalists might avoid contact with the family for fear of upsetting them but a story will still be published
  - This situation is sometimes seen as an ethical one, in which the bereaved are respected by the media and left alone in their grief.
  - Police officers/family liaison officers understandably wish to prepare families for media attention but this can be problematic when the death is not judged by the media to be as newsworthy as the police expect.
  - Also, many journalists believe the police automatically assume that the family will need to be shielded from journalists.
  - If one publication considers the story newsworthy then others will too, particularly if it has originated from a Police press release, so a family might be contacted by several publications and might feel besieged by the attention.
  - Publication of story can attract attention from other news outlets that didn’t cover the death originally, especially if the story appears firstly in the local press and is picked up by the national media.
Cons and pros of engaging with the media

NEGATIVES:

• Social media: Taking comments and pictures from social media is a growing trend for journalists
  o They believe that when pictures and posts are publicly available they can use them without being unethical or breaching any codes of conduct.
  o They judge that the family has less justification to claim intrusion because their loved one or themselves have not altered their privacy settings.
  o One reporter said it was like a “virtual version of taking comments from cards and flowers at the scene” (Newton & Duncan, 2012).
  o Most people who find themselves in the media spotlight as a result of an unexpected death would not anticipate that their posts would end up in a news story on a newspaper’s website.
Cons and pros of engaging with the media

NEGATIVES:

• **Social media:** Taking comments and pictures from social media is a growing trend for journalists
  
  o Unauthorised use of social media content is a particular concern for families who feel they have lost control over its use.
  
  o This can cause emotional harm when what they perceived to be ‘private’ content is given wider publication without their approval.
  
  o Journalists may be aware they could be intruding into the relatives’ grief and shock but do so for pragmatic reasons, as one evening newspaper reporter told us:
    
    • “[It] is undoubtedly an intrusion to do this without their knowledge, but I have used this process because of the pressure of deadlines, newspaper policy, and the awareness that other media outlets would do the same whether we did or not.” (Newton & Duncan, 2012)
Cons and pros of engaging with the media

NEGATIVES:

- **Journalists can get things wrong**: the mis-spelling of the deceased’s name, errors in captions and misleading headlines
  - Even small errors in reporting or headline writing can be perceived by the grieving family as a lack of respect for their loved one.
  - Sensational headline writing or poor presentation of the story can also be a source of upset even when the reporter’s work is accurate and sensitive.
  - One bereaved person said:
    - “I think when it’s an individual family one of the things that upsets and distresses them so much is inaccuracy. Spelling somebody’s name wrong; stupid little things perhaps to the reporter or the editor but to the bereaved family it’s like insult on top of terrible injury. And it’s going to the neighbours and getting misinformation because nobody outside of your house knows the full story. They can give you a bit of the story but it’s probably wrong. And again that distresses people terribly.” (Newton, 2011)
Pros and cons of engaging with the media

POSITIVES:

• Why bereaved families should interact with the media
  o It is a way for them to acknowledge their loss, a chance to talk about what happened.
  o It is a way for them to inform the wider community about their loss – families can be overwhelmed by the concern and support shown by their communities after a death, and the media can assist by reaching a wider circle of friends, acquaintances, neighbours etc.
  o It is also a way for them to have their grief and loss acknowledged by the wider community.
  o Talking to journalists is essential for some bereaved families in order to ensure accuracy, to put right misconceptions and to offer a truer, fuller picture of their loved one than would be given by information from the police or courts.
  o Individual journalists can developed a lasting relationship of trust with the bereaved where they feel a responsibility to them – reporters can become someone who listens and may be able to help battle against bureaucracy.
Pros and cons of engaging with the media

POSITIVES:

• Why bereaved families should interact with the media
  o Talking to a journalist can give them some control over the commemoration of their loved one through the memories and anecdotes they share with a reporter and by their choice of favourite photographs.
  o It is a form of obituary and can provide them with a lasting, public memorial of their loved one’s life, detailing their character and achievements.
  o A cutting from a newspaper can become a treasured item that becomes part of their family history.
  o By agreeing to be interviewed they memorialize their loved one and humanize the taboo of death.
Pros and cons of engaging with the media

POSITIVES:

• Why bereaved families should interact with the media
  o It can offer them the ability to make a change in some way or alleviate the suffering of others through later stories e.g. campaigns and anniversaries.
  o Their stories of loss can assist the public’s understanding of death and grief and can help us to know how to mourn in modern society where many of the traditional rituals of death seem less relevant.
  o Their stories inform us about the fragility of life, the need to take care, the importance of sharing and empathy.
  o People want to know how others feel about significant events in their lives because they want to try to unravel how they might feel if it happened to them.
  o News stories of sudden death help us to make sense of our experiences but they also give a voice to the bereaved who want the world to recognize how much they miss their loved one (Duncan, 2012).
Advice for engaging with the media

- Try to keep an open mind – most journalists want to write a story that celebrates the family’s loved one, not a negative story of scandal.
- Agree to a face-to-face interview if they are able – this will give them more time to talk and will enable them to judge the reporter’s sincerity.
- If they are not able to deal with the media immediately after the death they could consider contacting them when they are ready – most journalists will leave a business card – but be aware that the reporter needs to tell a newsworthy story.
- Always ask the journalist for their name and that of their publication, and if possible get their business card. Most reporters will volunteer this information but check they provide it.
- Journalists will assume that when a family member agrees to talk to them that they are implicitly consenting to publication of the content of the interview.
Advice for engaging with the media

• A family don’t have to agree to be interviewed by every publication who contacts them – they can choose who they want to talk to.
• Most publications adhere to the Editors’ Code of Practice and therefore their journalists should not repeatedly contact bereaved people for an interview.
• The IPSO guidance on the Editors’ Code says that journalists must not continue to question, contact, or photograph people once they have been asked to stop. If a grieving relative clearly requests that a journalist stops their activities, the Editors’ Code requires them to do so unless there is specific and adequate public interest to justify a decision to carry on.
• It might be helpful for a grieving family to ask a trusted person or intermediary organisation who is not closely associated with the story to assist with press enquiries on their behalf. However, if they are present at the interview they should let the bereaved person speak for themselves and not try to answer for them.
Advice for engaging with the media

• Bereaved relatives often grant an interview without any prior knowledge of what questions will be asked or how the material from the interview will be used (Muller, 2013)

• Therefore, at the start of the interview, the bereaved family could ask for an explanation of what will happen to the information they provide e.g. ask the reporter to explain how their story will be treated; how they and their loved one will be portrayed and where, when and in what context the story is likely to appear, as well as a run down of what questions the journalist plans to ask.

• They should look out a favourite photograph of their loved one so that they can be represented in the paper as the family would wish rather than the news outlet using poorer quality images from elsewhere.

• Most publications will want a photograph of the bereaved relative to accompany the story so they should be prepared to be photographed and have their picture in the paper.
Advice for engaging with the media

• Lastly, try to understand the news process and that some things are beyond the control of the reporter e.g. the family’s story might have to be cut to a smaller article because of significant events or the need to publish before rival newspapers.

• These are production issues and the reporter has no say in them.

• Many journalists who interview bereaved relatives about their loss feel troubled when a story that reveals the family’s raw emotions and personal memories is reduced due to the production process. They feel they are letting down those who have shared their loss with them – the newsworthy bereaved.
One bereaved relative said she would always advise families to participate in the story:

- “I say speak to the press, but always, always ask them to understand the pain that you are going through and be able to say what it is that’s hurting you; tell them about the loved one you’re missing. Tell them about what kind of a person they were and let that be what people remember.... To me there’s always a story behind the headlines and if that story is told in the proper manner with compassion and accuracy between the person with the pen and the person telling the story I think it’s a good marriage. It’s a good thing to do because it can also help families being able to talk about their loved one.” (Newton & Duncan, 2012)
References
