**The knock at the door: Considering bereaved families’ varying responses to news media intrusion.**

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Relationships between the news media and the “news-worthy” bereaved have long been problematic, with the attention of scholars and journalists alike concentrating on the issues of intrusion and harassment during grief. This study begins to consider the “death knock” and continued media approaches from the position of the families themselves and finds that although there is undoubtedly evidence of anger at intrusion, there is a demonstrable willingness to engage with the media from the majority of interviewees. It also finds evidence that some families have felt excluded by the news media from the stories of their relatives’ deaths.

**Intrusion, trauma, death knock, bereaved, victims, ethics**

Violence and death are a mainstay of news media, with violent crimes featuring “disproportionately” in news broadcasts, and murder being the most prominent (Reiner, 2007; Jewkes, 2010). According to Jewkes, violence “fulfils the media’s desire to present dramatic events in the most graphic possible fashion”, it accords with the negative news values of the Western world (Galtung and Ruge, 1965); and Hanusch (2010), who details the representation of death in the media over centuries, describes it as “the new black of the modern media age”.

“... if a death satisfies even more news criteria, for example when it is violent, comes unexpectedly, involves a famous person, or the audience can identify with the death, then its news values will be even higher. (Hanusch, 2010;p)

Many deaths are recorded in the media without “humanising” factors such as personal photographs, obituaries or comment from their family or friends. Others are given sustained coverage involving many parties and facets in circumstances which require newly-bereaved people to have extended contact with the media (Greer, 2007). Even in the absence of interest from news teams it has become common for many deaths to find a public context through the web and social media with grieving relatives and friends utilising memorial sites and other means. (Gibson, 2001; Duncan and Newton, 2010)

Such online tributes have provided material for many news stories, but it could be argued that the only ethical way to cover the story of a tragic death is to speak directly to those closest involved: the family and friends. It seems an obvious statement, given the fact that these people are at the very centre of the story and therefore primary sources. However it could also be construed as a volte face from the way we have come to consider the ethics of death reporting, which tends to focus on the protection of the grieving and not on their inclusion. The death knock is a much-maligned practice, associated as it is with concerns about intrusions into grief and the exploitation of victim’s families (Duncan and Newton, 2010; Hayward McKay (2005) goes as far as to suggest that any defence of the death knock is “spurious” and accuses journalists who would justify it of self-delusion or even dishonesty. This is an understandable position. Arguably no human being would want to trample over a bereaved person’s right to mourn in private, and journalists have been shown to be no exceptions to this. However when we “walk away” (Simpson and Cote, 2006) or ’phone in to the office with an excuse (Keeble, 2000; Castle, 1999) are we denying the family the right to involvement in a story that is essentially theirs, not ours?

Despite the death knock’s dubious reputation amongst journalists, there are further supporting arguments for putting grieving relatives at the centre of the story. They include evidence that sensitive death stories have acted as catalysts to public action and have also served as public memorials to the deceased (Hume, 2003; Linklater, 1996; Webster, 1996; Griffith, 2004). There is also evidence that speaking about traumatic experiences can be cathartic for interviewees, and that victims can gain “mastery” over feelings of shock and helplessness by “giving testimony” (Raphael, 1986; Tait, 1996). Other studies have suggested that the media can be pivotal to the public’s understanding of tragedy (Reigert, Kitch and Hulme, Thomas, Griffith 2004).

One of the problems with our ethical decision-making in this area is that we rarely take into account the views of those most affected, whose best interests we claim to have at heart. Therefore this study aims to begin that process by conducting interviews with members of bereaved families whose stories have been repeatedly covered by the media

To inform the parameters of the study, the author attended meetings of two groups of bereaved friends and relatives who were able to offer direction and opinion: Support After Murder and Manslaughter Merseyside (SAMM), a UK campaign group offering counselling and support to those bereaved by homicide, and the Liverpool branch of Roadpeace, an organisation which campaigns on road deaths and offers support to those bereaved by traffic incidents. Following these discussions twelve individual interviews were then carried out with bereaved relatives, including four with expert witnesses defined as family members who have been through a tragedy themselves, but who also act as organisers, confidantes or counsellors to a wider group of bereaved people. In this case, three of the expert witnesses were either the founders of or are or part of the current leadership of regional victims’ groups, while one was the co-ordinator of a national organisation. Of the eight further interviews, four were with parents who had lost children to murder, one with the partner of a murder victim and three with participants who had lost either a child or a grandchild in a road accident. Finally a group interview was undertaken with eight members of Families Fighting for Justice, a UK group which campaigns for more victim involvement in the criminal justice system. This was the preferred method of interaction for these participants who did not want to be interviewed individually and at length. All eight had lost a close relative to murder or manslaughter. Most participants lived in the North West of England, and ages ranged from 20 to 75. In terms of media attention, three of the murder victims were given massive coverage at national and international level, four had some coverage from the national media and the rest featured in the regional media only. Only one of the accident victims received national media attention, with the others featuring in the regional media.

**Intrusion.**

About half of the family members reported some level of upset about approaches and subsequent contact with the media, although this was markedly lower in interviews with families of road accident victims. The two interviewees who reported the strongest adverse reactions were both the fathers of murder victims. One said he had roughly “escorted” a female reporter from a national newspaper down a series of steps, and that she had fallen down the last few.

“I couldn’t believe she came to my door at that time and in those circumstances. She shouldn’t have been there. You must have no heart to do your job.”

Interestingly, both had had a continuing relationship with journalists, which, at least in part, they reported in more positive terms. The second father reported that the journalist left when asked to leave, and said he had had further contact with the same reporter who had been helpful subsequently. The only females who voiced an angry reaction to journalists approaching complained about the manner of the approach rather than the fact that they had been approached. This was a case of murder within the family, a sensitive situation which would require a great amount of thought and caution before a call was made on the relatives. Instead, a reporter who had no clear idea of what had happened turned up at their door on the night of the killing without realising that they were the grieving family. The young mother who opened the door had only just learned of the deaths of two of her immediate family, and felt the reporter was revelling in the incident.

“He was like a teenager wanting to get the gossip. It was: what’s been going on up there? Why are the police there? If that guy had come up to me, told me who he was and said what he was doing, that would have been a different matter. It was the way he did it that was so upsetting. If he’d been honest from the start I probably would have spoken.”

As unpalatable as this encounter is, what it amounts to is a level of naivety and bad judgement and practice on the reporter’s part. It also gives weight to the argument that journalists need codes of practice and full direction from an experienced newsdesk when involved in interviewing vulnerable victims or witnesses. The reporter missed the story by an insensitive and inappropriate approach, which could be argued to be just as damaging to the reputation of the news organisation as it was distressing to the family. Perhaps more challenging in terms of our ethical decision-making and practice is the evidence from these interviews that some families are being “excluded” from the coverage of their own relatives’ deaths.

“In my case I’d say at least some of the damage done was by reporters going writing stories before they’d even spoken to me. I’ve had to ring up journalists to tell them my side of the story. Why didn’t they contact me? Even if I had nothing to say it would give me some warning that a story was going to appear. Better that than hearing it on the radio or picking up a paper and being confronted with it without warning. At least if you know something is going to be done, you can shield the more vulnerable members of the family from it.”

This participant had had a long exposure to the media since his son’s murder 20 years ago, with the case maintaining news interest because of appeals against conviction by those found guilty of the murder. Although he had criticisms of the media and the way his son had been portrayed, he believed speaking to journalists was essential for families affected by newsworthy tragedies in terms of accuracy and

Perhaps an even more troubling category is the thers who had been briefed by the police to expect lots of media attention, yet received next to none. This was

“The police said not to be surprised if when I opened my curtains in the morning there was all kinds of media out there. I thought it was good to be forewarned so I could think about whether to speak to them. When I opened the blinds the next morning there wasn’t a soul out there and there never has been. Not that I wanted that, but I think someone should have contacted me before printing what they did.”

When a tragedy occurs which attracts the attention of the news media, the family may already be feeling “under the microscope” and subject to major stresses from a number of parties in the criminal justice system. Three of the expert witnesses suggested journalists should be made more aware of the situation they are entering, perhaps by undertaking elements of the training currently given to police family liaison officers, during which bereaved relatives relive the circumstances of their loss.

Average person no contact with police. All of a sudden 3-4 police officers in my house. Forensic people coming in. May search your house.

35-yr-old daughter murdered. Her daughter was a very private girl. She found it very difficult that these men were going through her belongings, they were going through her diary, her computer, they went through all her bank accounts and they even went through her knicker draw. She cannot forget that, it was so intrusive.

99.9% of families would say want to do all I can. Doesn’t stop them feeling abused

**Public appeals**

A number of interviewees demonstrated a very sophisticated understanding of the need to speak to the media when the help of the public is needed. Interviewee A, whose adult child was missing for some days before the murder came to light, wanted to do anything “positive” to help the police, and saw an appeal to the media as the major part of that.

“I don’t know where I got the bravery to do it because I’d never spoken to the press or anything like that. I was just a mum. I do remember always feeling like a rabbit caught in the headlights. I was talking but I didn’t know what they expected of me.”

Interviewee A made her appeal outside her home and expected that would be enough. However because the case had made national headlines, she was then “besieged” by requests from TV news teams for individual interviews inside her home.

“I noticed with Rhys’ parents (Rhys Jones, the 11-year-old shot dead by a gang member in Croxteth, Liverpool, England, see notes) that they were sitting behind a table talking to the press. With me it was the camera crews all piling into my home. I felt that was very invasive because my home was the only place I felt secure at the time.”

In the Rhys Jones case, the appeal by his parents Stephen and Melanie was considered by the police as crucial in bringing forward witnesses who were able to identify the killer. (Realk crinmes) Interviewee A felt the police should be able to guide families through the early stages of their relationship with the media following a tragedy, acting as mediators, although she felt that for some families, particularly those in which there are tensions with the police, this could be counter-productive. By contrast, Interviewee G, whose adult child had been killed in a road accident from which a vehicle had driven away, was advised not to make an appeal to the media. Her family liaison officer had been deeply affected by the incident, and felt he was protecting her from more upset and pain. Although the advice was given with the best possible intentions, and was accepted at the time as the least-stressful alternative, Interviewee G believes it was the wrong decision to make.

“I still wonder whether the driver would have been caught if made that appeal.”

There is some evidence that the police automatically assume that the family . Guidance issued by the National Policing Improvement Agency in 2008 refers to the “need to protect the family from an unwarranted media intrusion”.

There is a danger of a FLO over-identifying with a family and allowing professional boundaries to erode. Whilst in the short term this may benefit the family, there is evidence that it may adversely affect them in the longer term when the FLO withdraws.

The emotional intensity of the family liaison role is more pronounced than almost any other specialist role within the police service. The mental and physical demands can be extreme and, unfortunately, not always recognised or acknowledged. A recurring theme of attributing factors emerged during inspection visits, which can be summarised as follows:

Sustained contact with a family in grief;

regular extended tours of duty;

prolonged periods of working in isolation;

expectations to manage existing workloads whilst performing the FLO role;

lack of support and recognition of the role;

multiple deployments.

In some instances, family members were themselves potential suspects and this created an ambivalence in their approach; on one hand, they still wanted to ask the FLOs for detailed information, but on the other, felt they had to be guarded about what they said for fear of it being used in evidence. In such cases, as well as in instances where the family members might be called as witnesses, the FLOs, other police officers and procurators fiscal were particularly guarded in the information they provided. In some instances, this was made clear, but not in others, and this later gave rise for concern that the FLO (or other information provider) had not been as frank or honest as they could have been.

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**Accuracy as respect**

Although concerns about intrusion and adequate representation of victims and their families, the largest area of upset mentioned was basic accuracy. Complaints about the media getting things wrong were frequent and widespread among all interviewees. Six interviewees complained about “hard, objective errors” (Maier, 2005) such as the mis-spelling of the deceased’s name.

Interviewee F complained about a misunderstanding over relationships within the bereaved family and another about the circumstances of the death. There were also complaints about errors in captions and misleading headlines. Three of the interviewees cited sensational headline-writing or presentation as the biggest upset even when the reporter’s work was accurate and sensitive.

“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 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.”

One expert witness suggested that even the tiniest error in reporting, headline writing was perceived by the grieving family as a lack of respect for their loved one. This offers a large ethical problem considering the increase in errors catalogued by a number of studies. In a survey carried out by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, 45% of online journalists complained of a “loosening of standards and less careful reporting”. Maier (2005) documents staffing concerns “reporters stretched thin by staff cuts” and Russial (2009) was concerned about the lack of editing of online news. Farnell (2011) reports that sub-editors are seen as “superfluous” by some newspaper managements in the UK, and quotes a memo sent to Johnston Press editors instructing them to do away with the “old practice” of checking each story for accuracy. It has already been documented that public perception of errors can begin to affect a media organisation’s credibility and therefore could be a commercial concern. This finding adds weight to that argument, but also introduces the ethical concern of the news outlets unwittingly upsetting the most vulnerable of sources, their families and their friends.

Conversely, the relatively new practice adopted in some news organisations of allowing reporters to write straight into templates could be seen to be double-edged in the case of the interviewees and group participants who complained that although the reporter’s work was accurate, the accompanying headlines were either sensational, misleading or plain wrong. It could be argued that a headline written by a reporter who has been out to see the family would be more sensitive and accurate than one written by a disinterested sub editor. Interestingly no-one complained about being misquoted by a reporter in the main body of a newspaper or broadcast report, suggesting that in general those families who were interviewed had their views represented accurately. The only participant who did feel she had been misrepresented had spoken to a magazine containing “real life” stories. Her quotes had been deliberately altered to make her sound particularly northern, when actually she is accentless and comes from the Midlands.

**“Labelling” of victims and their newsworthiness**

In a report on for the UK Feist (1999) acknowledged the importance of offering a rounded picture of the victim to the public in order to gain sympathy and response to appeals. He quotes a senior investigating office as suggesting officers should personalise the qualities of the victim, for example emphasising that the victim was a mother of young children rather than a prostitute. Why???

Three of the individual interviewees had problems with the descriptions of their loved ones offered by the media, as did four members of FFJ in the group interview. A prostitute and heroin addict

One father found his son had been described as a drug dealer There are at least two issues to be considered here. Should we be more sensitive when the descriptions are true but perhaps upsetting to the family (and particularly children in that family) and should we take more care when the facts are disputed to gain evidence from all parties? In this case, dodging the death knock has led to upset and injustice.

Other participants whose relatives had been murdered complained about the obsession with sensational “human interest” aspects of their tragedy while other aspects they considered to be more important, such as failures in police procedure or miscarriages of justice, were almost ignored, despite campaigners actively canvassing for coverage. Interestingly, there was a perception from the participants in the group interview that the amount of media coverage had a definite effect on the way the case was subsequently investigated and prosecuted. It should be pointed out that this particular group was made up of people who felt they had been let down by the system in some way, either by failure to find or prosecute their relatives’ killers, or by what they regarded as lenient sentences when trials had gone ahead. Nevertheless there was a feeling that some cases were made cause celebres by the media because they fulfilled some form of news criteria while other very similar cases were largely ignored.

There were similar complaints from members of Roadpeace, who were concerned that many road deaths did not receive the coverage they should because of perceptions in the media that road deaths were “ordinary” deaths. The organisation says road victims are treated as third-class victims, and that the judicial system sees their deaths as “trivial”. One interview participant complained that the media often seemed to have more sympathy with the driver than the pedestrian, no matter what the circumstances of the incident.

Conclusions:

The aim of this study was not to justify the death knock and other such approaches or condemn them, rather it to include the voices of vulnerable interviewees in the debate.

The responses demonstrate that this is a complicated area of ethical judgement which requires much more consideration of the myriad shades of grey in the relationship between the media and the bereaved. The “bereaved” and the “families” are not homogenous groups, although they may have much in common. While we should continue to be concerned about media intrusion into grief, the findings here suggest that we are capable of causing harm in many more ways; through neglect, inaccuracy and insensitivity.

Should be more help and advice – from whom? Voices must be heard – but less brutal a first meeting?

What of those who don’t receive the attention they are then expecting?

There is evidence here of poor practice and immaturity . However there was a lso evidence of good practice, including . Honest, sympathetic, mature

Some things could get worse – errors, reliance on police and internet etc.

“As long as they’re getting their pay check they don’t care. The people who do a good story, they deserve that pay check. The people who are googling it and asking around for rumours or looking on twitter – they’re often basing their stories around lies. That’s not fair.”

Notes:

1. Jackie Newton has 30 years’ experience as a print journalist, carrying out her first death knock at the age of 17, and going on to doorstep bereaved relatives for regional newspapers and

as a freelance for tabloid national newspapers. She has also worked on journalism

education initiatives with Support After Murder and Manslaughter (Merseyside).

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