

# The Eye of the Disaster

## A Study of Journalists' Work at Accident Scenes and Disaster Sites

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### Abstract

The thesis is an occupation study that combines perspective and theory from mainly journalism and crisis psychology. It covers journalists (reporters and photographers) - a work group with a professional mission in an extreme situation, as eyewitnesses to disaster, and their editors. An essential part of the knowledge base rests on research on previous accidents and disasters, particularly studies on the reactions of rescue workers while working during serious events. The research is a case study of the 1998 fire disaster in Gothenburg, which ultimately took 63 young people's lives and injured another 213, thereby becoming the largest Swedish fire disaster in modern times. Those who died in the fire were of 19 different nationalities, which contributed to the tragedy receiving massive news coverage both locally and internationally. The ensuing media reporting brought up questions concerning how this type of journalism actually comes into being. How is the reporting influenced when journalists themselves are indirect victims and are struggling to master their own reactions to the crisis? How does the accident scene function as a workplace for unprepared and shocked journalists? What coping strategies do reporters use to manage to carry out their mission? And what can we learn in the future from our experiences with these types of events?

The study is based on literature studies, content analysis and interviews. In the thesis, journalists' experiences of their own *reactions* to working at an accident scene have been related to three factors: the *person* – the human being who is a journalist; the *occupation* – the journalistic mission and the journalist role; and the *situation* – the traumatic event and site. A further dimension of the mission, *reflection* – the need for crisis support as well as self-evaluation and learning – has also been presented.

In the categorizing of the journalists' coping strategies during their work at the accident scene in Gothenburg, four journalist roles have crystallized, namely *The Witness*, *The Weasel*, *The Hack* and *The Rescuing Angel*. These roles have arisen from the individual ways of reacting to the crisis situation and through the coping strategies that came to be dominant in different individuals. The roles have also been affected by how the conflict between good human being and good journalist was handled, the balance between the roles and the dominance of one or the other.

The results can also be placed in a learning context with the help of theories on professional skill and competence. Such a view of journalistic work at traumatic events can hypothetically make it easier for journalists to prepare themselves and understand their own reactions in an extreme situation. It is also conceivable that supervisors could be helped by this view, in their aspiration to choose appropriate employees for a mission whenever possible. A reasonable goal is for the employee assigned to witness and report on a trauma to have *sufficiently good aggregate competence*. In addition to the well-recognized forms of formal, practical, prescribed, situational and applied competence, the thesis has generated a new form called *coping competence*. This is the individual's ability to master his or her crisis reactions during work at a traumatic event.

The thesis is concluded with recommendations for ten new work norms for media reporting in connection with serious events and potentially traumatic experiences. The Swedish journalist corps's press ethical rules of play should, according to the results of this thesis, benefit from being complemented with the aim of achieving *sufficiently good disaster or trauma journalism*.

### Keywords

journalism, journalists, news coverage, trauma, disasters, coping, stress, competence, journalist roles, media ethics

# Katastrofens öga

En studie av journalisters arbete på olycksplats

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