

Journalists who in the line of duty become eyewitness to a traumatic event may face the greatest professional challenge of their lives. Reporting on a disaster involves heavy personal as well as professional pressure. Media organisations are also put to the test, and editors have a special responsibility for published content and for their staff on site. The relationship between media and disaster victims is particularly delicate, and media interaction with rescue and emergency services is also an area of concern.

This book surveys the journalistic task of covering accidents or disasters and includes press ethical principles and psycho-traumatological issues such as stress reactions and coping. The empirical part is based on a disastrous fire at a Halloween party in Gothenburg, Sweden, 1998, in which 63 young people lost their lives and 200 were injured. It is an occupational study based on interviews with Swedish journalists reporting from the scene as well as their editors. The main focus is on the accident site as a workplace in the acute phase, but long-term aspects of individual and collective learning and psychological support are also considered. In addition, a model of journalist roles on a disaster site is presented along with a competence model for disaster journalism.

In the past decade, the Swedish edition of the book has been widely used in journalism undergraduate programs and further training for journalists and disaster actors: emergency services, first responders, communications and crisis teams. This English edition is a translated version of the author's doctoral thesis, presented at the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication at Gothenburg University and published in Swedish, 2008.

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Liselotte Englund The eye of the Disaster



JMG



THE EYE OF THE DISASTER

Journalists' work and media coverage at traumatic events



DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION • UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

The Eye of the Disaster

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Liselotte Englund



JMG

Department of Journalism, Media and Communication
University of Gothenburg

Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Journalism, media and communication
Department of Journalism, media and communication
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

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CONTENTS

AUTHORS PREFACE	13
1. INTRODUCTION	17
PROFESSIONAL EYEWITNESSES	20
<i>Frontline witnesses</i>	22
<i>Accident reporting as a journalistic genre</i>	24
THESIS AIM AND RESEARCH ISSUES	25
<i>Why journalists at an accident site?</i>	26
<i>Person, profession and situation</i>	28
<i>Analysis model</i>	30
<i>Thesis issues</i>	32
<i>Reporters and editors</i>	34
<i>This study in relation to previous research</i>	35
THE CONTENT OF THE BOOK	36
2. THE SITUATION	39
THE NATURE OF THE EVENT	39
<i>Classification of accidents and disasters</i>	40
<i>The place of the event</i>	42
CONTROLLABILITY	43
STRESSORS	45
ACTORS AND VICTIMS	46
<i>Contact areas and confrontations at the accident site</i>	47
<i>Directly affected</i>	49
<i>Family and close friends</i>	50
<i>Eyewitnesses</i>	51
<i>Responders – helpers</i>	51
<i>Journalists</i>	53
<i>Meeting and portraying survivors</i>	53
<i>When the directly affected are children and young adults</i>	54
ACCIDENT SITE AS WORKPLACE	55
<i>International studies of disaster journalism</i>	56
<i>Scandinavian research on disaster journalism</i>	57
<i>Swedish studies</i>	58
<i>Studies of the fire disaster</i>	59
<i>Learn from history</i>	62
CONCLUDING REMARKS	63
3. THE PROFESSION.....	69
JOURNALISTIC MANDATE	69
<i>Media and journalist functions in accident reporting</i>	71
<i>Organising work</i>	74
<i>Management and co-worker role</i>	75
PROFESSIONAL CODES AND ETHICS	77
<i>Approved and questioned media ethics</i>	80

<i>Rules of consideration and conduct</i>	81
<i>Rules of integrity</i>	83
<i>Journalists' moral compass</i>	84
CONCLUDING REMARKS	85
4. THE PRIVATE PERSON.....	89
STRESS SUSCEPTIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY	90
<i>Risk factors</i>	91
<i>Resilience</i>	92
<i>Personality traits</i>	93
<i>Emotional intelligence and empathetic aptitude</i>	94
CONCLUDING REMARKS	95
5. THE REACTION	99
STRESS REACTIONS	100
<i>Acute stress: a normal reaction to an abnormal situation</i>	104
<i>Survivor experience of stress and crisis reactions</i>	105
<i>Previous studies of journalist' stress reactions</i>	107
<i>Interacting with stressed leaders</i>	109
COPING STRATEGIES	111
PERFORMANCE – ACTION ON SITE	114
CONCLUDING REMARKS	117
6. THE EMPIRICAL STUDY	121
INVESTIGATION METHOD	121
SELECTING RESPONDENTS FROM THE CONTENT ANALYSIS	121
<i>Delimitation</i>	122
<i>Interview as a method</i>	125
<i>A psychological perspective</i>	127
<i>Reconstructed experiences?</i>	128
<i>Meeting on the phone: advantages and disadvantages</i>	128
<i>The case study as method</i>	130
<i>Questions and interview guides</i>	132
<i>Studying an occupation</i>	133
<i>From interview to text</i>	134
<i>Knowledge generated by the choice of method</i>	135
<i>Research ethical guidelines</i>	136
<i>Closeness and distance</i>	137
THE CASE OF THE GOTHENBURG FIRE: A BACKGROUND	138
<i>Media coverage: course of events</i>	139
MEDIA COVERAGE IN THE PRESS, RADIO AND TV	142
<i>The fire portrayed in the press</i>	143
<i>The fire on the radio</i>	146
<i>The fire on TV</i>	147
<i>Confrontations on the site</i>	150

7. THE SITUATION: WITNESSING HORROR.....	157
THE EVENT	157
AN UNCONTROLLABLE SITUATION	159
<i>Ambiguous uncertainty</i>	159
UNPREPAREDNESS AND OTHER STRESSORS ON THE JOB	161
THE AFFECTED	162
ACCIDENT SITE AS A WORKPLACE	164
<i>Journalists and responders</i>	164
<i>Collegial interaction</i>	167
<i>Journalists on site when the fire was out</i>	168
THE SITUATION: CONCLUSIONS	169
8. THE PROFESSION: REPORT!	173
UNCERTAIN ASSIGNMENT	173
DISTRIBUTION OF WORK	176
<i>Reporting on the next days</i>	177
JOB INSTRUCTIONS	178
DISASTER AND LEADERSHIP	180
PROFESSIONAL ACUMEN	181
THE ASSIGNMENT: CONCLUSIONS	183
9. THE PROFESSION: ASSESSMENTS AND DECISIONS	187
WORDS OF THE EDITOR IN CHIEF	187
<i>Input from the field</i>	189
PROFESSIONAL CONSCIENCE	190
<i>The will to help</i>	191
IDENTIFYING AS A JOURNALIST OR NOT	192
<i>Not identifying as a journalist</i>	193
<i>Identifying as a journalist</i>	194
PRESS ETHICS – ACTING AND PUBLISHING	197
<i>Professional ethical choices</i>	197
<i>Publicity rule no. 9: Always show consideration for the victims of crime and accidents</i>	200
<i>Publicity rule 11: Be careful with pictures</i>	201
<i>Rejected</i>	202
PRESS ETHICAL MISTAKES	205
<i>The grey zone of press ethics</i>	206
THE CYNICISM OF DISTANCE	207
PRESS PHOTO	209
ASSESSMENTS AND DECISIONS: CONCLUSIONS	210
10. THE PRIVATE PERSON: ONLY HUMAN	217
VULNERABILITY	217
<i>Acute stress reactions</i>	219
<i>Personally affected</i>	220
COPING	221
DELAYED REACTIONS	222

<i>In the even longer term</i>	224
REACTIONS AND COPING: CONCLUSIONS	225
11. REFLECTION: RESPONSE AND RECOVERY	229
PSYCHOLOGICAL RELIEF	229
<i>Social support and trauma relief</i>	229
<i>Employee stress: a management issue</i>	231
<i>Defusing after the fire</i>	232
<i>The importance of social support</i>	237
<i>Journalist after the fire:</i>	238
PROCESSING AND RECOVERY: CONCLUSIONS	240
12. REFLECTION: SELF-EVALUATION AND LEARNING	243
PUBLICATIONS	243
<i>Us and them</i>	244
<i>Criticism of rival papers</i>	246
<i>Paying for others' mistakes</i>	247
<i>Being rewarded for tragedy</i>	250
PREPAREDNESS AND LEARNING	251
<i>Learning from history</i>	256
<i>Life experience</i>	258
<i>Professional experience</i>	259
<i>The importance of formal qualifications</i>	262
<i>Professional development needs</i>	263
BONDING WITH SURVIVORS	264
SELF-EVALUATION AND LEARNING: CONCLUSIONS	266
13. THE JOURNALIST AS EYEWITNESS.....	273
SITUATION	273
<i>Witnessing</i>	273
<i>Unpreparedness</i>	274
<i>Uncontrollability</i>	274
<i>Stressors</i>	274
<i>Interaction and confrontations</i>	275
PROFESSION	275
<i>Duty to public interest</i>	276
<i>Journalist role</i>	276
<i>Approaches</i>	277
<i>Press ethics</i>	277
<i>Judgement and decision</i>	278
THE PRIVATE PERSON	279
<i>Personality and vulnerability</i>	279
<i>Life experience and identification</i>	279
REACTION	280
<i>Coping strategies</i>	280
REFLECTION	281

<i>Processing and recuperation</i>	282
<i>Self-evaluations</i>	282
<i>Learning</i>	283
ISSUES GENERATED BY THE STUDY	283
ROLE CONFLICTS	283
<i>Fellow human being or professional journalist</i>	285
JOURNALIST ROLES	286
<i>The Eyewitness</i>	286
<i>The Weasel</i>	286
<i>The Hack</i>	287
<i>The Guardian Angel</i>	287
COMPETENCE TO REPORT ON A DISASTER	290
<i>Sufficiently good ability</i>	290
<i>Competence perspective on the journalist profession</i>	291
<i>The private person – actual competence</i>	293
<i>The private person – formal competence</i>	293
<i>The profession – formally stipulated competence</i>	293
<i>Reaction – coping competence</i>	294
<i>Performance – the utilised competence</i>	294
<i>Reflection – learning and feedback</i>	295
<i>Professional norms for trauma journalism</i>	295
<i>Learning for better or worse</i>	297
POSTSCRIPT: ON SILENCE.....	301
REFERENCENS.....	303
APPENDIX 1: EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW GUIDE	315
APPENDIX 2: CODE OF ETHICS FOR PRESS, RADIO AND TELEVISION IN SWEDEN	319

AUTHORS PREFACE

Ten years after the publication of my doctoral thesis (monograph) in Swedish, my present employer, Karlstad University, offered to fund the translation into English of the thesis, titled "The Eye of the Disaster: A Study of Journalists' Work at Accident Scenes and Disaster Sites", which was publicly defended at the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication at Gothenburg University in the autumn of 2008. Shortly after, it was published in book form.

In the past decade, the book has been widely used in undergraduate journalism programs and professional development initiatives, as well as by all actors at a disaster site: the police, responders, paramedics and crisis teams. In addition, it has been used for training purposes in public service agencies responsible for civil contingencies and crisis management at national, regional and local levels.

The international academic community, on the other hand, has not had the opportunity to respond to the findings since the thesis was written in Swedish. The present version in English is aimed to increase access to the material for non-Swedish-speaking researchers and professional journalists.

The investigation is based on a horrific event – a fire disaster in Gothenburg, Sweden, in which 63 children and young adults lost their lives and 200 were injured while attending a private party. The casualties were aged 12-25. The progress of the fire was explosive and emergency exits were blocked or hard to find. Reporters and photographers were quickly on site, and several became professional witnesses to the traumatic event. The subsequent media reporting raised questions about journalists' work conditions and the terms of journalism in the context of disastrous events. How is reporting affected when the journalists are directly afflicted and struggling to cope with their own acute stress reactions? How does the accident site appear as a workplace for the unprepared journalist under extreme stress? What coping strategies do the reporters use to complete their mission? And what can we learn from this type of experience for the future?

Initially, the study was a research project commissioned by the Swedish National Board of Psychological Defence (BPD). Later, the thesis project was further supported by the main funders Ann-Marie and Gustaf Ander's Foundation for Media Research, the Wahlgrenska Foundation, the Medical Research Council, and others.

A reasonable question to ask is whether the results of the study are still reliable ten years later. The answer is that the issues treated – work conditions, stress reactions, coping strategies, learning processes – are still relevant. One difference to consider, however, is the present media logic with multi-channel publication, increased live broadcasts, continuous web publishing and deadlines, and new technologies affecting journalists' procedures and citizens' use of the media, not least the dramatic increase of social media. When similar disasters take place today,

such factors affect professional procedures and publishing as well as the entire communication system. The type of experiences that more recent studies have shown to be relevant and sustainable over time are individual perceptions of the professional mission, encounters with the afflicted and responders, their own stress reactions, interaction with colleagues and other actors, the need of psychosocial support, as well as learning and feedback.

Since 2008, research on psychosocial interventions after potentially traumatic events has been a rapidly growing field. In the study of the Gothenburg fire the journalists discuss their expectations of immediate debriefing on completion of the assignment. At present, however, psycho-trauma research suggests that the intervention principles that should be used to guide and inform intervention and prevention efforts are promoting: a sense of safety, calming, a sense of self- and community efficacy, connectedness and hope.

Hopefully, the book will contribute to enhancing research in the field and provide further training for journalists and other crisis actors on work conditions in the context of accidents and disasters. A vision of a more competent media coverage is also presented for normative purposes, not to mention the need of better psychological preparedness for those who volunteer or are sent on similar assignments.

In the Swedish version, many people are mentioned in the acknowledgement section, but I gratefully and warmly especially mention again my supervisors Bengt Johansson and Kent Asp, professors of journalism at Gothenburg University. For this English version of the thesis I would in particular like to thank Per-Olof Michel, associate professor of disaster psychiatry, who helped to ensure that the terminology used in the area of psycho trauma is correct, and Elisabeth Wennö, who translated the whole thesis into English.

Last but not least, I am indebted to the journalists, photographers and editors who through their personal and moving stories and generous sharing of reflections on covering disasters have contributed to lessons learned after the tragic fire in 1998.

By Kyrkby and Karlstad, Sweden,
2018

Liselotte Englund

1. INTRODUCTION

Suddenly, they are there, in the midst of an unimaginable chaos, barely conscious of how they got there, and even less certain of what has happened. The duty of the journalist in the event of unexpected and serious accidents and disasters is to be on site quickly, assess the situation immediately, and start reporting. The time pressure and the assessment and interpretation of the situation constitute three important and aggravating factors in disaster journalism. What is more, a usually totally unprepared person arrives at an extreme scene: A reporter or a photographer has dashed off on an uninformative emergency call, as in the case of the Gothenburg fire in Sweden 1998: "There's a fire at Backaplan", a message which can mean anything from a fire in a store-room, not involving human suffering or gigantic trauma, to a major catastrophe. What is it like to be the witness of an accident with many victims?

Among others arriving at the accident site, there is a human being, who is also a reporter, young or old, experienced or a novice, more or less vulnerable, better or worse equipped to encounter the unimaginable event. On Friday 30 October 1998, like many other Swedes, I nearly choked on my morning coffee. The event reported was as inconceivable as the radio announcement that the Swedish prime minister Olof Palme had been shot. The time was 07:30 and I had just turned on the Swedish Television Channel 1 (SVT1) news reporting that there was a fire at a private Halloween party near the city district Backaplan in Gothenburg, Sweden. Tens of people were dead, and many injured. There was a great deal of uncertainty. Perhaps there were many more victims... and how could this have happened?

The rest of the day was devoted to TV watching (SVT 1 and 2 and Channel 4) and radio listening (Swedish Radio National Channel P1 primarily, since I was in Lund in the south of Sweden, and there was no coverage of other local stations than the regional one at that time). The listening and watching took place in a mix that turned out to generate interesting thoughts, lessons and research issues, which I would like to illustrate with the following summary impressions from the morning in question.

From Teletext I switch over to SVT 2 where a programme about economy was broadcast as usual and the SVT Morning news (Rapport Morgon) discussed the truth commission's report in South Africa with experts. Then followed a documentary on Arabic women and guests in the studio as before. For about 45 minutes of the morning broadcasting only regular pre-scheduled segments were on the air. The host was neutral or easy-going and I did not sense that anything tragic had befallen Sweden. This is an illustration of the time it takes to understand something, or, possibly, of media inertia. Then a short sequence of pictures was shown from the accident site, displaying, in my opinion, too many opportunities for identifying

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The regular guide for *Radio P1* was abandoned. Apparently they were lucky, since the studio was doubled staffed because they were testing a new morning schedule. One could notice low-keyed, affected reporters, but also interviews with people in distress going too far. A young boy in particular was conspicuously off balance. A priest in the studio said that he was overwhelmed: "How should I approach those who need me?"

The morning show on *Channel 4* had invited guests to comment on the tragic event. A dizzy young boy said: "I don't even know if my relative is dead". At 08:20, there was a commercial with "The hits songs we like to hear again", discordantly jarring with the situation, begging the question: Is there a backup plan to avoid inappropriate commercials in these situations? In a later news segment, the task force commander of the rescue services said that "you can never prepare", and a reflection could be that if the rescue professionals cannot prepare, how can reporters and photographers be expected to? But the degree of preparedness can always be improved. At 10:20, *Channel 4*, interrupted the coverage of the fire with a programme on hunting. Admittedly, they had devoted the large part of the morning to the fire disaster.

Not until 09:40 did I notice that *Channel 1 Morning News (Rapport Morgon)* had adjusted the tone and content to the situation in Gothenburg. Shortly before ten o'clock, the host said "The incident has coloured *Rapport Morgon* /.../ we'll naturally report more...".

I did not share the opinion that the Swedish National Television - SVT morning was coloured by the event. Some would argue that the TV coverage in the first hours after the fire had striking similarities with the coverage the TV morning after the Estonia ferry disaster in 1994. In the report *Estonia in the News* from the *Swedish National Board of Psychological Defence* (SPF), it is described how *Channel 2's morning programme (Go'morrön Sverige)* showed their regular segments between the news broadcasts on the morning after the ferry tragedy, while the morning programme on *Channel 4 (Nyhetsmorgon)* was completely devoted to the Estonia disaster. Studio interviews alternated with news broadcasts.

Radio P1 adjusted the content to the Gothenburg fire until 11 o'clock when the programme *The Job (Jobbet)* was broadcasted as planned with "school" as the theme of the day. The programme *Respite (Andrum)* was somewhat delayed but felt conducive to the situation with a quiet piano and "young" meditative electric guitars that "grew", transitioning into a choir, singing "let the night be followed by day". This was followed by a crescendo of trumpet, electric guitar and organ music ending in the quiet piano of the beginning. From earth to earth, ashes to ashes. Birth, life and death. The pre-recorded *Respite* programme had in fact been withdrawn and replaced by this programme, more adapted to the nightly tragedy.

Radio P1 replaced the show *For pleasure (För nöjes skull)* with an extraordinary broadcast of the programme *Studio 1* where the guest was Stig Jonsson, a priest known for his efforts in connection with a terrible coach accident in Norway involving young Swedish school children in 1988. In response to the question of how to treat people who have had a similar, appalling experience, he said that "grief needs attention /.../ listen, but don't give complete answers". The host informed us that listeners had called to say, "there's too much talking right now." And Stig Jonsson added: "Yes, we need silence and music". Later in the programme there were live reporting from the local Hammarkullen's church, where a reporter noted that "this affects us all". It sounded as if he had a lump in his throat. He also said, "...people want to be alone, and at the same time there's a great need of talking".

In *Radio P1*, the Noon News, there was, a later much discussed (praised and criticised), segment: a news reporter delivered a personal and touching report from inside the fire-ravaged premises. A

slow walk among burnt shoes, other personal belongings, too narrow portholes, soot and ashes and anxiety-evoking sights. At the time, it was hard to decide if it was very good or atrocious. Sometimes that line might be thin. Maybe it was the event rather than the description of it that was atrocious.

The same day, at 13.30 hr's, in another channel, *Radio Megapol*, there was a happy ignorance of a halloween party ending in a tragedy as well as the remarkable excited host inviting listeners to call in and compete for tickets to "the great halloween party", which "will be a blast".

That day was good starting-point for disaster journalism studies. One question that arose was why do things turn out as they do in the media on a day like this? How can unbearable events be depicted in a bearable way? What is it like to report from an accident site? What stress and crisis reactions affect reporters and photographers who are sent to an accident site and an inconceivably traumatic disaster with short notice and without preparation? It is the two last questions in particular that form the basis of the following pages.

Professional eyewitnesses

Accident and disaster journalism as a field of study poses many questions. What specific demands are placed on the journalist in these very vulnerable and stressful situations? What is a professional approach in such a context? To what extent do journalists under great mental pressure experience that the professional role and human empathy are in conflict? If their actions are taken under the influence of a trauma, what consequences will this have on the decisions and actions that govern journalist and media reporting of an accident?

Journalists, like other actors at the accident site, are in a state of emergency – physically, psychologically and in terms of time. The assignment to report on such an extreme situation will entail deviations from certain journalistic norms. The American journalist, Jeff Alan, describes in his book on journalism practice, *Responsible Journalism*¹, how he, as a young and inexperienced, newly graduated high school student, was at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on the historic evening in June 1968. Robert Kennedy had just

won a senator election. Alan was there to report for two radio stations when Robert Kennedy was shot a few steps away from him. At least that is what Alan experienced there and then. The Senator lay bloody on the floor, and people were screaming. "With the tape recorder I started reporting," Jeff Alan writes.²

Kennedy has been shot – they think Kennedy has been shot. Robert Kennedy has been shot in this room off to the side of the hall. I was near the senator; we heard what appeared to be gun shots from inside his room. It ´s mass chaos. You heard it as it happened.

[Ethel Kennedy screams, 'Let a doctor get to him'] We don ´t know what has happened, it ´s mass chaos. Someone else has been shot in the forehead, and she is bleeding badly. Yet another person was shot near Kennedy. It was mass chaos here; we did hear gunshots from the hallway and there are people running everywhere.

Jeff Alan was not sure about what he had seen. He reported what he knew, which was not a lot. "My emotions got in the way; my reporting was fragmented and disjointed", he writes. He further describes experiencing how people were "covered in blood" and how he first thought that everybody had been shot. Later it turned out that many had been cut by shattered champagne glasses. "I assumed that Kennedy had been shot, but didn't know," writes Jeff Alan. When Alan was running towards the media telephone desk, he was unaware that he was the first to report on the incident.

"With a phone in each hand I went on air live on two stations at once. /.../ Even though it turned out that Kennedy had indeed been hit, I had no way of knowing at the time. My overzealous reporting could have been inaccurate and irresponsible.

Jeff Alan's reporting of the night with Kennedy could have been the description of nearly any other accident or disaster. His experience clearly shows that reporting from an unexpected and shocking event is a challenge. When, as in Jeff Alan's case, the reporting is live there are special demands on journalism and the journalist. The reporter is left to his/her own judgement when no editorial deliberations and clear instructions are available.

The American airway company PAN AM crash in Lockerbie, some days before Christmas Eve in 1988, was a shock to many reporters on the site. An American research team lead by Joan Deppa, professor of journalism, studied the event, which was marked by mass chaos and a high degree of uncertainty³. The newly retired Fran Ryan, reporter at the *Daily Record* in Glasgow, had just returned from a shopping-trip to Lockerbie when he heard about the plane crash. Ryan raced his car back to Lockerbie, where he was

faced with utter chaos and an enormous crater in flames. Suddenly he was on duty again:

Nothing in his long career could have prepared him for this or any of the many sights he would see in the hours ahead. It was as if he had arrived in the middle of a war zone. ⁴

Now and then people refer to the journalist "John Wayne complex".⁵ Some suggest that the journalist tradition demands that "journalists can take it and not show it," as William Cote, professor of journalism, and Roger Simpson put it in the book *Covering Violence*.⁶

This view of the journalist Superman, is contradicted by the fact that many reporters and photographer who are exposed to severe trauma actually develop the kind of crisis reactions that should be considered to be indirectly affected by an event. Journalists are like any other individual: they cannot rid themselves of human reactions and their effects.

Frontline witnesses

The journalists who are in the eye of the disaster – at the war front, at the accident site or in an earthquake area may appear as Wild West heroes, unbreakable John Wayne types with bulletproof vests and steely eyes. The Norwegian journalist Åsne Seierstad's reporting from Kabul in 2002–2003 is an example of this kind of journalism.⁷ In an interview in the journal *The Journalist (Journalisten)* she says, "...the most important thing is to be an eyewitness." ⁸ Seierstad has made it clear to the editors that she wanted to write about her own experiences in the place before she went to Bagdad. In another article she says, "as a war correspondent you armour yourself mentally and learn to handle things in a strictly professional way."⁹ She further points out that it can be worse for a person to be an unsuspected witness to a car accident than reporting from a war for a longer period. This argument explains one of several differences between the conditions of war reporting and disaster reporting.

Swedish Radio's Sofie Ribbing is another example of a frontline witness, who was sent to a war zone with much less preparation than Seierstad had. For many years, Ribbing was an empathising and committed voice in *Radio P1's Studio 1*. She was hastily sent on the honorable and meritorious mission to cover Bosnien Serbs' progress and the

horrendous event at Srebrenica. She was sent there with a plane ticket, a telephone number in Sarajevo, a bulletproof vest, a helmet and rucksack; but without the most important things: A clear assignment and support back up.

Back in Sweden, she was showered with praise and distinctions. She was said to have introduced an unusual and innovative journalism, But there was a downside this time too.

Sofie's story is a different story. It centres on what she did not say when she returned to Sweden in triumph, but suppressed when she was praised and receiving awards. It surfaced later when production demands increased in the downsizing radio world and she was a mother and wanted to prove that she could cope with that too. After two miscarriages the burnout syndrome was a fact. Then the questions came: One journalist more or less -- does it matter? What is the life and health of a journalist worth? Where should the line be drawn between a reasonable effort at work and who draws it?

This, and similar stories are recounted in the book *What is a human being in the media*, by Lisbeth Gustafsson¹⁰, and there are more accounts than expected and not only of war but of major accidents, disasters, and political rebellions that have affected and marked the journalist as a human being.

An award-winning press photographer describes a photo he took on the Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1998. Near him is a student supporting an injured and bleeding friend. One arm supports the friend's head and the other is in the air while he breaks out in a roar. The photographer is haunted by his recollections:

"It's one of my best photos", he says. "But it's also a memory that has haunted me for a long time. One of all the events I have talked about, again and again. It's vital to get it off your chest."¹¹

One of the worst international examples of the consequences of victim journalism to frontline witnesses took place in Africa. The situation was described in the Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* – in the historical attachment Photos from a decade.¹² The headline reads: "Two victims and one vulture, or two vultures and one victim?" On a field in South Sudan lies an emaciated girl. Behind her there is a hungry vulture. The award-winning war photographer Kevin Carter aims his camera and takes a photo. Then he shoos the vulture away.

His role was clear; firstly a photographer and not a relief worker. Carter's picture was spread around the world and turned into an epitome of the affliction in Africa. Several humanitarian organisations have used it to raise money to their relief operations. But the cruel picture also resulted in a press ethical debate. Who was the real vulture? This is the eternal dilemma of the war photographer. The question of the

girl's destiny preyed on Carter. When a friend put the question that he was constantly asked, about what else he did to help the girl, he answered despairingly: "Nothing, there were thousands of them." If the girl reached a relief station is not known. For the photographer who was increasingly marked by the suffering he had witnessed on the job as a war photographer, there was no relief station. The photo was awarded the prestigious Pulitzerpris in 1994. Kevin Carter had his international break-through. Two months later he committed suicide.¹³

No one can assess the cause and effect in this story, but journalists and others were shaken by it. And the press ethical debate continued.

In Sweden too, there are several examples of award-winning pictures of victims. Sometimes the photo begs the question: What did you do as a photographer?

Accident reporting as a journalistic genre

In all times accidents and disasters have evoked public and media interest. Already the newspapers at the beginning of the 16th century contained this kind of news. Criminality and wars have always had a high degree of news value.¹⁴

In a column in the Norwegian tabloid *VG, Verdens Gang*, a counterpart of the Swedish *Aftonbladet*, the media researcher Martin Eide writes, "Like other tabloids VG is awaiting the major disasters."¹⁵ A cynical, but possibly a realistic view on how journalism and news reporting work. It also reflects the influence of market forces influence, especially on single copy sales. "Death always has a news value," the ethnologist Nils-Arvid Bringeus, professor emeritus, states in the final national report on the Estonia ferry disaster and its consequences.¹⁶ The church funeral ringing in bygone days also raised people's curiosity as to who had passed away. But media interest today, according to Bringeus, does not attend to the death of the average individual, but to death by accident.

After a disaster, the media consumer has a need for answers to two main issues: "How could it happen" and "How big a risk is it that it will happen again?" Media scrutiny of power is often delayed even if recent major accidents have resulted in investigative journalism that was initiated "as soon as the fire was extinguished".

Disaster journalism is not essentially different in character from other types of journalism. Above all, there are similarities with crime journalism and war journalism. The media studies of a Swedish massmurder investigation in 1994 by Börje Ahlström¹⁷ and Stig-Arne Nohrstedt, Karin Fogelberg and Gert Z Nordström's

studies of war journalism¹⁸ testify to this. But journalism in these extreme circumstances also deviates from the journalism norm in several ways. As the Norwegian media researchers Blix and Bech-Karlsen put it, we can say that "problems become pointed and focused in the case of an accident."¹⁹

Thesis aim and research issues

Journalistic texts are usually produced under time pressure. In connection with unexpected events such as accidents and disasters, not only the time pressure but also the mental pressure becomes tangible. Work takes place in the present: The focus is on the now. Then and later have less significance. This means that investigation, interpretation, decision and action take place under extreme circumstances. In many ways the assignment is ambiguous: it requires being quick and also correct, being considerate and conducting investigation at the same time, calming and cautioning the public, inspecting and criticising without spreading rumours.²⁰ The outcome in the media – the journalistic product – is affected by the circumstances of its production, that is, the situation, the journalist's mental state and vulnerability, professional skills and the nature of the assignment, and finally and not least the impact of the journalist's own reactions to the event.

Originally, I sought an answer to the question: Why do things turn out the way they do in the press after a disaster? The question led to extensive literature studies before I undertook the interviews, forming the empirical basis and centring on the disaster site as a media workplace. I wanted to describe the conditions under which the media operated at the site of the disastrous Swedish disco fire at Backaplan in Gothenburg in 1998, and to create a picture of the reactions and patterns of behaviour that emerge in accident reporting and how these are managed. The concept of journalist includes reporters, photographers and their editors.

The overriding aim of the thesis is to describe and explain how journalists experience working on an accident scene and their own crisis and stress reactions. These are related to three factors that impact on the special circumstances of the journalistic assignment, how it is carried out and with what consequences. The factors are the person (the human being as a journalist), the profession (the

journalistic assignment and the journalist's role) and the situation (the traumatic event of an accident or disaster).

Why journalists at an accident site?

There are several important reasons for studying journalists (reporters, photographers and their editors) reporting on a traumatic event. They are, for instance, the only professionals arriving at the scene with another assignment than saving lives, helping the injured, fighting fires etc. All other professional categories present are rescue workers. This can make the journalists' job distressful and guilt-ridden.²¹

Journalists are also the only professionals on the scene who lack training in dealing with people at an accident site. Being an eyewitness to a disaster in progress entails severe psychological stress, both because of the sight of the dead people and encountering the injured and shocked people, and the experience of their own crisis and stress reactions. The police force, and the rescue and medical emergency services are regularly provided professional development in theory and practice, but despite the regular training each situation entails new challenges. Journalists do not get any training and are ill prepared for a disaster. The journalists' mental crisis and stress reactions in relation to the situation, personal qualities and professional assignment constitute an unexplored field, which calls for attention because their reactions may have consequences for other people on the accident site and for the performance of the assignment.

The editors are faced with a different challenge than the eyewitness journalist. It can be difficult for the editorial staff to relate to the happenings at the accident site. This distance to the event can hypothetically mean that the editorial board and editorial colleagues can distance themselves from events, which can make it easier to separate empathy from the professional task, which may make for a more clear-sighted journalistic assessment. On the other hand, the hypothetical distance can reduce the press ethical sensitivity and increase obtrusion if the reporting is to the detriment of the victims.

It is significant for accident reporting that the reporters and the photographers often "assign themselves", meaning that no one else is on duty. There are no instructions and often no information to speak of, which makes disaster journalism different from other genres where research is conducted in advance.

Studying reporters, photographers and editorial staff as different journalist categories is justified, beyond the reasons mentioned above, because of the differences in working conditions between reporters and photographers. The photographer arrives at the scene with the professional attribute of the camera, while the reporter can choose to remain in the background. The photographing reporter can be perceived as provocative by the directly affected when trying to take photos of the ongoing trauma. The conversational role of the reporter is less provocative, but not necessarily simpler. Photos can be taken at a distance but conversation requires face-to-face contact.

Generally speaking, occupational studies of work under stress and mental pressure are interesting because the situations involve many issues. Everyday professional problems are accentuated and the questions sharpened. The professional role and press ethics are tested on the basis of very special situations. In connection with a major accident or disaster the time pressure is increased, in some cases to the point of being radio-like when the reporter calls in their eyewitness accounts. With the recent web development (beyond the scope of the present study) the printed media's speed has become ether-like. This development jeopardises the ethical aspects. The combination of time pressure and mental stress is interesting to study regarding reporters on the site and editors. An important factor to clarify is how the deliberations and decisions made are affected by the strain of the situation.

The situation on an accident site places great demands on the professional groups present, including journalists. The nature of the situation can vary a great deal between different accidents and disasters. Journalist witness the trauma to different degrees. At the Gothenburg fire and the 9/11 terror attacks several journalists witnessed the events. On other occasions such as the South Asia Tsunami in 2004, the journalists arrived to the chaos following the acute phase. This involves other mental and professional circumstances. Yet another type of accident takes place in inaccessible places, like the Estonia ferry disaster out at sea, where the journalists did not witness the accident either during or after the acute phase. Other demands on defining the situation and good interpretation ability are required. Also the geographical spread of the accident affects the chance to perform journalistic tasks. Is the area limited to a block or does it extend to half a nation? Other situational factors are how many and what categories of people are af-

fectured. Are the victims children, adults or elderly? One or more nationalities? What is actually known about the event and what is left to the journalist's interpretation?

Person, profession and situation

The journalists' experiences and stress reactions are related to the three factors that affect job performance, namely the individual person (the human being the journalist), the profession (the journalistic assignment and the journalist's role) and the situation (the traumatic event of an accident or disaster).

The situation in the thesis is a constant, as it were, but a situation to which different people in different professional capacities have arrived, in this case, reporters and photographers. The study aims to describe and explain the tension between journalists and fellow human being, between the assignment and the wish to help others, between pursuit of news and withdrawal.

We could also say that it concerns three encounters in a very special situation: with the situation ("What has happened?", identifying the situation), with themselves ("How should I handle this?", in terms of their own crisis reactions and coping), and with the professional assignment ("How should I depict this?", in terms of press ethics, for instance).

The journalist's first duty on arriving is to define the situation, sometimes with the help of the scarce information to the newspaper or via an SOS (mayday/alarm) call, and at other times with a bit more knowledge of what has happened. In either case, the reporter and photographer are left to their own resources to interpret and assess the situation on site. The editorial staff have to be particularly sensitive and responsive in their decision-making, combining empathy and professionalism under pressure, which is a challenge.

The professional assignment of reporting on a disaster is governed by factors on three levels: Firstly, there are the media roles of being watchdog and provider of news and information. In the event of a disaster, the information function assumes greater importance as public authorities can use the media to inform about channels to public support and rescue services. In addition, citizens have a right to information about the event. Secondly, the journalist has the editorial duty

to consider news value, posters and single copy sales (economic factors), which affect the way in which the event is described. Thirdly, the journalist can, at least hypothetically, be his/her own boss, for example, at a nightly alert about a major accident or disaster, when the assignment is undertaken in interaction or conflict with colleagues and management. Here, a balance might have to be struck between the professional and private person. How much should I write and how much should I help (if at all)?

It is difficult to predict how individuals will react on arrival to an accident site and being a witness, and equally difficult to know how they cope with their reactions and on what grounds. The so-called "individual vulnerability" (described in Chapter 4) is a critical factor. Vulnerability is the sum of inheritance and environment, life style and health status, which combine to affect our coping of different kinds of crisis. Previous experience and studies indicate differences related to the sexes, life experience, previous professional experience and different types of media that the journalist represents.²² Translated into practical wisdom, It is interesting to know what problems the person journalist encounters on the accident sites and how the reactions affect the way he/she tackles the problems. In combination with different types of situations, parts of our psyche and emotions are triggered differently. Are the victims children or adults? Is the disaster a fire, terror attack or a natural disaster? Is the event controllable or uncontrollable? A natural disaster might not evoke the same kind of wrath as a deliberate fire.

The person, the journalist, is a person who can react and act very differently in various situations. The journalistic assignment involves some fundamental principles, which might be modified in extreme situations. For example, certain press ethical rules might appear impossible to practice, or journalism norms inadequate. Situations are never identical. Experiences and lessons learnt can be obtained from each event but even the most experienced reporter or photographer can be afflicted with both paralysis and hyperactivity, demonstrate professionalism and blunders. The hypothetical question, "Who is best suited to report on a disaster?" is impossible to answer. Besides, the editor has seldom the opportunity to select a journalist for an assignment. When the alarm is sounded, chance decides who happens to be on duty. However, knowledge about contributing factors can make the disaster reporting easier to organise and carry out.

Analysis model

What factors trigger journalists' reactions? Studies of journalists' reactions are important in order to understand why "the professional person" reacts and acts in a certain way, partly in terms of the journalist as "indirectly affected" by the event, partly to understand the working conditions behind the subsequent publications. Cognitive, emotional, behavioural, physical reactions and coping strategies are in focus, in other words, what they "think, feel and do". In this context, the editorial board members are seen as an important informant category in their capacity as leaders and journalists working in the offices (in relation to the reporters and photographers on site). A key question is the consequences of the journalists' reactions for their decisions and actions on the accident site and for the publications of their reports.

Three factors are assumed to be important for journalists' reaction on site.

Firstly, there is the extreme situation: a major accident or disaster that reporters and photographers arrive at to depict, which they witness and react to. This is an extreme work situation, deviating from the normal one in several ways, but also constituting a clear example of the mechanisms and problems of news journalism.

Secondly, there is the profession, that is, the professional person in relation to the professional journalism role, the assignment, press ethics, etc.

Thirdly, there is the person: the individual journalist. What kind of person is facing the task? Qualities such as personality, vulnerability, stress disposition/tolerance, resilience and coping ability are factors that make a difference to a person's way of handling the situation.

A further factor studied is reflection after the assignment, such as the journalists' need of processing experiences and of receiving psychological relief. This is studied in their self-evaluations of their own reporting (performance) and of their colleagues at the newspaper and in other media. Lessons learnt are an important factor for the future. Hypothetically, the personal and collective processing, self-evaluation and learning processes can have effects on future media traumatic event reporting. The editorial management has a great responsibility to support the individual reporter or photographer during and after the assignment. It is also a leadership issue to

communicate experiences of events such as the earlier mentioned Gothenburg fire.

The starting-point of this study is the journalist as a person and as a professional. The person is assigned the performance of a task in a specific situation, namely on an accident site. The focus is on the person's reactions to the potential trauma that witnessing a disaster entails. The individual journalist's reactions to the situation are affected by the nature of the event and personal qualities. The individual must also handle the professional assignment and its regulations. The tension arises between the individual's private wishes and needs (e.g. helping or escaping), and professional motivations and demands for reports.

The analysis focusses on their own reactions, linked to the situation, the profession and the person during the acute phase of the event. The reflections made by the individual journalist some time after the event are also discussed in relation to the analysis. These reflections and self-evaluations can partly serve as the journalists' mirror images of the event, the assignment and their own psychological reactions.

The factor "performance", that is, the result of the assignment is also shown in the model. Although "performance" can only be discussed in the form of self-evaluations, it is important to include this aspect in the model.

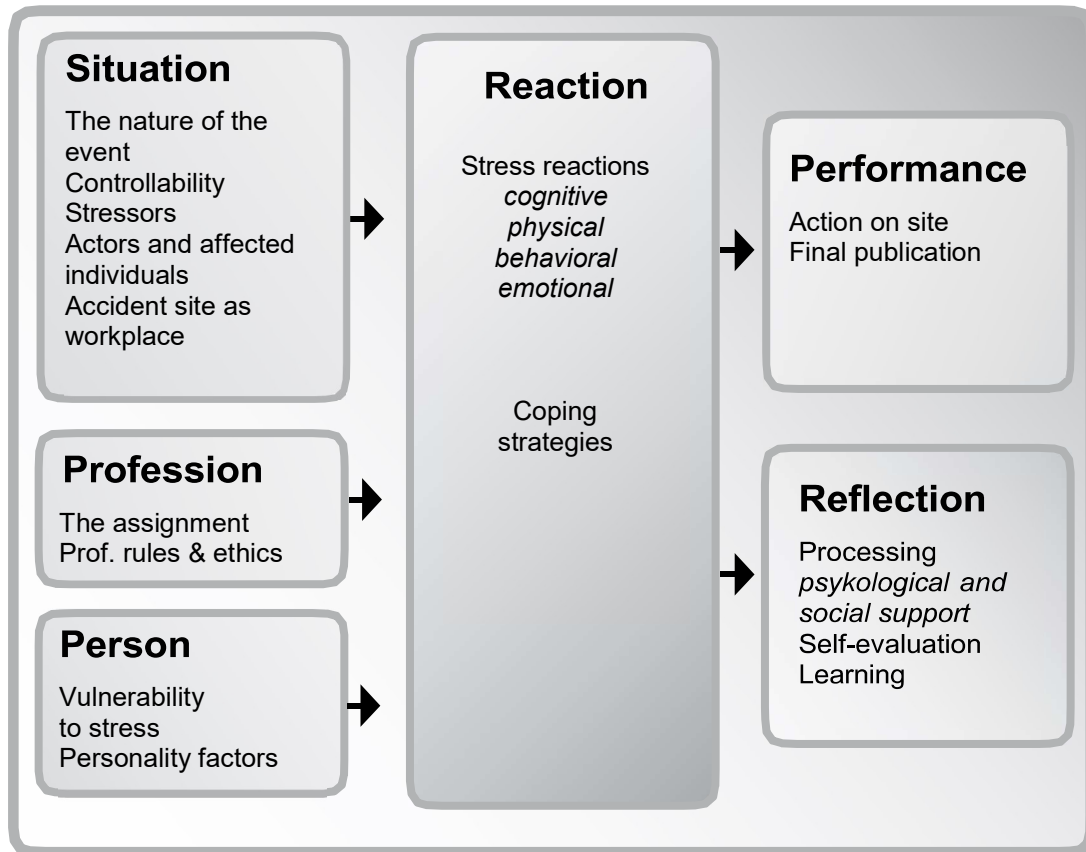


Figure 1. Factors affecting journalist performance in severe events (e.g. accidents and disaster): An analysis model.

The journalistic work always aims at performance, even though the final publications/prints not are included. Actions on the accident site are important but not a published part of the journalistic performance.

Thesis issues

Studying journalists at work on and in connection with an accident site calls for a number of questions, but some must also be excluded. The choice here was to study a case where the individual journalist (the person), the journalistic assignment (the profession) and the nature of the event (the situation) are in focus. The tensions and conflicts arising between these three factors are related to the crisis reactions that are triggered when working on accident site (the reaction). How do journalists negotiate this field of tension?

The journalist arrives at the scene on his/her assignment as a professional and as a human being with personal qualities such as

different degrees of vulnerability and/or resilience. At the accident site the journalist experiences and witnesses an ongoing trauma. He or she may react psychologically and emotionally to the event, and copes in different degrees and ways with the potential reactions. The journalist handles the situation in individual ways and acts on the basis of the above factors. After the reporting assignment, the journalist processes the event, evaluates his/her journalistic performance, and learns from experience and from feedback to editors and colleagues in other media.

This thesis aims to clarify how individual journalists' reactions and performance at the accident site are affected by the following issues:

1. The situation

How does the nature of the event (regarding type of accident, spread, time, place, category affected and actors' interaction) affect the reporters' and photographers' reactions to the situation?

How do they experience the degree of controllability, stressors on the site, the interaction with other actors and general experiences of the accident site as a workplace?

2. The profession

How do the reporters and photographers describe that they are affected by their assignments and the demands made at the accident site – social role, legal frames and the professional role – in short, their way of handling demands, norms and rules in an possibly extreme situation?

How do the journalists' crisis and stress reactions affect the work situation and the social role, and what are the conflicts between the private person and the professional person?

3. The person

How do the reporters and photographers describe the importance of personal qualities such as personality, vulnerability, life experience, stress tolerance, coping ability and life experiences for how they function and act as professional private persons in the reporting on a disaster?

How do journalists describe working at the accident site in terms of cognitive reactions, emotional reactions, physical reactions, and coping strategies?

In addition to the analysis of the factors impacting on the journalistic assignment at the accident site, issues are also analysed related to the phase that follows on the completed reporting. The starting-point is that the reflection is affected by the performance and reactions at the accident site. Moreover, it is the reactions and performance affect the work and the processes that follow.

The journalists describe their crisis reactions and their experienced performances in relation to the situation, the profession and the person. The reporters' and photographers' reflections belong to their need for crisis support after completing their assignment (and how this is conducted if needed); they evaluate their own and their colleagues' work and describe how feedback and processing generate internal and external learning and reflect on the effects on future assignments.

Reporters and editors

Although the reporters and photographers are the centre of attention in this investigation, the editors and editorial staff also constitute an important category for the study because the editor has the final say about the assignment and the report, which ultimately affect the result of the reporting.

Secondarily, as shown in the analysis model and research issues, the interviews also included questions on the time after the reporting assignment, illustrating the journalists' need of psychological relief, for example, and any therapy and self-evaluation or learning processes.

When a major accident or disaster takes place in the night, the newspapers' staffing is reduced. In the case of the Gothenburg fire, many reporters and photographers were on duty long before their editors. The roles of journalists on the site and editors in the office are different at newspapers with main editorial offices in Stockholm (some 500 kilometers away from the event), or in Gothenburg (where the disaster happened). Working conditions for the journalists arriving at the site when the fire is out and the area evacuated are different compared to the journalist eyewitnesses.

The shared issues are the views of the assignment, reactions to the event, and coping with them, previous experience, ethical decisions and other considerations. The differences are that the journalists witnessed the events at the site and that they have to cope with

the conflict of being there both as professionals and as a fellow human being, which the journalists in the office are spared.

To draw conclusions of what the reporting entails in the long run, questions were also asked about the need of psychological relief after the assignment. In their capacity as supervisors, the editors can face the fact that they should offer a colleague psychological support while being in need of support themselves. Self-evaluations of their own reporting, their papers' accumulated reporting, and their views on how the media in general reported on the Gothenburg fire are also covered. Both journalists in the field and their editors give an account of their experiences of how they can learn – individually and collectively – from the individual case to be better equipped for similar assignments in the future.

In short, the event at Backaplan in Gothenburg turned out to be a disaster with unusually many unpleasant ingredients. It encompassed children, young adults and was a shocking experience and a great tragedy. The first photographers and journalist on the scene were the witnesses of an ongoing catastrophe where young people were the victims of a conflagration before their eyes. How did journalists handle that situation and what were circumstances for a correct and considerate journalism practice?

This study in relation to previous research

The current situation in the field of disasters and crisis reactions is that many areas have been covered and frequently studied. In other areas there is a shortage of studies, which motivated this doctoral study. As is clear in the following chapters, there is a great deal of knowledge of rescue work and public agency work in connection with disasters and accidents. Likewise, the crisis reactions among survivors and rescue workers have been studied nationally and internationally. Occupational studies of journalists and news production have also been studied in many ways. But the areas of journalists' crisis reactions, coping strategies and reporting on accidents and disasters are unexplored.

The table below demonstrates the relation between this research fields and related fields.

To explain the complicated relationships affecting the journalist's performance on the accident site, knowledge of disciplines other than

journalism is needed. Media theory must be combined with crisis psychology to clarify understanding and explanations. Theories of such an analysis are missing, which is why an explorative study is necessary.

The methodological aim of the study is to create concepts for the understanding and further studies of disaster journalism and to discuss the relation between the concepts.

Table 1. Study areas and objects in disaster research.

RESEARCH AREA	Occupational studies	Accidents, crises, disasters from a society perspective, e.g. crisis communication	War and terror	Crisis reactions (stress, shock, coping, psychological support)
RESEARCH OBJECT				
Survivors	--	✓	✓	✓
Rescue staff	✓	✓	✓	✓
Journalists	✓	✓	✓	Knowledge gap

The content of the book

This introductory chapter is followed by four chapters which in turn address the theoretical basis of the empirical studies of the situation, the profession, the person, and the reactions. Then follows a description of the empirical study in Chapter 6, including accounts of methods and the case of the Gothenburg fire. Chapter 7 describes the journalists' experience of the situation. Chapter 8 describes their experience of the assignment. Chapter 9 centres on assessments and decisions. Chapter 10 deals with the person, that is, the journalist's as a human being's, and their own reactions to the assignment. In Chapter 11 the needs of social and psychological support among those who have witnessed the disaster are treated, and

how newspaper managements when applicable handled and organised this. Chapter 12 describes how the journalists and their editors evaluate their personal and collective efforts professionally, and their experience of internal and external learning. The empirical Chapters 7-12 focus on the journalists' crisis reactions in relation to the conditions for their job performance. These chapters are dominated by quotations from the interviews, which may appear too detailed and too long, but the choice to include them is deliberate. The aim is to let the voice of the interviewee be heard and not simply to convey the facts. Hopefully, the very personal stories add life and colour to the text. General conclusions and a concluding discussion are provided in Chapter 13.

Footnotes

- ¹ Alan (2001) *Responsible Journalism. A practical Guide for Working and Aspiring Journalists*.
- ² Alan (2001) p. 2
- ³ Deppa (ed) (1994)
- ⁴ ibid p. 71
- ⁵ Blix & Beck-Carlsen (1990); Danish paper *Journalisten* nr 19/2001; Englund (2000) et al.
- ⁶ Coté & Simpson (2000) p. 232. Roger Simpson is from 2007 'Dart Professor of Journalism and Trauma' and former founding director vid *Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma*.
- ⁷ Fogelberg (2004)
- ⁸ "The Journalist" (*Journalisten*) 2003-03-31
- ⁹ The magazine *Krisberedskap* no 1:2004
- ¹⁰ Gustafsson (2002a) p. 27
- ¹¹ Gustafsson (2002b) p. 15
- ¹² The printed photo documentary "*Bilder från ett århundrade... och historierna bakom dem*".
Expressen/GT/Kvällsposten 1999-12-26, p. 92ff
- ¹³ ibid
- ¹⁴ Ekström & Nohrstedt (1995) ; Nohrstedt (1996); Weibull (1983); Journalism studies from Gothenburg University show that journalists find accidents and crimes, after local news, the most interesting stuff for the readers (Asp et al. 2007)
- ¹⁵ Eide (1995)
- ¹⁶ SOU 1999:48
- ¹⁷ Alström (1996)
- ¹⁸ F eks Nohrstedt (2000; 2002b; 2005); Nordström (2002), Fogelberg (2004)
- ¹⁹ Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990), p. 22
- ²⁰ Larsson & Nohrstedt et al. (2000); Englund (1999b) (2000) (2002a)
- ²¹ Discussed within Swedish media after several major accidents and disasters, like the bus crash in Måbødalen, Norway in 1988, Scandinavian Star ferry disaster 1990, the Estonia ferry disaster 1984 and the Gothenburg fire disaster 1998. Articles in Swedish can be found on www.journalisten.se and: www.mediavarlden.se
- ²² Alström (1996); Weibull (1991); Englund in Larsson & Nohrstedt (2000)

2. THE SITUATION

The professional role always requires the journalists to venture into diverse environments, places and times, and to encounter various categories of people. Prepared or unprepared, they have to take on the task of listening, asking, investigating, interpreting summarising and reporting. But how do the situations, working conditions, and the specific "workplace" affect the task? The situational difference between reporting on a disaster from the newspaper office and at the accident site is striking. Similarly, the everyday journalistic tasks, which usually do not involve stress reactions, differ from the extreme situation of working at an accident site.

The aim of this chapter is primarily to describe the situation of journalists covering accidents with reference to existing research. A background is given to accidents and disasters in terms of type of accident and disaster, extent and consequences, etc. The type of accident has a bearing on how journalists and others react to the event. The stressors contributing to making the work hard are described along with the importance of the degree of accident controllability, resolvability and transparency. The category of affected persons is of the utmost importance, and therefore also treated. Many researchers agree that events affecting children are the worst to deal with.¹

A major issue involves the main actors at the accident site, namely the rescue services, health care personnel and the police. The special demands imposed on the journalist and the tensions and conflicts (described in the introductory chapter) arising in the situation need to be examined more closely.

The nature of the event

Human societies have always been haunted by accidents and disasters, and invariably these have been a subject of interest. A disaster is a radical event,² not only to the affected eyewitnesses and next-of-kin but also to the media organisations, public authorities, the nation and communities. Research on disasters originates in the U.S. 1950s for the purpose of meeting military needs to increase preparedness for possible attack with ABC weapon (weapon of mass destruction).³ As an extension of this branch, research has then been conducted to improve general preparedness for crisis and disasters. Many argue that disaster

research stands to gain a great deal from the military experience, for example, the American psychology Professor Barton Meyers,⁴ who even argues that war should be included in the disaster concept since the social and psychological consequences are very similar. The individual can also experience a disaster to be equally traumatic as a war. Hypothetically, this may also be reflected in similarities between war and disaster journalism.

The individual-related research on reactions to disaster situations can be said to rest on two main issues,⁵ partly the patterns of behaviour, reactions and coping during the acute phase of the disaster, partly the more long-term effects on health after the disaster. In the latter case, research usually centres on PTSD, the post-traumatic stress disorder. Risk research is a related field,⁶ which has a focus on the period before a disaster – among others, the so-called warning period. In the case of sudden and unexpected accidents, however, there is no such phase.

Classification of accidents and disasters

The terminological definitions of accidents and disasters in this thesis are derived from the *Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare's handbook on medical disaster preparedness*,⁷ from which the following definitions have been borrowed: A disaster is a situation where available resources are inadequate in relation to acute needs, and the drain is so heavy that normal quality requirements for medical treatment can no longer be maintained despite appropriate measures. A major accident is a severe event where available resources are inadequate in relation to acute needs, but where it is possible to maintain normal quality requirements through a reallocation of resources and a different technology. The single term accident is a sudden event that has detrimental effects on human beings, the environment and property. An accident can be caused by natural phenomena or human acts or omission to act.

A *medical disaster* is a situation caused by an accident, natural disaster, war etc., where health care and our common resources are not enough in spite of reinforcement. There is, in other words, no possibility to help all the victims. Efforts have to be primarily geared towards saving lives and alleviating suffering, while reducing damages and their effects are secondary.⁸ The rescue workers available cannot fulfil their task because of the lack of personnel and resources. In their revised

version of regulations and general advice on peacetime medical disaster preparedness, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare has introduced the concept of 'severe event' for situations requiring special health care management.⁹ The term covers disasters as well as major accidents such as threat, hostage situations and terror attacks. The concept of severe event extends the meaning in a psychological and psychiatric perspective, since an event can require many and specialised health care efforts without causing many deaths or physical injuries. It can also refer to a minor event, which may affect many people in an area, especially if the victims are children. The term severe event is primarily used in the fields of health care, health protection, disease control and the social services.

International research on disaster and accidents commonly rests on three definitions.¹⁰ Firstly, there is catastrophe, which is a radical event, usually a natural disaster in the form of an earthquake or flooding. Disaster is used to describe major events such as tanker accidents, shopping mall bombings, or collapsing stadium stands with many casualties (the Swedish Estonia event and the Gothenburg fire are disasters rather than catastrophes in British terminology). For minor accidents, in which local, regional and national institutions are not affected, the term accident is used.¹¹

A more or less interpersonal interpretation of the concept disaster means that the event is *psychologically* disastrous for the affected families.¹² Dynes also refers to a common *sociological* interpretation of what a disaster is, namely an event in which a great many human relationships in a limited geographical area are broken. In terms of the latter explanatory model, international transportation accidents with victims of different nationalities are not included in the disaster concept.

There are many viewpoints. The words *accident* and *disaster* can have very different meanings depending on the contexts in which they are pronounced, who is giving the information, etc. Accidents and disasters can be classified on different grounds. Some *definitions* are given above and beyond this a *classification* can be made on the basis of cause, size, extent and spread.¹³ A certain understanding of different types of accidents and disasters is important for the understanding of how and why people react so differently to various situations. Individual reactions are therefore important to observe and understand in the light of the causes and contexts of events.

A classification based on the cause of an event leads to two main groups, namely natural disasters and technical disasters, the latter are called produced ('man made') disasters. The group *produced disasters* can further be categorised in terms of intentional and unintentional events. Causes that human beings cannot influence are often easier to handle from a psychological perspective than a situation with a clear scapegoat. The coping strategies are also dependent on the nature of the event.¹⁴

The ferocious tsunami – the tidal wave – leading to the South Asia disaster during Christmas in 2004 was a natural disaster of gigantic proportions at a great distance from Sweden, but with as nearly as many victims as in the Estonia disaster.¹⁵ Next to the sinking of Estonia, the Gothenburg fire in 1998 is one of the most severe disasters ever to afflict Sweden.

The place of the event

An accident or disaster does not always occur in an accessible place for the rescue services and the media. The Estonia ferry disaster is a case in point. Plane and tunnel accidents are other examples. At the Backaplan fire in Gothenburg in 1998, the surrounding buildings were easy to approach, while the premises on fire were inaccessible to the fire fighters and smoke divers.

A further example is the avalanche disaster in Norwegian Vassdalen where a military exercise was taking place in 1986, despite bad weather conditions. Because of a misunderstanding among the officers in charge, tracked vehicles went out despite the avalanche alert. The result of this fatal mistake was that 31 soldiers ended up in a snowslide and 16 lost their lives. The Norwegian journalists were hard pressed to create a picture of the event. The area was inaccessible and the sources – the military officers – were unwilling to communicate, it was reported. In Arne Blix and Jo Bech-Karlsen's study of the Vassdalen accident, there is a description of how the first journalist arrived at the accident site – on skies.¹⁶

In connection with the Estonia ferry disaster, which was not witnessed by either journalists or photographers, a special dilemma arose. The ferry terminal at the Swedish side of the Baltic Sea was the outpost to which the media and next-of-kin were referred. Hospitals in all the countries concerned became the workplace of the world's journalists

and photographers. In exceptional cases, a TV cameraman was allowed to accompany a surface rescuer into the air to document the rescue of people at close quarters. This was not indisputable.¹⁷

Controllability

The newly arrived journalist's identification of the situation at an accident site is affected by an interpretation process. The crisis psychologists at the Swedish Armed Forces, Ann Enander, Claes Wallenius and Gerry Larsson argue that an individual in an accident or disaster situation does not react directly to the objective reality. Rather, it is the interpretation of it that constitutes the subjective reality that the individual reacts to.¹⁸ An individual under acute stress interprets the situation and their own situation in it (see further in Chapter 5). This involves asking questions such as: "Is this a threat?" and "What can I do?" The situation and their own resources to handle it are interpreted. To a great extent, this is assumed to be unconscious.

Enander, Larsson and Wallenius have developed a model, which describes the degree of controllability, resolvability, and clarity in disaster situations.¹⁹ The model centres on individual experiences rather than objective course of events, and illustrates how, for instance, an event such as the Gothenburg fire can be experienced as both unresolvable and ungraspable when the journalist arrives at the scene. An example of a situation that is perceived as graspable and resolvable (A) is a fire in a stadium stand, because normally, there is a possibility to be rescued. In the case of graspable situations impossible to resolve (B), an accident may have happened but the people involved understand what has happened and are completely dependent on others for their rescue, for instance, being shipwrecked on a deserted island or being trapped in a mine. The Gothenburg fire is an example of this category since it was virtually impossible to get out of the burning building. Situations that are perceived as ungraspable but still resolvable (C) are, for example, threats of polluted drinking water. By boiling the water we can manage the situation.

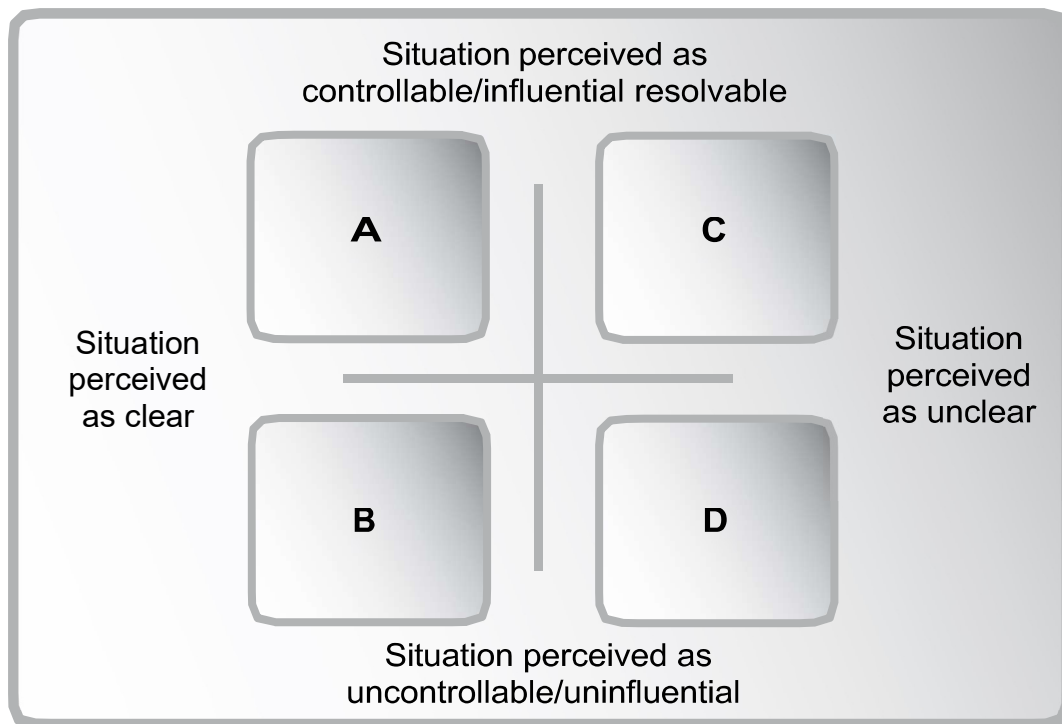


Figure 2. Subjective key dimensions for understanding and explaining individual reactions to disaster events.²⁰

Finally, situations that are both ungraspable and unresolvable are environmental threats such as nuclear plant disasters, which have consequences that are difficult to survey and nearly impossible to resolve. The most difficult situations to handle in the moment must be situations that are easy to grasp but impossible to resolve. The Gothenburg fire was such a situation.

The extent of subjective clarity and controllability respectively is of great importance to the interpretation process. Gerry Larsson argues that emotional reactions are the result of and governed by the cognitive assessment of a situation.²¹ Others, for instance, Öhman, have pointed to indications that emotional responses can arise without cognitive features.²² One aspect that needs to be emphasised is how stressful an individual perceives a certain situation. Lack of food and sleep, weather conditions, and collegial conflicts are some examples of non-cognitive emotional responses.

Stressors

The Norwegian clinical, research and war psychologist Atle Dyregrov has listed stressors that helpers (rescue workers) experience in disaster situations, based on conversation with rescue personnel in Norway and abroad and other research studies and reports on disaster relief work from the whole world.²³ Several of the stressors can be assumed to apply to media members on the site too, even if they, according to Dyregrov's model, also constitute a stressor to the rescue personnel. The stressors are a result of the extreme situation on the accident site.

*Table 2. Stressors in rescue operations: rescue personnel and journalists compared.*²⁴

Stressors for responders /rescue services (ref. Dyregrov)	Potential stressors for journalists
Uncertainty at call-out, time pressure	x
Duration/waiting	x
Public and media turnout	x (public turnout)
Strong sensory impressions	x
Contact with deceased and injured	x
Scope, duration and intensity of disaster	x
Insufficient resources	?
Danger	x
Problem if cooperation, line of command, coordination and leadership	x
Role conflict	x

The work on the accident site may take place under extreme pressure. Working without knowing the situation fully and in organisational chaos under time pressure, perhaps combined with mass media obtrusion, is a delicate problem. Curious by-standers and agitated relatives are significant stress factors. Dyregrov describes how rescue personnel can experience the situation:

They can see that people are dying without being able to do anything for them; they can be forced to make decisions affecting other people's lives and health; they can inadvertently tread on body parts, and all their senses are exposed to strong impressions. The contact with dead children is perceived to be the most stress-inducing factor.²⁵

Accident site work organisation is always marked by uncertainty. This fact, in combination with strong sense impressions and contacts with victims, and time pressure – sometimes for a long time – makes the work very stressful.

Cooperation, coordination and leadership must be solved while people are dying in clear view of rescue workers and eyewitnesses. Much of the experience that responders at accident sites have in all, probability also apply to reporters and photographers present in their capacity as professional eyewitnesses.

Actors and victims

”Why are they here?” is a recurring question from people who dispute the presence of the media at accident sites, or perhaps rather the way in which media professionals go about their business. To some the answer is given while others have strong reservations. The answer is coloured by strong feelings, personal and professional experiences, and responses are probably also based on too little knowledge about the conditions of journalism. There will always be people who think that journalists have no place at accident sites, as Blix and Bech-Karlsen suggest.²⁶ There are those who obstruct the journalists' work (responders or eyewitnesses) and those who criticise a publication after the fact. The reason may be a self-interested wish to hide something, but more often a wish to protect individual integrity. Protecting individuals against exposure is usually the clincher in such argumentation.

In particular, the fast and live local broadcasting media function as invaluable information channels in tracing victims, checking rumours, giving information and instructions, and leaving official messages to, for example, family members.²⁷ In this capacity the media act as a control centre and independent journalistic work is superseded by the need to relay the messages of a credible source. A risk in disaster reporting is that speed is given priority over objectivity and source criticism with the result that erroneous information reaches the public. The media provide effective information about different kinds of responder services to victims and their families. Even negative announcement such as ”there is nothing to report at present” can be valuable.

Throughout history, there are many examples of situations where journalists allegedly have prevented the emergency care,²⁸ for instance, by physically being in the way of emergency services, or, as in the case of the Estonia ferry disaster, when the journalists intensive telephoning

blocked lines intended for communication with the responders. Such experience contributes to tense relations between the media and responders or relatives and survivors.

A representative of the Swedish Rescue Services addressing a seminar with Swedish war psychologists and disaster psychiatrists on disaster ethics in 1998, claimed: "There is a prevalent contempt of journalism in the Swedish municipal crisis groups".²⁹ Many other examples of similar attitudes are documented in several reports and experience-based records.³⁰ Not least has the occasional experience of survivors and relatives regarding media intrusion and journalist transgression contributed to colouring the public groups' perception of journalists and photographers as a collective.

The former priest, Stig Jonsson, who worked in connection with the Måbødals bus accident, thinks that accidents and disasters must be covered by the media, but the question is how.

We can't stop the media from covering accidents, but the way they write about them it is important /.../ The Haukeland hospital staff in Bergen, Norway think that the press severely violated the integrity of patients and families /.../ We understand that they have a job to do, but they must understand that we have a job to do too, said the hospital staff.³¹

Media presence at accident sites is a question of legitimacy, as the answer to the initial question rests on legislation pertaining to publicity: freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the public's right to access information.

Contact areas and confrontations at the accident site

The members of the media are the only professional category arriving at the scene without the duty to save lives or partake in the rescue operations in any other way. Rather, they perform as professional witnesses with a different, clear duty, which, however, is often questioned by rescue service personnel and survivors and other eyewitnesses.

Another distinguishing feature is the tension that can arise – sometimes a kind of polemics – between the media professionals and the other professional rescue groups at the site, while the rescue services have a duty to cooperate and do that. The contacts made at the site take place against the background opinion that the media presence is provocative, and yet their presence cannot be called in question. But

there is reason to review their work performance. Gunnar Ekman describes, in his doctoral thesis on police work,³² how policemen are positioned against "them" ('the Svenssons' and 'the jobs)'), a "we-against-them" attitude, which is reminiscent of the interplay between journalists and rescue workers, or journalists and citizens".

The journalist profession is similar to the police profession in the sense that it also involves a multitude of relationships. In Ekman's study of police work, a policeman notes that "we can meet anyone from managing directors to addicts."³³ In their professional practice, journalists and photographers can meet the same spectrum of situations and people from all walks of life. At an accident site, anything from formal interviews with rescue chiefs to emotional, tentative conversations with survivors and bereaved people can take place. The same journalist is expected to manage the whole spectrum of relationships in interviews, observations and photo journalism. This is an example of the way the situation per se places demands on a range of the journalist's professional skills and acts.

In a study of the so-called Flink murders in the city of Falun, Sweden in 1994, Alström investigates the journalists' contact areas at the scene of the crime.³⁴ The scene and the situation cannot completely be compared with an accident scene such as the Gothenburg fire, for instance, but can still be of interest in the context. In the Falun case, there were striking differences between the choice of sources and contacts in the journalists' practice. So, for instance, were the evening tabloids to a greater extent present in Falun than the morning dailies. The tabloids contacted the police more than the morning papers and the local press. The local press interviewed psychology experts to a lesser extent than all other papers. No comparative quantitative study of contact areas has been made in relation to the Gothenburg fire. However, the government report³⁵ indicates roughly the same tendencies as in the Falun case in terms of the papers' difference in staffing at the accident site. The morning press normally allots less space to this type of accidents and crime. It follows that the number of personal encounters are fewer but there are more telephone interviews. Similarly, their presence at the scene is less conspicuous than that of the evening tabloids.

When the media meet people at an accident site, the interaction is different if the individual is directly affected or an eyewitness. The category "citizens" appear in three different shapes: as affected (victims and survivors), family and friends arriving at the scene, and other eyewitnesses at the site. These actors interact with journalist and rescue

personnel on the basis of different circumstances. This is a reason for approaching the citizen actors from different perspectives.

The main stakeholders and actors on the scene can therefore be divided into five different categories:

1. Affected/survivors
2. Family and close friends (arriving at the scene)
3. Eyewitnesses /the concerned public
4. Responders³⁶ (rescue services, the police, paramedics, public officials)
5. Journalists (reporters and photographers)

Two of these groups have a professional mission at the site, namely the responders and the journalists. But only the former have the duty to help and save lives. This is why both the members of the media and the public or relatives are spectators or eyewitnesses. The journalists can therefore be defined as *professional eyewitnesses*.³⁷

Interaction and cooperation at an accident site or a disaster area take place under heavy psychological and physical strain for many. Folkesson's study³⁸ of the rescue team during the Gothenburg fire shows that more than 40 per cent of the rescue personnel found the contact with relatives and friends very stressful and around 15 per cent pointed to other situations at the scene as complications. Contact with the media are likely to belong to the category "other situations", as previous studies by, for instance, Dyregrov³⁹ have shown that the presence of the media and the public are perceived as very stress-inducing factors.

Directly affected

Affected people, here in the sense of injured and unharmed survivors, are main actors in the drama on the accident scene. By definition, the deceased belong to the category affected too, even if they are not actors in the same way as the survivors are.

Often the category affected falls into subgroups, for instance, ethnic, geographical or age groups, or classmates or colleagues, or a random number of individuals, who happen to be in the same place – at a venue or on a journey.⁴⁰ The composition of the affected group impacts on the scenario and what takes place during the first few hours at the accident site.

The interaction between the affected and the media can vary. In the midst of chaos it is not clear to the injured and other survivors who the journalist are. If they are aware of the media presence, they react differently. Harrison has, like several other researchers, noted that the affected individuals in a disaster seem to want to be interviewed by the media. Talking about the event publicly can offer a moment of relief.⁴¹ Experiences of several disasters show that the affected often welcome the opportunity to share the pain, according to the British disaster expert Michael Granatt, with reference to studies on the Piper Alpha, Tjernobyl and natural disaster such as hurricanes.⁴² He claims that it certainly happens that the persons affected by a disaster never want to see a journalist or a camera again, but most of them have no objection if the situation is within the frame of normal media coverage.

At the same time, research has shown that journalists can aggravate the trauma that the affected can be afflicted with.⁴³ Above all, this applies to long-term reactions. Consenting to an interview at the accident site does not mean that the interviewee will perceive it as positive in the long run. Brewin and others think that individual's recovery process can be disrupted by detailed questions.⁴⁴

Family and close friends

In most accidents and disasters the site is sooner or later filled with family and friends of the affected. They can be attractive interview objects for the reporters but also constitute an obstacle to journalists trying to get close to the affected, which can lead to conflicts between these persons and the members of the media.

In the case of inaccessible accident sites such as accidents at sea, the journalists and family members meet in the same place, often in venues chosen by authorities. After the Estonia ferry disaster in 1994, the Estline terminal became not only a "disaster place" in Stockholm but also an information centre and acute crisis centre.⁴⁵ Around 450 family members came to the terminal and 5 621 incoming calls were registered. The Estline terminal became the Estonia Swedes' "accident site". After the Estonia ferry disaster there were great difficulties in accessing reliable information on the ferry passengers. The uncertainty of surviving, missing or dead persons was nearly total. Such uncertainty entails an extra traumatic strain on everyone remotely concerned and puts great demands on journalists' treatment of vague and preliminary information.

Eyewitnesses

The eyewitnesses of the accident in this context are all persons present on the scene besides journalists, rescue personnel, survivors and family/friends. Most accidents also attract a stream of people who happen to be in the vicinity: residents, passers-by, and a curious public who have just heard the news on the radio. The latter group often constitutes a neglected actor at accident sites.

Through history, people have intervened in disasters to help those in need and lend a hand to rescue services. Fires and explosions are examples⁴⁶ of situations where the public has played a part in raising the number of people saved. Such public actors are also sources of information for the media. The media dramaturgy is often intensified through the often self-appointed eyewitness "heroes". The accuracy of their assessments and statements is difficult to verify but are always useful elements in the media dramaturgy. The downside of the self-appointed heroes is the risk that their actions can be used for self-serving interests to highlight their own achievements or, in a worse case scenario, to hide guilt.

Responders – helpers

The care of the directly affected persons at the accident site is provided by the rescue and medical emergency services. A rescue operation involves three actors and three legislative frameworks: The rescue services (often municipal) under the Rescue Services Act,⁴⁷ the police force (state) under the Police Act,⁴⁸ and healthcare (county council) under the Healthcare Act.⁴⁹ The three actors are usually called responders or rescue services in the context of a disaster.

Leadership is exercised by the Rescue Services at a disaster site.⁵⁰ Land-based disasters are managed by a rescue service commanding officer,⁵¹ whose team includes a police force commander and a chief medical doctor. The police have the authority to "... close, evacuate or prohibit entrance to a building, room or other place, notify prohibition of moving a certain object /.../ or take other such measure."⁵² Media often depict this function as if they prevent civilians from intervening. The police have to perform a balancing act between prohibiting and asking civilians for necessary assistance (which seldom happens), while preventing more casualties. The latter is often a consequence of the phenomenon that people who have just been saved from a fire return to it

to save their friends. This conflict between police, survivor and even the media, is described in the government report on the Gothenburg fire,⁵³ and in research studies of the communications situation in connection with the fire.⁵⁴

The medical staff and their efforts are seldom criticised in the context of accidents and disasters. In actual fact they seldom get either praise or complaints and the paramedics' performance on site only figures in a few studies apart from the *National Health and Welfare Board's* so-called *KAMEDO reports*.⁵⁵ They emerge as a grey and hard-working mass – a kind of invisible heroes. Hospital staff, on the other hand, attracts the attention of the media after the acute phase. In the Health and Welfare Board's general guidelines the importance of conducting rescue operations in a humane and dignified way is emphasised, and this includes providing protection from media exposure:

All medical treatment on the accident site must, beyond the somatic care provision, also be imbued with humanity and the basic needs of warmth, water, rest and discretion must be met. Correct and succinct information must be given tactfully and continuously. If possible do not separate family members. It is also imperative that the affected are protected from further new and strong impressions, mass media and the public.⁵⁶

In international disaster medicine there are two main approaches to the treatment of injured in a disaster. The American model advocates minimal treatment on the scene and quick transportation to hospital, so-called *load and go*. The Swedish model prefers more extensive treatment on the site with assessment and registration before transportation to hospital, so-called *stay and play*.⁵⁷ The latter approach entails greater risks of exposing the injured and the deceased, which the journalists must consider. Both the accident site and the hospital are disaster sites in this context.

Irritation and conflicts between rescue personnel and the media have been documented after several major accidents and disasters.⁵⁸ "The mass media often have to bear the brunt of this, and justifiably so", Atle Dyregrov comments in defence of the rescuers' anger with the journalists. He offers the following quote from one of his studies as an example: "Obtrusive journalists who tried to get inside the barriers to take photos of the dead," said a member of the rescue team in response to the question of what was the hardest in connection with a plane crash. Dyregrov also refers to a study of rescuers after the Måbødalen bus accident, which shows that 90 per cent of the local rescue team thought that the media representatives behaved reprehensibly.

Journalists

The journalist does not arrive at the scene alone. Also his or her colleagues or, as it were, competitors, are there. Speaking about competition in the case of disasters may seem insensitive, and previous studies of rescue workers indicate more collegiality than competition between the media.⁶⁰ But the tendencies are there, and gradually the collegial tension tends to grow. The thought of the photos the competitors might have taken, and observing how "close" the other reporters venture, affect the journalists' work in varying degrees. The internal professional discussion after major accidents usually involves blaming other papers for violating press ethics but seldom criticism of their own papers.⁶¹ The contributions to the debate that describe how a colleague has disgraced the profession or caused suffering to others in some way can also be regarded as a reflection of the tension between journalists who have been working alongside under traumatic and stressful conditions.

Meeting and portraying survivors

To understand the work situation at an accident site it is imperative to know something about the survivor's condition and reactions. Around 900 persons died in the Estonia ferry disaster. The Finnish psychology and psychiatry researchers Taiminen and Touminen⁶² observed 32 survivors in immediate hospital care for four days.

Directly after the rescue most of them were calm and only displayed minor emotions. This changed in the course of a few hours. Denial was the first reaction. Four survivors who had lost their family members got amnesia. They remembered "everything but the last hours before their rescue". This makes it difficult for journalists who need reliable sources. Their memories returned after two days, however. Many were thrown between euphoria, denial and anxiety. Some were afraid of the dark and developed agoraphobia. Others mixed aggression with guilt. Survivor reactions are marked by the type of disaster that they have survived. In transportation accidents (ship, train, plane, and coach), the initial reactions are more intense, because the accident is often sudden and quick.⁶³ Often such accidents happen in a remote place and inaccessible place, unknown to the survivors. This unspecific "somewhere" increases the feeling of dislocation. Transportation accidents often involve people of different nationalities, which compound communication between them and their relatives. Usually the media news

is out of sync with the next-of-kin communication. Certain types of transportation accidents, especially plane crashes most often have a 100 per cent fatal outcome.

Fire disasters produce similar reactions in many ways in the survivors, but also differ in some respects from transportation accidents. For instance, there is sometimes a short alert phase even if the spread of the fire is very fast. Survivors of the stadium fire in Bradford in the UK in 1985 described, in regard to their physical experiences, that they barely felt any pain despite their burn injuries. Most of them felt the heat from which they tried to escape. Someone actually drove his car home without shoes – they had burnt.⁶⁴ Psychologically, feelings of terror and panic dominated with a clear flight impulse. Dyregrov suggests that survivors' reaction pattern often involves "rapid, automatic mobilisation of accumulated experience".⁶⁵ At the accident site actors who, to a lesser and greater extent react automatically on the basis of accumulated experiences, meet survivors, rescue staff and journalists. The relevant issue is therefore to define what type of accumulated experience is the most functional one in regard to individual coping and acting at the accident site.

When the directly affected are children and young adults

The Gothenburg fire in 1998 claimed the lives of 63 children and young adults, even more were injured and many survived the horrible event. The journalists reporting on the event were faced with the task of depicting severely traumatised children and young people.

Directly or indirectly affected children and young people constitute an extremely vulnerable group. This thesis deals with such a situation as it involves directly affected, that is, killed or injured, children. Dyregrov emphasises that children have an (temporarily) increased need of closeness and contact in the event of a disaster. Children also display a number of normal symptom behaviours such as anxiety and anger. There is a tendency, however, he thinks, that adults underrate children's disaster reactions and need of help.⁶⁶

The grown-ups attitudes to children seem to be imbued with the perception that children soon forget what they have experienced, which may be the reason for the comparative lack of studies of children's disaster.⁶⁷

Coté and Simpson share the same line of thought, suggesting that parents, in spite of their love and care, are unreliable observers of children's mental status.⁶⁸ Previous research has primarily studied surviving children by interviewing their parents, with the result that many have been lulled into a sense of false security that children escape many normal disaster reactions: "They're okay" has been a far too common statement, in Coté and Simpson's view:

Among the most acute reactions that children are afflicted with is a sense of unreality and disbelief, fear and bewilderment, coping and strength and finally magical thinking. Experiencing the event like a dream is more common in children than being overcome by a sense of unreality, and, above all, they are less inclined to deny the event compared to adults.⁶⁹

The grown-ups' reactions to the event – if present – are very influential in how children react. Even if most children, particularly the older children, behave in a calm and collected manner at an accident site, complete paralysis is not uncommon. Children can lose control of body movements and feelings. They can also hide to escape danger. It is important for rescue staff to know that children tend to wander off from the scene on their own, as Dyregrov stresses.

Unlike young children, teenagers can judge themselves harshly. This is especially true if they feel that they could have prevented something from happening. Guilt and self-recriminations are common and may take hold without objective reasons. Dyregrov notes that there are striking similarities between children's and adults' way of reacting to disasters. This also explains the similarity in the symptoms afflicting affected rescue staff and journalists. When a major accident or disaster involves children, there are special demands put on the reporters, both in terms of consideration and in terms of knowledge about how children react to disasters. This should be heeded when the journalists' sources are children and young adults.

Accident site as workplace

"Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise", Martin Luther is reported to have said standing before the Imperial Diet (assembly) at Worms in 1521. The philosopher Michael Polanyi interprets this to mean that the will of the individual ties her to a voluntary duty: "The freedom of the subjective person to do as he pleases is overruled by the responsible person's freedom to act as he must."⁷⁰ Polanyi thinks that individual

conscience is the product of traditional education and selection. Professional traditions strive to cultivate a conscience among its members.⁷¹ Elaborating on Polanyi's science and society theory, the philosopher Bertil Rolf⁷² interprets his ideas of a *professional conscience*. A functioning profession imparts higher values such as truth and justice and the conception that a calling pervades the professional practice.

At the accident site, the journalists and photographers "cannot do otherwise". What does their professional conscience look like in this extreme working environment? A great deal has to do with the journalists' sense of calling in depicting the unbelievable drama. For a 'real' journalist it is worse to be accused of doing too little than too much in such a situation, as Kerstin Persdotter, head of Swedish *Channel 4 News* at the time, claims in the *Publicists Yearbook* in 1995 after the Estonia ferry disaster. The internal newsroom criticism is more severe if it turns out that a member has underrated an event, she suggests and adds that it is not wrong to criticise and question journalists' way of working, but not enough defence is offered to protect indisputable news reporting. In her own defence, Persdotter goes on to say:

Reporting a disaster with so many victims becomes unbearable to follow, simply because what is described is unbearable./.../There were a few offences made and those were the result of a very difficult working situation. It's not vulture-like to look for survivors and interview them in the hospital, wrapped in blankets, still clearly shocked by their terrifying experiences. I'd like to see the TV viewer or radio listener who wouldn't prefer to hear the story.

Journalists in the field as well as the public as media consumers face the paradox involved in disaster reporting. We want to know more, but not too much. The journalist wants to report what has happened but with some reservations. How do journalists perceive this paradoxical and challenging task?

International studies of disaster journalism

Research on disaster reporting on site is available in a few studies, primarily in the US, Great Britain and Australia. The previously mentioned American professors of journalism, William Coté and Roger Simpson, together with other researchers provide a good survey of the typical issues associated with journalistic practice in the context of accidents, disasters and other trauma in *Covering Violence*.⁷³ Typical issues are, for instance, the journalists' role as the public's eyewitness,

their own experiences, humanity versus the scoop, and reporting when children are victims. They try to define the distinguishing features of reporting on traumatic events and how to handle it since such reporting is often criticised by the public. Coté and Simpson also try to relate experiences of journalistic practice to current research on psychotraumatology with the purpose of supporting responsible journalism and increasing the journalists' understanding of their own crisis reactions and of those of the affected. As Coté and Simpson put it, the aim is to: "get more of the best and less of the worst".

The researchers' conclusions include that journalists sometimes have to shoulder the role of "helper" despite their lack of knowledge of crisis reactions and trauma. In such cases the journalists must "seek to avoid making damage". In addition, it is beyond doubt that no one witnessing a disaster can escape mental reactions, which in some cases could scar for life. This also applies to journalists.

Scandinavian research on disaster journalism

Nordic media researchers Blix & Bech-Karlsen⁷⁴ were quick to study journalists' methods and ethics on accident sites. As residents in the Norwegian North, they had recourse to a number of accidents and disasters in their vicinity. Because of its topography, northern Norway has been unusually hit with mountain and sea accidents. What started out as a teaching material for the journalism programme in northern Norway turned eventually into an extensive research survey in the form of a manual.

Blix and Bech-Karlsen describe how disaster and accident journalism is pursued during different phases of the disaster. They have also studied journalism in connection with a number of Norwegian accidents in the 1980s. The oil platform Alexander Kielland, which capsized in 1980, is an example of how the information from uncertain sources was reproduced in the media, which had to correct themselves continually. The tabloid *VG – Verdens Gang* – launched strong criticism against the security in the North Sea already in its first issue after the accident, thus marking the entrance of the critical disaster journalism on the scene.⁷⁵

A plane crash in the so called Mehamn accident in 1982 led to many years of speculations on the cause of the accident, which was never completely established. The media were eventually forced to wonder to

what extent they should pay attention to rumours and speculations in the event of an accident.⁷⁶

When an aeroplane with 33 passengers crashed into a mountain at Torghatten in 1988, a very risky and hard rescue operation ensued. Photos from the operation were attractive to the media. The national media alerted the local press, which immediately dispatched photographers to the scene. On the day after the accident – a Saturday – both the local papers had many photos of the rescue operation. On Monday the national media and the TV channels published photos of bodies encased in plastic. This introduced an extensive press ethics debate in Norway, which also encompassed self-criticism regarding the intensive pursuit of relatives of the victims.⁷⁷

The Vassdalen avalanche accident in 1986 exemplifies the information crises that sometimes arise in connection with accidents and disasters. The press criticised the Norwegian armed forces and authorities for withholding essential information. In return, the media were attacked for unacceptable methods, witch-hunting scapegoats and lack of consideration for the affected.⁷⁸

The coach accident in Måbødalen (with Swedish school children from Kista) led to intensive press ethical discussions in Norway and Sweden. In this case, the hospitals were the main criticisers of media methods. The hospitals reported after the accident that the affected had experienced the press as "beasts" and the hospital felt haunted by the media. Some members of the responders also felt disturbed by the journalists' intrusive questions about the cause of the accidents during the rescue operation in progress.⁷⁹

Swedish studies

Several major accidents and disasters have been documented and studied in Sweden: the hotel fire in Borås in 1978,⁸⁰ the coach accident in Måbødalen in 1988,⁸¹ the Estonia ferry disaster in 1994,⁸² and the Gothenburg fire in 1998⁸³ are some examples. Swedish researchers and practitioners have also studied major international events such as the 9 September terror attack in 2001.⁸⁴ In addition, there were the fire on the ferry the Scandinavian Star in 1990, the tram accident in Gothenburg in 1992⁸⁵ and accidents and crimes such as the Flink murders in Falun in 1994.⁸⁶ The two former accidents were never evaluated from a media theoretical perspective. In the wake of the Måbødals accident, there was a certain internal professional debate but there is very little

media research related to the event. The coach accident in Måbødalen must, however, be seen as a watershed moment in the Swedish accident and disaster journalism even if research in the field only took off after the Estonia disaster. "A more ruthless professional group has seldom been seen", the priest Stig Jonsson and the journalist Annika Hagström commented in a documentary debate book.⁸⁷

Swedish research on the media coverage of crises, accidents and disasters has been dominated by studies of media coverage (content)⁸⁸ and crisis communication.⁸⁹ Some have adopted the perspective of the affected,⁹⁰ but none provide any detailed analysis of journalism on the accident site.⁹¹ Studies of the responders' working conditions and mental reactions, however, are richly represented.⁹² These provide an important basis for this study of journalist profession's working conditions on the accident site.

The pursuit of publishable material on accidents, disasters and crime poses questions about several professional dilemmas as stressed in some previous works.⁹³

Studies of the fire disaster

Ten days after the Gothenburg fire, the government decided to appoint a special analyst to investigate how the communication of news and information regarding the fire had worked for the affected persons with a non-Swedish background. The appointee was Professor Kent Asp at the Department of Journalism at Gothenburg University. The government referred to the discussions caused by the fire, not least on issues related to the rescue operation, the police investigation and public security in connection with public events. There was also a concern that the debate after the event might fuel and deepen the gaps between groups of people in the community. The investigator was also instructed to investigate the working conditions for the mass media that particularly targeted immigrants.

The government report *SOU 1999:68*⁹⁴ states that the Gothenburg fire is the worst fire in Sweden in modern times. The conclusions on the media performance include that there were relatively few speculations in the media despite the fact that the fire hit the world news and despite the rescue leaders early statement that the fire was deliberately started. Some criticism was directed at the premature and intrusive interviews with young people with intense stress reactions, who were dissatisfied with the achievements of the police and rescue services. The

report states that "it is important and natural to interview eyewitnesses but also important that journalists and photographers are aware that a state of shock can affect people's personalities and judgement."⁹⁵ The problems mentioned regarding the rescue staff's treatment of the youngsters can be explained by the stressful situation, which did not facilitate flexibility in work approaches and attitudes. The report suggests that the people in charge need to know their staff so well that they can send the most suitable persons for the task of working flexibly and emphatically with agitated people with acute stress reactions,⁹⁶ which is a conclusion that should reasonably be applied also to media organisations.

Shortly after the government inquiry of the fire, the *Swedish Board of Psychological Defence* (SPF) initiated an investigation performed by researchers from Örebro and Gothenburg. Stig-Arne Nohrstedt and Larsåke Larsson headed several studies of information and communication situation in connection with the event. While the government inquiry called the event "the fire disaster", the SPF study called it the "Gothenburg fire". The latter was based on medical criteria for major accident and disaster respectively.

Larsson and Nohrstedt's research group primarily mapped the authorities' handling of the fire and its consequences. It was noted, for instance, that the joint disaster management organisation of the City of Gothenburg worked well from a coordinating perspective compared to if various authorities had operated with their own crisis team. Regarding the communication achievements there was an obvious and new channel in use, namely the mobile phone. Via mobile phones the event was communicated rapidly between the young people and their families, and also internally between the rescue and medical services and other authorities. Computer communication via the internet had a great impact too. Even though papers did not exist on the web to the same extent as today in 1998, web pages and chat functions were extensively used. As so often the case in accident and disaster situations, media were the dominant channel of information for the general public. The authorities focused on providing information to the media and one another.

A number of studies of the Gothenburg fire have been conducted with a focus on other aspects than the media perspective, of which some have relevance to this thesis, for instance, two studies at Karlstad University in psychology and public health, one by Per Folkesson on the

rescue services operations and their stress reactions,⁹⁷ and one by Barbro Renck with a similar focus on the police.⁹⁸

Folkesson's study (primarily involving firemen and medical emergency staff) shows that the rescue operations were characterised by focus, physical strength and endurance. The mental mobilisation involved keeping staff focused, paying attention, temporarily shutting down emotional functions and subordinating all actions beyond the operative target of saving lives. The study does not indicate any major psychological consequences for firemen and smoke-helmeted firemen. However, there were more signs among medical staff, crisis support staff, and particularly among women. The importance of teamwork and the function of organisations for a well-executed operation was part of the conclusions.

Renck's study of the police operation during the nightly fire shows that the policemen experienced a number of stressors. The media reporting is described as a stress factor. Other stressors were the uncertainty surrounding the call-out, the strong sensory impressions and the magnitude of the fire. Surprisingly, the study shows increased immunity to stress reactions in those who had experienced more traumatic events after the fire (the study was carried out one and a half year after the fire). Renck suggests that some sort of immunity can arise in combination with coping strategies and that policemen with a "strong psyche" unconsciously or consciously choose difficult challenges.

Margareta Bäck-Wiklund and colleagues at the *CEFOS*⁹⁹ in Gothenburg show in their report how existential issues surfaced after the fire: "Everything came to a standstill in a black hole and nothing was recognisable. Would existence ever be the same again? Would everyday life, joy and faith in the future ever return? Immediately after the fire, it was difficult for many people – not just the directly affected – to see how normality could be reinstated."¹⁰⁰ An interesting question is if the journalists witnessing the fire were filled with similar emotions and anguish.

The crisis groups and their support of people affected by the fire have been the subject of a number of studies by a research group (*FoU Väst*) in the social care area, notably the experience document "Meeting what you meet" in which support centre staff describe their experiences, for instance, social worker Britt Berggren who writes about "committed journalists who really respected the afflicted and our work" and that "cooperating with the media can even have a therapeutic effect."¹⁰¹ Tuija Nieminen Kristoferson has studied how individual grief

can be both private and public, not least through the media.¹⁰² The Gothenburg sociologist Abby Peterson has both studied integration as a process after the fire¹⁰³, and the fire disaster in a collective memory perspective,¹⁰⁴ called "the black hole", and the memory of life before the fire. Peterson refers to the growing research interest in how people create meaning in life. On the basis of this sociological perspective she has studied how the persons affected by the fire together shape and form their memories, sharing their grief. Commemorative days and other ceremonies have assumed great importance, not least on the initiative of *BOA – Fire Victims Families' Association*. Abby Peterson notes among other things, that several factors affect what we remember, namely when we remember, with whom we remember, where we remember, and for what purpose we remember. The trauma is the most forceful version of remembrance, which in the worst case may mean that intrusive recollections can totally occupy an affected or bereaved person.¹⁰⁵ Peterson emphasises the importance of the cultural context in memory processing. This was apparent after the fire since the affected had different backgrounds. There is also a kind of discrepancy between the public mass media death and the private and invisible grief. The latter may make the bereaved feel insecure and abandoned.¹⁰⁶ Previous studies, for instance Eva Reimer's study of Estonia ferry disaster families, have also shown that collective memory sharing is supportive.¹⁰⁷ Reasonably, this means that the rescue services, other responders, and the journalists' would also be in need of a collective memory community after a traumatic assignment where they have witnessed suffering and death.

However, none of the studies mentioned have specifically paid any detailed attention to the journalist profession. This thesis fills this gap, as it is not only based on the empirical studies that was carried out together with media researchers as part of the SPF study above in 1999 and 2000,¹⁰⁸ but is also a substantially more detailed and profound expansion of the empirical material.

Learn from history

One way of acquiring knowledge of the practice of journalism and media organisations is to study its performance in connection with a specific event. We can, for instance, look back on several interesting news coverage in the past, which have shaped the organisation and practice of Swedish media.¹⁰⁹ An early example is train accident in Ställdalen in

1956 when 41 persons, of whom many were children on their way home from school, lost their lives. The day after, the daily newspapers published reports that were extremely obtrusive, detailed and exposing.¹¹⁰ The local press was most obtrusive while the national morning and evening papers were more moderate. Today, the situation is the reverse according to several studies of accidents.¹¹¹ A couple of hours after the accident, which was described in terms of a disaster, the Swedish Radio broadcast a live telephone interview, which later was to be regarded as a breakthrough for telephone interviews in the radio. Bengt Feldreich conducted the interview respectfully. The Swedish radioman Sven Jerring broadcast live from the funeral in the Ljusnarsberg's Church. Subsequent to this event, freelance journalists were retained by the radio to allow for a more "mobile" radio journalism. A few months after the Ställdalen accident, the real news breakthrough for the radio news *Echo of the Day (Dagens Eko)* came when the Sweden – America Line passenger ship Stockholm collided with the Italian ocean liner *Andrea Doria* in thick fog off the US east coast. Across the Atlantic Ocean, the news correspondent Arne Thorén reported on the radio more or less live.¹¹² *Swedish Television* got started with live news broadcasting during the underground collapse at Skanstull in Stockholm in 1967, which lasted for three days and nights, the longest live broadcast up till then, during which the viewers could follow the dramatic event to its successful resolution.¹¹³

Through decades, events such as the coach accident in Måbødalen, Scandinavian Star ferry fire, Estonia ferry disaster, the tsunami in 2004 and others have come to shape media practice. Each event has resulted in a new discussion on norms, ideals, professional code, and ethical rules, sometimes resulting in new routines and procedures, sometimes quickly sinking into oblivion, that is, the same mistakes and press ethical errors are still repeated at a new site. Ekström and Nohrstedt define the aim of the journalistic outcome as "sufficiently" factual and balanced.¹¹⁴ They emphasise that efficiency and the ability to turn the unpredictable and complicated into something predictable and simple is everything in a profession with tight time limits.

Concluding remarks

The situation is a great importance to journalists' reactions and performance at the accident site. Is it a natural or a technical ('man made')

disaster? A deliberate fire or terror threat can be psychologically more difficult to handle than an unintentional plane crash. But a natural disaster, unprovoked by humans can still be traumatic to report for a journalist. The geographical range of a disaster also affect the journalists' task, as does the time it happened. When a disaster happens in the night, or weekend when staffing is minimal, there is less chance of collegial support, professional backup and leadership decisions. The place also affects working conditions and reaction patterns. Is the area accessible or not? Are the journalists eyewitnesses or do they get their information second-hand at another venue? The Estonia ferry disaster at sea was not possible to witness. At the Gothenburg fire, on the other hand, both reporters and photographers witnessed the raging fire.

The question who the directly affected persons are is also of the greatest importance. Are they children, young persons or adults? Are they even communicable? The journalists' contacts at the accident site play an important role, and often involve tensions and even conflicts that the reporters and photographers have to handle. Survivors who think the media presence is a provocation, rescue workers who think that the photographers are in the way or that the journalists interfere, family members who want to protect their loved ones and curious people who want to feature in the media in the roles of self-proclaimed heroes and saviours. Often tension may arise between journalists and also between reporters on the site and editors in the office.

No accident or disaster is like another. Every event has its own ingredients colouring the situation. The Gothenburg fire at Backaplan in October 1998 was essentially an uncontrollable and initially uncertain situation. The affected were all children and young people, representing 19 nationalities. The fire was raging when the first reporters and photographers arrived at the scene. They became witnesses to a disaster. It was night-time and a holiday, which means that the press and media were staffed by fewer people. There were many stressors: strong sensory impressions, many children, time pressure, uncertainties and a palpable role conflict for the reporters between the private person and the professional person.

Footnotes

- ¹ E.g. Dyregrov (1992) (1997); Dyregrov & Mitchel (1992); Michel et al. (2001)
- ² Disaster, after the greek *katastroph*: 'subversive', 'destruction'. (www.ne.se)
- ³ Wallenius (1996) p. 29.
- ⁴ Meyers (1991), *ibid*.
- ⁵ Wallenius (1996)
- ⁶ Some Swedish studies are Lidskog et al. (2000); Enander & Jacobsen (1996); Jarlbro (2004); Hedman & Trost (1997) Hedman (1999); Dahlgren et al. (1997)
- ⁷ *Socialstyrelsens handbok för arbete med begrepp och termer*. Internal working book 2006-04-20 &: <http://app.socialstyrelsen.se/termbank/> (in Swedish)
- ⁸ Sund (1985)
- ⁹ Socialstyrelsen: SOFS 2005:13; "Crisis support at traumatic events" (Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse) *The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) (2008)*
- ¹⁰ In Quarantelli: *What is a disaster?* (1998). Also in Larsson & Nohrstedt (2000)
- ¹¹ Dynes (1998)
- ¹² Dyregrov (1992), p. 9
- ¹³ Lundin (1992); Brandsjö (1996)
- ¹⁴ Lundin (1992), p. 30f
- ¹⁵ In the Tsunami disaster 2004, totally 544 swedes lost their lives. The amount of dead Swedish victims after the Estonia disaster in 1994 was 551.
- ¹⁶ Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990), p. 54.
- ¹⁷ SOU 1999:48
- ¹⁸ Enander et al. (1995) p. 37
- ¹⁹ Larsson & Kallenberg (ed.) (2003) p. 161
- ²⁰ Enander et al. (1995) p. 41 and in Larsson & Kallenberg (ed.) (2003) p. 161 f
- ²¹ Larsson (1987)
- ²² Öhman (1993) in Lewis & Haviland (ed.) *Handbook of emotions*; Enander et al. (1995) p.44
- ²³ Weisaeth explains "stressor" (1993/1997)
- ²⁴ Based on Dyregrov (1992) p. 173.
- ²⁵ *ibid* (1992) p. 173 f
- ²⁶ Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990), p. 20
- ²⁷ Nohrstedt & Nordlund (1993)
- ²⁸ F. eks. Jarlbro (1993); Raitilla (1996); Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990)
- ²⁹ Memory notes from "Uppsala Psycho Trauma Days 1998" by "Sveriges Krispsykologiska och katastrofmedicinska föreningar". Uppsala, Sweden, 22-23 oktober 1998.
- ³⁰ SOU 1999:48; SOU 1999:68; Härstedt (1995); Boije Hviid (1999); Dyregrov (1992); Raitilla (1996); Lundälv (1999); Larsson & Nohrstedt et al. (2000); Blix & Bech Karlsen (1990); Englund (1999b); Renck (2002)
- ³¹ Hagström & Jonsson (1997), p. 298-299
- ³² Ekman (1999), p. 166
- ³³ Ekman (1999), p. 171.
- ³⁴ Alström (1996), p. 56 ff
- ³⁵ SOU 1999:68
- ³⁶ Dyregrov (1992) explains 'responders' mainly as rescue staff, but can also include staff and volunteers within psychological support etc.
- ³⁷ Himmelstein & Faithorn (2002) p. 538
- ³⁸ Folkesson (2003) p. 154
- ³⁹ Dyrgrov (1992), Renck (2002), p. 45ff
- ⁴⁰ Lundin (1992) p. 33
- ⁴¹ Harrison (1999), referring to Shearer (1991). Also see Lundin (1992); Englund (1999a+b)
- ⁴² Granatt in Harrison (ed.) (1999).
- ⁴³ Enander, Larsson & Wallenius (1995;); Jarlbro (1993); Lundin (1992); Mjønes, Goet

- zinger-Falk & Stadin (1992); Brewin (2000) in "Crisis support at traumatic events" (Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse) *The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (2008)
- 44 Brewin (2000) in "Crisis support at traumatic events" (Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse) *The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (2008)
- 45 SOU 1999:48, p. 51 ff
- 46 KAMEDO 73, and other KAMEDO reports: 1, 24, 29, 39, 47, 51, 54, 57, 58, 61, 64.
<http://www.socialstyrelsen.se/kamedo>
- 47 Swedish law: *Räddningstjänstlagen* 1986:1102
- 48 Swedish law: *Polislagen* 1984:387
- 49 Swedish law: *Hälso- och sjukvårdslagen* 1982:763
- 50 *Räddningstjänstlagen* 12§ states (in Swedish): "Räddningskåren ska göra de räddningsinsatser som kommunen har ansvaret för enligt denna lag. Kommunen får överlåta till någon annan att göra räddningsinsatser som kräver särskild kompetens".
- 51 *Räddningstjänstlagen* 31§. "Det finns också räddningsinsatser som är av sådan omfattning att regeringen i särskilda fall får föreskriva eller bestämma att en länsstyrelse eller annan myndighet får ta över ansvaret för räddningsinsatsen. Detta kan bli aktuellt inom en eller flera kommuner. I sådana fall utses räddningsledare av den myndighet som fått ansvaret!"
- 52 *ibid.* 2§
- 53 SOU 1999:68
- 54 Larsson & Nohrstedt et al. (2000)
- 55 <http://www.socialstyrelsen.se/kamedo>
- 56 "Psyiskt och socialt omhändertagande vid stora olyckor och katastrofer".
Socialstyrelsens Allmänna Råd 1991:2, rev. 1996. p. 23.
- 57 Swedish law: *Hälso- och sjukvårdslagen* 1982:763. p. 13
- 58 Dyregrov (1992), p. 178ff;
- 59 *Ibid.* p. 178
- 60 Englund (2002)
- 61 Articles after different accidents and disasters in www.journalisten.se and www.medievarlden.se.
- 62 Taiminen & Touiminen (1996)
- 63 Hodgkinson (1988); Hodgkinson & Stewart (1991), p.55
- 64 Hogkinson & Stewart (1991) p. 56
- 65 Dyregrov (1992) p. 15
- 66 Dyregrov (1992) p. 105
- 67 *ibid.*
- 68 Cote & Simpson (2000) p. 185
- 69 Terr (1990) i Dyregrov (1992) p. 107
- 70 Rolf (1995), p. 189. Also see Polyani (1958) p. 308-309
- 71 *ibid.* p. 191
- 72 Rolf (1995)
- 73 Cote & Simpson (2000)
- 74 Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990)
- 75 Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990) p. 42
- 76 *ibid.* p. 46
- 77 *ibid.* p. 48
- 78 *ibid.* p. 55
- 79 *ibid.* p. 64
- 80 Lundin & Lindström (1982)
- 81 Hagström & Jonsson (1990); Håkansson & Schulman (1992); *När det ofattbara händer* (1998)
- 82 Several research reports from Swedish National Board of Psychological Defence (SPF);
Härstedt (1995); Boie Hviid (1999). SOU 1998:32; SOU 1999:48 *Lära av Estonia*.
- 83 Larsson & Nohrstedt (ed.) (2000); Englund (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2002); SOU 1999:68
Brandkatastrofen i Göteborg; SOU 2000:113 *Branden i Göteborg – en sammanfattning*.
- 84 Nordström (2002); Modh (2002); Svensson (2002)
- 85 KAMEDO-reports e.g. about Scandinavian Star 1990 (SOS report1993:3); Spåravagns-

- lyckan i Göteborg 1992 (SoS report 1994:2 / KAMEDO 62).
- ⁸⁶ Alström (1997)
- ⁸⁷ Hagström & Jonsson (1997), the chapter "Pressen och etiken", p. 296f
- ⁸⁸ E.g. Saar et al (1996); Lauristin & Vilhalemm (ed) (1996); Hadenius, Hedman & Nowak (1996); Kolstad (1996); Odland (1997); Andén-Papadopoulos & Höijer (ed.) (1996)
- ⁸⁹ Case studies about the Estonia disaster by Larsson & Nohrstedt (1996); Raitilla (1996); and about the Gothenburg fire disaster 1998, by Larsson & Nohrstedt (ed.) (2000). About media and crises, by Harrison (1999); Alan (2001); Coté & Simpson (2000); Lidskog, Nohrsetdt & Warg (ed.) (2000); Jarlbro (1993); Nohrstedt & Nordlund (1993)
- ⁹⁰ Reimers (2000)
- ⁹¹ Englund (2000, 2002) presents some pre-studies, based on interviews, with media staff reporting from the Gothenburg fire disaster 1998. Also see Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990).
- ⁹² Some examples are Lindström & Lundin (1982); Lundin (1992); Michel, Lundin & Otto (2001); van der Kolk, Mc Farlane & Weisæth (ed.) (1996); Dyregrov (1992 & 1997); Larsson, G (ed.) (1999); Wallenius (1997); KAMEDO 73: *Katastrofmedicinska studier under 35 år*; Malmsten (1992a+b); Brandsjö (1996); Larsson & Österdahl (1995); Renck (2002)
- ⁹³ Englund (1999a, 1999b, 2002).
- ⁹⁴ SOU 199:68 *Brandkatastrofen i Göteborg. Drabbade, medier, myndigheter*.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 182
- ⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 183
- ⁹⁷ Folkesson (2003)
- ⁹⁸ Renck (2002)
- ⁹⁹ CEFOS stands for "Centrum för forskning om Offentlig sektor" (Centre for research on public sector).
- ¹⁰⁰ From the preface in Bäck-Wiklund et al (2002), also cited in Peterson (2006), p.7.
- ¹⁰¹ Berggren i Rönmark (2001) p. 335
- ¹⁰² Nieminen Kristoferson (2001)
- ¹⁰³ Peterson (2002)
- ¹⁰⁴ Peterson (2006)
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 22.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 45.
- ¹⁰⁷ Reimers (2000)
- ¹⁰⁸ Englund (2000) in Larsson & Nohstedt et al, p. 157-190 and 232-236.
- ¹⁰⁹ E.g. Djerf-Pierre & Weibull (2001); Englund (2002b)
- ¹¹⁰ Englund (2002b)
- ¹¹¹ E.g. Alström (1997)
- ¹¹² Englund (2002b)
- ¹¹³ Brandsjö (1996), p. 54ff
- ¹¹⁴ Ekström & Nohstedt (1996) p. 153

3. THE PROFESSION

Journalists, rescue service staff, police officers and health care personnel – all these professional categories arrive at an accident site on a professional mission. While the rescue services, the police, and emergency care services have the duty to save, help and physically prevent the spread and consequences of the accident or disaster, the journalist's duty is to observe and report. This situation places the journalist as a professional witness in a psychologically very special position, and is a situation that is minimally explored in research.

A person with a specific profession arrives at a place where the situation is as extreme as described in the previous chapter. This chapter deals with the tasks, demands and expectations that accompany reporters and photographers to the accident site and the dilemma and conflicts that they may encounter as a result of the extreme working conditions at the accident site. What tasks are involved in the assignment and the journalistic framework? What challenges, considerations, norms and rules govern the professional practice in these extreme circumstances? And what tensions arise between the private and professional roles?

Journalistic mandate

The media are indispensable channels in a crisis affecting a community, locally, nationally or globally. The journalism practised is expected to be true, factual and relevant, but is in fact also spiced with a dramaturgy beyond the dramatic components of the actual event. People want to know "everything", and also be spared the worst. A recurring journalist's dilemma is this: how do we report on what has happened in a bearable way and with tolerable photos in terms of press ethics? How do we achieve providing a complete account of facts while avoiding unwanted publicity for the individual? The impetus to write is strong. The typical disaster happens unexpectedly, affects many and the outcome is uncertain. It is, in other words, per definition a perfect news item, which explains why the media are especially triggered by such extreme events.

A driving force of all accident reporting is also the fact that accidents (and crime) constitute the Swedish news consumers' primary reading.¹ A day of newspaper reading, radio listening and TV watching reveals

that the news flow is filled with accidents, crime, war, disasters and tragedies of all kinds, thus indicating that such events are important elements of news journalism.

Already in the mid-1980s, Lennart Weibull demonstrated that news of accidents and crime is essential to a newspaper's appeal.² Hvitfelt has confirmed the media audience's attraction to accident and crime in more recent studies.³ The journalists share this assessment of news value, as shown in Marina Ghersetti's chapter in *The Swedish Journalist Corps (Den svenska journalistkåren)*.⁴ Sensational, dramatic and excited news tops the Swedish journalists' list. To this category belong accidents and disasters.⁵

Such events are often related through the media camera lens before citizens and authorities have had time to react and act. The merciless abruptness has often been criticised for good reasons. But again, the question is if an unbearable event can ever be recounted in a bearable way.

At the rate of media expansion and growing importance in our lives, the amount of news reporting and information in the event of crisis has increased. Unexpected events with many deaths attract the greatest interest. Lowe Hedman notes that ca. 50 000 people die in traffic accidents every year. This is tantamount to 200 jumbo jets crashing every year. During two days after the Lockerbie plane crash in 1988 more people lost their lives on the American highways than in Lockerbie.⁶ In other words, in terms of news value, interest lies in unexpected mass death events rather than the gradual accumulation of accidental deaths.

The basic conception of the role of media is actually debated. The freedom of speech and the press and access to information set the norms for the media. At the same time, there is a basic confusion regarding the function of the media in accidents and disasters, as the Norwegian media researcher Jan Inge Sørbo has pointed out.⁷ When are deviations from the norm justified? When should other considerations be made? How should journalists relate to their own profession at the accident site?

At the beginning of the 1990s, Kent Asp put the question of the journalist's mandate to the test in the journalism anthology *The Assignment*.⁸ Firstly: Does something called the journalistic mandate really exist? Secondly: Where does the mandate come from? The answers only partly supported the fact that the democratic mandate is to inform the public. Asp also claims that we need to ask to which media and what

content the requirement to inform the public pertains. He further asks who decides if the requirement has been met or not. A speculative answer is that such assessment can be left to public debate and research. But publicists and journalists must evaluate and control the mandate too, in Asp's view. Journalists should be in the service of the public and truth.⁹ In the service of the public, media consumers should be influenced in a certain direction and in the service of truth citizens should be given the information and knowledge required to make their own decisions. In the latter case, the paradoxical situation of state control of the media and their free and independent position is palpable. Being in the service of truth does not necessarily equal being in the service of the public.

Kent Asp's argument and questions are relevant in a study of journalistic practice at an accident site. The question of who gives the assignment and how, is of interest as is the question of self-evaluation and control during and after the completion of the mission.

In several situations the journalist's self-scrutiny has been known, as public reactions are fairly immediate. But even if discussions have been conducted for decades there are still no clear key words for journalist practice at accident or disaster sites. However, it is noteworthy that the journalistic discussions are seldom about the issue 'why we are here', but rather 'how we should proceed when we are here'. Blix and Bech-Karlsen think that the first issue is closely linked to the media's independent position, which means that media loyalty is with the public.¹⁰ The journalists are therefore at the site on behalf of the public. As a result, anyone who closes the door to the media closes the door to the public. Needless to say, there are situations when doors must temporarily be closed and the presence of the media regulated, but the right to observe and recount is still the basic principle.

Media and journalist functions in accident reporting

The role of the media at the accident or disaster site is complex and the expectations of journalistic practice may be perceived as contradictory. What are the professional demands? Some earlier studies deal with this issue.¹¹ Nohrstedt has described a number of paradoxes emerging in media reporting on crises and disasters, which can illustrate the dilem-

mas that journalists face: Should I inform or examine? Be quick or correct? Create understanding or dramaturgy? Evaluate or think of news value?¹²

The first paradox is that the media are assumed to provide a national stabilising information channel while the journalists are expected to be unaligned with the state and even critically scrutinise public authorities and administration. It is difficult to say what this paradox means in a specific situation such as a disaster, other than that it requires flexibility and adjusting to situations.

The second paradox entails a conflict between the demands for speed, as the case is for all news journalism, and for correct information about the disaster. Both demands cannot be fulfilled simultaneously and have different importance to different journalists and situations.

The third paradox is the one involving understanding and entertainment. The founder of the Swedish newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, Rudolf Wall, in his time emphasised the importance of interest.¹³ In the so-called media logic, certain presentational forms can be related to a situation in a way that creates a situational media dramaturgy. Sensationalism, stereotyping, and polemics are common in the media's pursuit to awaken interest. In a disastrous situation there is a risk that the dramaturgy becomes an encumbrance to both the information delivery and the investigative and problematizing type of journalism.¹⁴

The fourth paradox, described by Nohrstedt, is the conflict between evaluation and news value. This is related to the time perspective in the reporting against the background that the short-term journalism is influenced by the news value while the evaluation and the profound reporting take place in a later phase.

The contradictory aspects in covering an accident or disaster are the biggest challenges to the journalists. This and previous studies exemplify several conflict situations related to all of these paradoxes such as confrontations during media reporting on accident scenes.¹⁵

Nearly all disasters unfold according to a fixed pattern.¹⁶ A number of development phases can usually be discerned, as in all types of crisis, not least the individual different states of stress reactions.

Needless to say, journalism may take varying forms in different phases of an accident or disaster. When an event is preceded by a warning period, this could be called crisis or risk journalism.¹⁷ This form of media reporting in Sweden has been studied by Jarlbro, Hedman, Nordlund and Nohrstedt and others.¹⁸ From a warning period (risk

journalism) via an acute phase (disaster journalism) to a so-called ambivalence period (investigative news journalism), a new direction phase (with more long-term investigative journalism) could eventually be reached. These phases can probably last for days or weeks. The drama or the excitement may remain at a high level.¹⁹ The disaster journalism in the acute phase of the event may be characterised by a present tense form and the press reporting shares features with the speedy uncensored news transmission of the radio and the TV. The later phase (ambivalence period) can last for months or years, partly depending on the extent to which the cause of the accident has been established. The Estonia ferry disaster is such a still unresolved event and the subject of authority and press inquiries whenever new information is produced. Commemorations and new investigations are usually distressful for those who were traumatised.

Crisis situations are characterised by lability and involve choice-making. Individual and collective stress marks the situation, which also leaves room for subjective interpretations. Handling the conditions, tensions and paradoxes in such a situation is not an easy matter for the individual journalist. It is a matter of public concern that the media members should be able to handle such situations.

In the study *The impact of the Tsunami (Tsunamins genomslag)* on the media handling of the tidal wave in South Asia in 2004, it is stated that the role of the press as information provider and channel for finding missing people was greater than ever before.²⁰ The press assisted in calling for missing people on the web as well as in the papers. In this way, the news reporting targeted both readers in Sweden and the Swedes in Thailand. The press functioned as information as well as news provider.

The journalist profession may sometimes be routinely difficult and stressful. At an accident site or a disaster area the stress and pressure are increased. The issues normally facing journalists are sharpened and norms and rules may have to be revised. The battle against the clock is there, along with the pursuit of status within and beyond the profession. The scoop, headlines and newspaper poster photos are incentives that may conflict with their own morals and ethics. Personal journalism is perhaps set against industrial media production, that is, the paper's economic interest against individual wish or reluctance to exaggerate and dramatize the event. Tensions and conflicts between journalists and rescue staff can aggravate the situation considerably. Beyond the interpersonal tensions there is also a field of tension between theory

and practice and between the text and reality. Professional ethics and press ethical rules are such examples.

The journalist – the reporter and the photographer – has a difficult and complex task as an indirectly affected individual and a professional eyewitness. The professional conscience may guide more than written norms and rules. Arriving at an accident site and quickly forming an idea of what has happened is difficult. The Swedish Armed forces' training manual states: "The greatest difficulty in complex operations is often to identify and define the situation, the task or the problem."²¹

The heart of news journalism is to assess, interpret and recount an event in a short time. When this has to take place in chaotic circumstances, high demands are placed on the individual journalist. The risk of erroneous decisions increases as it does in all decision-making situations under duress.

The interpretation a professional person makes in a given situation contributes to a subjective view of reality there and then. Interpreting and coping with a situation is a way of creating order. The historian Peter Englund suggests that "order is something we invent to hide a confusion we cannot bear to watch."²²

Organising work

As the American sociologist and media researcher Gaye Tuchman put it, news journalism "is to routinize unpredictability."²³ Disasters and accidents belong to the most unpredictable that we can imagine. And even when this unexpected event happens, the production process, deadlines and distribution have to be maintained within given time limits. News production involves organisation to a great extent. It is a paradox in news production that routine is set against flexibility.²⁴ The latter is a great challenge in the case of an accident, as this may be followed by decisions on more publishing, extra editions, more staff, temporary newsroom at the site, and so on.

The practice of journalism encompasses a multitude of situations of choice, deliberations and priorities. These are partly based on the social and editorial duty, partly on the circumstances and conditions of the assignment. Norwegian media researcher Martin Eide describes journalism practice as "creativity in an industry-like environment."²⁵ Studies of journalistic practice indicate that it frequently diverges from the professional ideal of creative journalism. Reality often turns out to be

very structured. But within the structures, there is usually room for variations in performing the assignment.

The power to publish or not to publish lies with the media, sometimes with the individual journalist, but more often with the editor and the publisher, or at times even the owner. The control of the assignment to the journalist, as well as the content of the paper, can apply to both the acquisition and editing of the text and photo. The journalist's own freedom of selection and interpretation can vary.²⁶

When reporters arrive at the site, they may have given themselves the assignment as the only person on duty in the middle of the night, or in a place without a local reporter, to which a journalist or photographer arrives first. In practice, the journalist on the scene can direct the needs of the paper, request more colleagues, or decides what has to be done. After some hours, when the editors have caught up and collected information from several channels other than the reporter in place, the control of the process is handed over to the office.

Management and co-worker role

News journalism involves handling the unpredictable in a predictable way. When the situation is extremely unpredictable, as it is during a major accident or disaster, routine procedures may have to be replaced with improvisation and intuition. In both cases – the normal day and the unusual day – the morning meeting plays a great role in gaining control of the product to be (article or newspaper). Monica Löfgren-Nilsson's studies of three editorial offices show, however, that the morning meetings seldom allow room for discussions of journalism.²⁷ They are rather based on the news editor's list of job priorities. The morning meeting seems to be the editors' chance to control work. If an accident happens in the night, the function of the morning meeting is both to get information on the night's events and manage the work ahead. Ekström and Nohrstedt mention the time pressure as a limitation of the journalist's chance to fulfil ideals, but also that time frames are a resource.²⁸ The production process is preset and the "editorial machinery" is still at work and everyone knows which slots to fill and when.

Monica Löfgren Nilsson notes that the past fifteen years have involved radical changes in Swedish newsrooms.²⁹ Digitalisation and in-

creased production, fewer employees and more temporary project employees, increased stress and demands for multi-task skills are the reasons.

In the daytime, newsroom staff would normally have time for reviewing a colleague's material. At night, such procedures may be neglected. Löfgren-Nilsson's previous newsroom studies show that the night editor must often settle for checking headlines and photo captions. Time pressure in combination with modern production technology has had this effect. The technology allows reporter and the photographer to insert their own material and in principle "pour the text and photos" directly into the paper. The chief editor can therefore not be sure that a night chief and an editor have read the texts.³⁰

In a newspaper office, the news director leads, plans and organises the daily work. The chief editor and sometimes the managing editors, on the other hand, play a more peripheral role in daily journalistic practice. Their decisions, on the other hand, can have immediate consequences for the newsroom practice, for instance, regarding publishing on a normally publication free holiday, which was the case at the time of the Gothenburg fire in 1998.

It is reasonable to assume that the kind of journalistic product that the reporter or photographer on the scene feel that they are expected to deliver varies with the type of paper they work for. In Ekström and Nohrstedt's studies of newsrooms it was clear that the evening press has the aim to attract attention, provoke, and entertain, thus differing greatly from the aims of the local press. The evening press articles need not always be balanced and may contain certain exaggerations, generalisations, far-reaching approaches and sensational headlines.³¹ On the other hand, Ekströms and Nohrstedt's participatory observations at an evening newspaper showed that the colleagues protected the personal dignity of interviewees to a greater extent than the debate on evening press journalism seems to suggest. The researchers found no evidence that evening press journalist were more cynical and careless than other reporters. However, evening press journalists took a lighter approach to norms such as comprehensiveness and accuracy.³²

To a varied extent the press has its own house rules for reporting. When Tomas Andersson-Odén in 1996 investigated the existence of policy documents in Swedish newsrooms, it turned out that half of the pressrooms had one.³³ The question is if such policies serve as control instruments for managements or if individual employees apply them.

Löfgren-Nilsson notes that the papers' policy documents have no relevance to reporters and news directors in their daily work.

What is the reporters' relation to their news directors and how controlled do they feel in their work? Löfgren-Nilsson's studies shows that it is primarily non-urban paper journalists that enjoy great freedom to choose how to cover something. In different degrees, reporters and photographers are under the orders of news directors that are either democratic or authoritarian in their leadership. Most news directors seem to be democratic leaders, seeing themselves as advisers and sounding boards. The democratic leadership is not unequivocally positive. It can also be an effect of lack of initiative.³⁴

Freelance journalists work under different terms than employed journalists. But the freelancers must also adjust to the norms and ideals characterising the news organisations where they publish their articles. When the alert is given, the freelancers are often at the accident site. Some photographers use the SOS Alarm Centre for emergency calls, as a wake up call. Freelance reporters living outside the cities often work with great mobility in time and room.

Professional codes and ethics

The press ethical rules and the professional rules among the press corps are important to Swedish journalists. Everyday journalist practice is filled with difficult and contradictory consideration. At an accident site the considerations can be complicated, change character and the decisions taken can have considerable consequences. News journalism and its ethical ideals are so demanding that they are difficult to achieve, as Ekström and Nohrstedt point out.³⁵ While being demanding, they might also be unclear and contradictory.

Rules are very important in the performance of tasks in all operational areas. But rules cannot be supreme. They also need a practice. Today, rule and socially defined patterns are often interchangeable. A social community decides what is right or wrong in certain given situations and what is in accordance with the rule and what is a violation of it.³⁶ It can also be seen as a basic principle of many professional codes defined by social and professional communities. If individuals really follow the rule or simply think they do, is a completely different matter.

Norms differ from rules by not being bound by law. The third Commandment "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" is an example of a norm – a recommendation. Codes or rules, on the other hand, are followed by sanctions or sanction possibilities. For what do we need norms? When we realise the value of a norm, force is invested in it. It involves how we should act or should not act in different situations. According to Hans-Gunnar Axberger, a basic press ethical professional norm is always to tell the truth.³⁷ Essentially, norms are passed-down experiences of what is right or wrong. Swedish journalists have both written and unwritten professional norms. To these can be added the existing professional and publicity codes and rules, which can be sanctioned if violated.

The professional ethics expected to guide the journalists in their work are specified in the booklet *Code of Ethics for Press, Radio and Television in Sweden (Spelregler för press, radio och TV)*³⁸ which is published and updated by the joint board of media associations in Sweden, including the journalists' union, the Swedish publicists' association and the branch organisation of press publishers. The journalists are thus committed to follow certain principles in their professional practice.

The publicity rules involve the following recommendations:

- *Provide accurate news* by being critical of sources and checking factual details. The poster, preamble and headline should be supported by the text.
- *Respect individual privacy*. Consider carefully any publicity which could violate the privacy of individuals. Refrain from such publicity unless the public interest obviously demands public scrutiny.
- *Exercise care in the use of pictures*.
- *Be cautious in publishing names*.

The professional codes pertain to the journalistic integrity and credibility in the way material is obtained. Reasonable requests from interviewed people of knowing in advance how and where their statements will be published must be met. Special consideration should be paid to inexperienced interviewees, and the interviewee should be notified if the interview is intended for publication or only for information. Interviews and photos must not be faked: "Montage, electronic retouch and captions should be handled in such a way as not to mislead or deceive the reader. Whenever a picture has been altered through montage or

retouch this should be stated. This also applies to such material when it is filed in picture libraries”.

Special consideration should be paid to the photograph assignment and to the procurement of photos, especially in connection with accidents and crime: ”Always show the greatest possible consideration for victims of crime and accidents. Consider carefully the question whether to publish names and pictures with regard to the victims and their relatives”.

The ”rules of the game” regarding photos and names apply to reporters, photographers and their supervisors. ”Consider carefully any publicity which could violate the privacy of individuals. Refrain from such publicity unless the public interest obviously demands public scrutiny”, it says.

It is obvious that the interpretation of the rules is elastic. The cultural climate and general mentality have increasingly come to take a less tolerant view of the publication of names.³⁹ Many people think that most journalistic blunders are in violation of laws, agreements and ethical rules. In actual fact, the media themselves exercise the most crucial censorship in accordance with the current press ethical system, even when the law would allow publication.

Of the different professional codes, advertising ethics is probably closest to press ethics. Another example is the ethical codes of the medical profession, the so-called doctors’ rules.⁴⁰ Although these directives are often called rules, they are in fact norms and principles. However, some of these professional ethical codes are linked to sanctions, such as exclusion from the professional community, and therefore meet the criterion of ”rule”.

Let us translate the two dimensions of ethics – praxis and inner character – into journalistic terms: the press ethical framework is then ”ethos” and ”ethikos” is what the individual journalist actually does and wants to do in a specific situation, i.e. the theory and practice of press ethics.

Journalism ethics involves two contradictory demands. One is the demand for truth and the other is the importance of respecting personal dignity. The press ethical guidelines can be said to be a necessary but not satisfactory part of ethical journalistic practice. Many newspapers have realised this and issued additional house rules and policy documents on ethics and morality in reporting. Mostly, however, the ethical dimension exists in an unwritten and tacit form, for example, in

continuous newsroom discussions.⁴¹ This may apply especially to traumatic events and disasters as the situation is usually characterised by great uncertainty and a great many people that experience stress reactions, including journalists.

Approved and questioned media ethics

While the mass media devote more and more space to ethical and moral issues, press ethics has paradoxically been more questioned in recent years. Complaints made to ethical review boards of Radio and TV and the press (The Swedish Broadcasting Authority, Radio Complaints Commission and the Press Complaints Commission) are frequent. Many express disapproval of faked interviews, photos secretly taken and spectacular approaches in requesting interviews (for example, when journalists have stated a false identity (as close relative or friend) to gain access to hospital wards.⁴²

Another problem in the journalism ethics is the globalisation of the media situation. Traditionally, the proximity of event and newspaper office has made newspapers careful about photos, names and other delicate matters out of consideration for the family and friends of victims. But today, when nearly every Swede can watch *CNN*, the geographical distance loses significance. *CNN* and *Sky Channel* could show close-ups of victims in the Baltic Sea after the Estonia ferry disaster. And in a developed industrial country like Sweden, far away is also near.

What do the ethical principles mean to Swedish journalists? The studies made at the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, at Gothenburg University, show tremendous support for the press codes among journalists. Since the first survey, made in 1989, the support has increased. The principles of treating individuals with care have the strongest support among women and younger journalists. In recent years there have been several debates and discussions on the press ethical framework, both internally in the branch journals (*Pressens Tidning* and *Journalisten*), and externally in newspaper opened pieces (opinion editorials), in TV and radio debates. More and more voices are heard calling for a review of the rules and also of the institutional ethical review made by The Swedish Broadcasting Authority (Granskningsnämnden för radio och TV) and the Press Ombudsman (PO/PoN).⁴³ In the autumn of 2006 the book *Media ethics under de-*

*bate (Medieetik under debatt)*⁴⁴ was published, in which representatives of the media and organisations and media researchers and press officers discuss Swedish media ethics. Claims are made that the press ethical system has eroded from inside and that the present system lacks legal certainty for the individual and that the self-correction system does not handle complaints on media work methods.

Rules of consideration and conduct

The principle of "informed consent" is applied in medical ethics. A corresponding professional ethical principle is observed in journalism regarding acquiring material: Agree to reasonable requests from interviewees of being informed in advance how and where their statements will be published.⁴⁵ In connection with disasters, however, this rule appears to be unreasonable against the backdrop of chaotic circumstances that would effectively prevent this type of communication between reporter and interviewee from taking place.

Respect for individual integrity is fundamental to many professions. In journalism this is reflected in the seventh publicity rule: "Consider carefully any publicity which could violate the privacy of individuals. Refrain from such publicity unless the public interest obviously demands public scrutiny".

The ninth publicity rule refers to, among others, disaster victims: "Always show the greatest possible consideration for victims of crime and accidents. Consider carefully the question whether to publish names and pictures with regard to the victims and their relatives".

Journalism ethics does not only apply to what goes into the paper or the broadcasting media, but also how the individual journalist behaves on site. In this respect reporters differ from photographers, as continuing to speak with a person experiencing an obvious stress reaction, involves a more active step than pressing the camera button. The journalist can withdraw, text remain unwritten, whereas the photographer cannot undo a photo.⁴⁶

Studies of Swedish journalists have shown that very few think that it is acceptable to conduct interviews with eyewitnesses who are dealing with their stress reactions in connection with accidents.⁴⁷ Generally speaking, Swedish journalists take care to protect the rights of the individual. Women are more considerate than men.⁴⁸ Another factor in-

cluded in the journalist surveys is their views on name publishing, indicating that the number of journalists who think names should be published without exceptions in the case of children and adults is increasingly dropping.⁴⁹

The degree of consideration given is without comparison the most debated and studied press ethical issue. This is partly explained by the fact that the public is usually particularly concerned and disturbed when victims of accidents and disasters are exposed. Ekström and Nohrstedt argue that the justification for lack of consideration is always made with reference to the primary task of journalism: to tell the truth in the media.⁵⁰ Consideration involves both opportunity and willingness. But assessments as to the where the line is drawn vary.

Interviews with survivors who try to handle their stress reactions and eyewitnesses of accidents and disasters constitute an area not treated in the press ethical rules.⁵¹ One of the rules partly covers such situations: "Show special consideration to inexperienced interviewees". And: "Allow the reader/listener/viewer the possibility of distinguishing between statements of fact and a comments". There is no definition of an inexperienced interviewee. The logic here does not work in the reporting on an accident. Informing an injured survivor in distress about publishing does not justify the interview. Individuals with severe stress reactions can hardly know what is best for them in that situation. Even less can they survey the consequences of consenting to an interview and being photographed. Analysis of unpublished raw data from the year 2000 survey showed that two out of ten journalists had problems interpreting this professional code of conduct. Nine out of ten journalists thought that it was more or less unacceptable to interview shocked eyewitnesses. The latter can be interpreted to mean that interviewing people in distress is often but not always acceptable, but often there are no other people to interview, which means that the journalist has a difficult decision to make.

Finally, a proportion of journalists thought that it was more or less or even completely acceptable to interview people suffering from stress reactions. This opinion was held by more men than women. As in the case of photos of identifiable victims, there was the same tendency in the correlation between number of years in the profession and opinion as in the case of interviewing people in shock. Journalists with fewer

years in the profession thought to a greater extent that it was acceptable to interview people in distress than their colleagues with many years of experience.

Rules of integrity

The individual's integrity is well covered in press ethical rules as well as in legislation on freedom of speech and freedom of the press. In these law texts as well as in the penal code encroaching on personal integrity is defamation, in the form of slander or libel.⁵² In the Swedish Journalist Union's collective agreement for its members there is section stating, "employees shall not be obliged to write against their convictions or perform demeaning tasks"⁵³ The opportunity to refrain from assignments that are perceived as degrading to the journalist well as those violating others people's personal dignity or exposing them to humiliation is there.

Individuals affected by accidents and disasters risk being exposed in the media in a humiliating situation. For example, visiting a relative who has just lost a beloved can be felt as a strongly demeaning assignment to some journalists while others have no qualms at all. Anyone who refuses to carry out an assignment has the right to do so. Not least can this be done with reference to the publicity rule: "Show the victims of crime and accident every possible consideration." But many times it is impossible to predict the situations and meetings that might arise during a reporting mission. A journalist can experience strong feelings of humiliation during an assignment without seeing "a way out of it".

Journalists' moral compass

Morals govern the journalists' actions. If ethics is the principles of morals, then morals are our inner compass of right and wrong; what makes us do what we do.⁵⁴ Our morals are not static phenomena. Journalistic morals build on the press ethical rules, and on a general human ethics in the sense of being responsible for our actions.⁵⁵ The latter require self-reflection, which in Ulrich Beck's terms is an expression of "reflexive modernity".⁵⁶ Giddens has expressed similar thoughts.⁵⁷ However, their theories concern the media rather than journalism. Concerning the moral dilemma of journalism, Ekström and Nohrstedt suggest that it is about how a certain action can be justified when the real incentive is to deliver a punchy piece of news. The authors formulate two questions as examples: "Is it morally right to publish?" And: "How far may a journalist go to sell news?"⁵⁸

Rather than addressing these issues, the authors claim that journalists and editors instead ask how their actions can be justified. Such an argument makes the market news value take precedence over moral righteousness and to govern editorial decisions. The ultimate consequence of such professional morals of action can be – if they deviate greatly from general morals – that the public finally rejects journalism.

The journalistic morals have, like morals in general, plasticity, that is, elasticity and flexibility.⁵⁹ The question is if morals are adapted to each individual situation primarily on the basis of shared professional and organisational norms. According to Ekström and Nohrstedt, the journalists' own feelings, values and experiences are less involved.⁶⁰

As always there are exceptions confirming the rule, as when individual journalists reject assignments and publications, which is a kind of moral empathy with reference to the idea that they would not have liked to be treated in a certain way, the golden rule of journalism. Journalists, like other professional groups involved in interpersonal relationships, have a professional conscience.

The sum of journalistic conditions, norms, ideals, ethics and consequences is described in Ekström and Nohrstedt's contextual model, which links these concepts to the journalistic ethics of action,⁶¹ which means that it is in the specific situation that the journalist's ethical conduct is tested in the context of the norms, ideals, conditions and conceivable consequences of the professional assignment. Sometimes ethics of conduct works by instinct without reflection. At other times, the

decision is made after much deliberation, and sometimes after consulting colleagues and supervisors. Ethics of action can be seen as an application of the journalistic professional ideals balanced against all other operating factors.

Concluding remarks

The journalist profession is both independent and restricted, surrounded by legal frameworks and guidelines. Journalists as a professional group at an accident site face many tough challenges. It is in the public interest that the media are in place but their presence is still regulated by the current circumstances of the situation and professional codes and norms. Media reporting in such contexts is also characterised by a number of paradoxes. The need to be both quick and correct, close and distant, informative and critical, news hunting and considerate take a great deal of effort. The most difficult aspect is probably the situation that the journalist is "only" an eyewitness and not a respondent. When the person the journalist wants to save lives, the professional journalist must document and report.

Journalists' reporting on a traumatic event is expected to be truthful and factual, and yet having the dramaturgy and rhetoric required for appealing to readers. Consideration of victims must be shown, and single copies sold. Interest in accidental deaths is big. While that which must not happen, is happening and although we do not want to hear about it, there is still a great need of information. It is the journalists' duty to supply it. Several dilemmas and paradoxes present themselves to the journalist. Should they give priority to social stability information or to critical scrutiny? Speed of accuracy? Understanding or drama? Information or news reporting? The journalist profession is part of an industry-like editorial machinery requiring a great deal of creativity. Policy documents and professional codes only partly govern work. Media supervisors are often democratic sounding boards rather than commanders.

The journalists' professional codes of practice and press ethics are – despite the profession's free and creative nature – important to all members, but paradoxes are still at work. The journalists' codes and norms are simultaneously demanding and governing principles and unclear and contradictory. When the task is to report on a disaster, certain

rules have greater value than others. The guidelines on respect for individual integrity, protecting privacy, showing consideration of victims and being careful with photos belong to the prioritised category.

An important aspect of the professional code of practice is that both conduct and publications must take place in an ethical manner. It is not enough to refrain from publishing a photo. The very moment of taking the photo may be a violation. All colleagues must consider actions as well as publishing and in particular the journalist who is the eyewitness on-site.

Who, then, is adequately equipped to encounter chaos and identify the situation? Are the professional demands enough? A problem when the alert is given is the limited opportunity to select a person for the assignment. And even if it had been possible, it is impossible to know how a person will react at an accident site. Events are never identical. When the experienced war correspondent arrives at an accident scene with many children, this may be the last straw. The medical journalist on her way home from work might be the best equipped to cover a fire disaster. A newly graduate journalist, a former nurse, might make the most humane reporting on the survivors of a major accident. We can only speculate. Every situation is unique. The event can have components that "trigger" the journalist's reactions, depending on previous experiences. The impact of personal factors in the context of accidents is described in the next chapter, which also discusses how the profession can affect individual reactions and performance on the scene.

Footnotes

- 1 Weibull (1983)
- 2 Ibid and Hadenius & Weibull (1989 and later editions of *Massmedier*); Ahlström (1997);
- 3 Hvitfelt (1994)
- 4 Ghersetti (2007) in Asp et al *Den svenska journalistkåren*.
- 5 Ibid. p. 101.
- 6 Hedman & Trost (1997) p. 30f; Ornstein (1996)
- 7 Sørbo (1991) p. 8
- 8 Asp et al (1992) *Uppdraget*, p. 9ff
- 9 Ibid. p. 17ff
- 10 Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990) p. 21
- 11 Englund (1999a); (1999b); Nohrstedt & Nordlund (1993); SOU 1999:68, Appendix 6; Andersson-Odén et al. (2005) *Tsunamins genomslag*.
- 12 SOU 1999:68, p. 272 ff. The paradoxes are: (1) information channel or third government (2) Rapidity or correct information (3) Understanding or amusement (4) Evaluation or news value.
- 13 Hassleberg (1945); *Journalistik i Dagens Nyheter*; (1923) in facsimile (1989); Hasselberg (1945) *Rudolf Wall. Dagens nyheterers skapare*.
- 14 Nohrstedt in SOU 1999:68, p. 274
- 15 F.eks. Englund (2002); SOU 1999:48; Larsson & Nohrstedt et al (2000)
- 16 Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990)
- 17 Englund (2002)
- 18 Jarlbro (1993), (2004); Hedman (1997)(1999), Nohrstedt & Nordlund (1993)
- 19 Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990), p. 66
- 20 Andersson-Odén et al (2005) *Tsunamins genomslag*, p. 91 ff, 176ff
- 21 *Pedagogiska grunder* (1998)
- 22 Englund (1991), also in *Pedagogiska grunder* (1998) p. 282
- 23 Tuchman (1978), also cited in Nohrstedt et al (1994) p. 13
- 24 Nohrstedt et al (1994)
- 25 Eide (1992), p. 24, also in Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 27
- 26 Asp (1986), p. 362
- 27 Löfgren-Nilsson (1999) p. 123
- 28 Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 158
- 29 Löfgren Nilsson i Asp et al (2007), p. 67f
- 30 Löfgren-Nilsson (1999) p. 132
- 31 Ekström & Nohstedt (1996), p. 161
- 32 Ibid. p. 162
- 33 Andersson-Odén (1996)
- 34 Löfgren-Nilsson (1999)
- 35 Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 88
- 36 Rolf (1995) p. 107
- 37 Axberger (1994), also cited in Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 89
- 38 See appendix 2 in this book; *Code of ethics for press, radio and television* www.tu.se
- 39 SCOOP, 4:93
- 40 Codex éthicus (lat. 'den etiska lagen') ethical rules for medical doctors
- 41 Englund (2000)
- 42 Härstedt (1995)
- 43 E.g. *Pressens Tidning; Tidningen Journalisten*: www.journalisten.se. DN Debatt; www.dn.se
- 44 Petersson (2006)
- 45 See Appendix 2.
- 46 Englund (2000)
- 47 JMG Granskaren nr 2-3 (2001) p. 44f
- 48 ibid. p. 39
- 49 ibid. p. 42

- ⁵⁰ Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 111
- ⁵¹ In the original Swedish version of this book – and as basis for the study, the Swedish codes of ethics for press, radio and TV, version 1998, were used. This English translated edition also uses the updated codes from 2017. There are some minor revisions between 1998 and 2017. Not with any major importance for the presentation of results in this book edition.
- ⁵² Weibull & Börjesson (1995) p. 52; Axberger (1994) p. 225 f
- ⁵³ *Journalistikens spelplan*, SJF (2000) p. 48
- ⁵⁴ NE, www.ne.se, the words "ethic" and "moral".
- ⁵⁵ Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 241
- ⁵⁶ Beck (1986/1992), also cited in Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 241
- ⁵⁷ Giddens (1991)
- ⁵⁸ Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 244
- ⁵⁹ Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 250
- ⁶⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁶¹ Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 24

4. THE PRIVATE PERSON

Personality, that is, the human being behind the professional role, is the baggage that the journalist brings to the accident site. The individuals' so-called vulnerability background, which involves resilience, current life situation, health, and the nature of the trauma, is also crucial to their ability to handle a disaster.¹ A person's accumulated life experiences, including previous bereavement, grief and loss, are part of vulnerability too. The human being is fragile as well as adaptable, although the proportions vary with the situation. Depending on the vulnerability profile, people are susceptible to stress in various degrees in different situations.

The Norwegian professor of disaster psychiatry, Lars Weisaeth,² argues that the intensity of the event and the individual's interpretation of it, combined with personal vulnerability (or resilience) decide the consequences of overwhelming strain. Individuals also have different degrees of emotional intelligence, which Daniel Goleman, psychology researcher and science journalist, defines as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships."³ Emotional intelligence is a useful quality for rescue service members and for journalists at the accident site.

Current knowledge of the importance of personality factors among rescue personnel can help us understand how journalists are likely to react, function, and act in the same situation. People's cognitive, emotional, behavioural and physical reactions, coping strategies, and as a result of these, performance and actions, are essential to identify in the study of journalists' practice at the accident site. We know that journalists react – but how?

Behind all journalism there is a subject – a human being. It is impossible to separate the person and the journalist.⁴ In the reporting on an accident or a disaster, the private person or the "I" will loom large as a kind of threat against the professional person. Arriving at the scene is a journalist who is also a human being shaped by nature and nurture, mental and physical health (or illness), previous and current life situation, short or long professional experience, more or less life experience. The first question is: "What has happened?" The next question is: "Is it dangerous?" And then: "What can I do?" How much does the person

behind the professional matter? And how do the person's vulnerability, life experience, stress susceptibility and emotional intelligence affect the journalist's practice at the accident site?

Stress susceptibility and vulnerability

There is a limit to human resilience. As the Norwegian researchers in disaster psychiatry Lars Mehlum and Lars Weisæth put it, the human psyche is "a delicately balanced and complex unity, which has still proved to be very adaptable and flexible both through the evolution shaping it and through the individual's life."⁵ The psyche develops just as the body through challenges and efforts, but not always in a favourable direction. Sometimes the strain is so overwhelming that it becomes destructive and debilitating. A disaster or lethal threat triggers stress reactions in more or less everyone affected by the event. To some, the overwhelming strain turns into a psychological trauma.

In order to understand and explain the effects of psychological trauma, knowledge of several domains is needed. Biology, psychodynamics and cognitive theory, learning psychology, social theories and existential humanist philosophy are some fields, according to the authors of the book *Psychotraumatology (Psykotraumatologi)*,⁶ the crisis psychiatrists Tom Lundin, Per-Olof Michel and Ulf Otto. The accumulated knowledge in the area is based on experiences made in connection with wars and major disasters. Military research is, in other words, useful to contemporary nature and technology disasters. But stress reactions in traumatic events are not a new phenomenon. Hodgkinson⁷ and Shay⁸ point out that the phenomenon is portrayed in the battles of Homer's *The Iliad*.

During a lifetime we all experience crises in various ways and of different dignity, directly or indirectly. Life ambitions are defeated and we are forced to change perspective on our place in existence. Johan Cullberg, professor of psychology, thinks that the Western view of human evolution is mechanical with growth, maturity and decline. Its opposite is a dialectical view, emphasising how our attitude to life can benefit from painful events, which provide knowledge of life at the level of experience.⁹ The latter perspective means that the psychological crisis is the basis of human maturity. The human being is always evolving, learning formally and informally of life experiences. Private and professional development is interwoven and competitive at the same time.

In the Chinese sign for crisis, which means threat and opportunity, both strength and weakness are represented. In a crisis situation all senses are activated and paradoxically many people under duress can perform beyond their normal capacity.

Experiencing trauma is a basic component of human life.¹⁰ What factors influence an individual's way of reacting and the risk of developing acute or posttraumatic stress reactions? As described above, a stable and confident personality is considered to be a possible protective factor.¹¹ Conversely, a bad self-esteem is a risk factor. The social net, often regarded as a "salvation" in many situations, is not a guarantee for preventing posttraumatic problems, according to Michel and others.¹² McFarlane mentions our own or family member's mental ill health as a vulnerability factor.¹³

The so-called strength/vulnerability model attempts to illustrate the factors leading to vulnerability and severe stress reactions.¹⁴ Individual personality, stress tolerance, previous life crises, unprocessed trauma or previous psychiatric problems are factors affecting vulnerability. The current trauma affects vulnerability in various degrees depending on if the event involves dramatic loss, exposure to grotesque death and strong sensory impressions. Dyregrov uses the expression "factors influencing the course of events."¹⁵ He argues that people's reactions to a trauma beyond the personal factors, also depend on the current situation, training and experience and social environment. In other words, personal background, current life situation, health and the character of the trauma mean a great deal to how the reactions will manifest themselves. This applies to survivors, rescue workers and the indirectly affected such as eyewitnesses and next-of-kin. Many factors interact and it is the degree of vulnerability that decides if the normal emotional crisis develops into a psychiatric condition.

Risk factors

Witnessing the suffering of others, combined with feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, has proven to be a risk factor for later psychiatric problems. Trauma researchers currently talk about "potentially traumatic events,"¹⁶ because the individual's interpretation of the situation decides if it will be a stress factor or not. The type of event (situation), the group affected, and the degree of exposure have an impact on

whether the affected and the indirectly affected run the risk of developing long-term psychological problems as the result of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

A number of risk factors for developing long-term psychological problems in relation to a trauma can be listed on the basis of two psychological meta analyses,¹⁷ also summarised by Per-Olof Michel and others in the document "*Crisis support in severe events*" (*National Board of Health and Welfare*).¹⁸

- Event severity level and perceived threat to life
- Lack of social support after the event
- Pronounced mental reactions during and immediately after the event, especially dissociation (deficient ability to integrate the self and the experience cognitively)
- Sex (female = increased risk)
- Age (child = increased risk)
- Level of Intelligence and education
- Social class and/or minority status
- Vulnerability due to previous experience (victimisation or abuse in childhood; previous severe trauma; previous own or family member's psychiatric disorder)
- Concurrent life stress

Media reporting can in itself increase the exposure to traumatising impression through persistent repetition and richness in detail. It is possible that thorough research on accident and disaster reporting indirectly entails increased exposure for the reporters and photographers involved. The risk factors should be considered in relation to the individual journalist as belonging to a potential risk group and journalists should be made aware of the risk factors for the individuals portrayed in the media.

Resilience

Our way of reacting to and recovering from potential traumatic events can vary a great deal. Some may be affected by persistent posttraumatic reactions (chronic reactions), while most may recover. Yet another group may develop delayed reactions, while others may not experience any problems (resilience). This is what studies of 9/11 have shown.¹⁹ Several recent studies show that the majority of people who have been

afflicted by some form of severe event do not develop serious traumatic reactions. On the contrary, some seemed even to have become stronger through the event. Masten et al. have described a kind of "posttraumatic growth" and argue that it involves a kind of "ability to adapt to difficult or threatening circumstances."²⁰ A Dutch research survey shows that resilience is constituted by an interaction between social support and self-reliance.²¹ The latest research survey issued by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare shows, however, that it can be extremely difficult to assess, in the acute phase of a disastrous event, which individuals run the risk of developing disorders.²²

When an accident or a disaster strikes, some people will eventually be psychologically traumatised, and not only the directly affected, but also survivors, next-of-kin and close friends, not to mention the rescue services, eyewitnesses, church and social services personnel and members of the mass media.²³

Personality traits

There are many psychological approaches on how to study personality. One approach used in defence and disaster research is the so-called "trait models".²⁴ Such models are based on a hierarchical view on personality based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. At the bottom there are thoughts and actions related to the current situation, for example, the need to take cover. The second level is constituted by habitual thoughts and actions such as putting on a safety belt without thinking. Level three involves personality traits such as anxiety and humour, while the top fourth level comprises personality dimensions based on closely related personality traits. If a personality trait is calm and relaxed, the personality dimension can be "emotional stability".

The so-called Big Five model, developed by the American personality psychologists, Paul Costa and Jeff McCrae, is described by Larsson, Kallenberg and Carlstedt.²⁵ It is a trait model based on five everyday language definitions of personality dimensions. The assumption is that all people have several or all personality traits but to varying extent. No one has only one.

An outgoing and sociable dimension is called extraversion. Dominant traits are need for excitement, energy and optimism. The opposite, introversion, means solitude and introspection, which do not equal unhappiness or pessimism but rather independence and being

reserved. People with emotional stability can handle difficult situations without being upset, while emotionally unstable people are easily afflicted with fear, guilt and despondency. Conscientiousness marks a person who has organisational skills, trustworthiness, strong will and is result-oriented, often beyond what is normal. The disadvantage with this kind of personality dimension can be obsession with work and a disdain for applying moral principles. A dimension that is similar to the dimension of extroversion is social smoothness, that is, being helpful, friendly and having a positive view of people, which are attractive qualities but which tend to become a disadvantage in competitive situations. Social inflexibility, on the other hand, although perceived as less attractive, can be more competitive and skeptical, which often are useful qualities in difficult analysis situations. A personality dimension that involves sensitivity to one's own feelings is openness to new experiences, which is a dimension of variation, intellectual curiosity and creativity, while a reluctance to embrace openness to new experience entails conservative values and a preference for the familiar. It is interesting to ask what might happen to the journalist, the person, in relation to these personality dimensions when trying to identify the basic reactions and coping with a traumatically dominated reporting assignments. Even if the personality factors cannot be studied scientifically, the perspective can be a useful preunderstanding.

Emotional intelligence and empathetic aptitude

In connection with studies of the media reporting of traumatic events, the concept of emotional intelligence may be relevant to refer to again. With this concept, Daniel Goleman means "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships."²⁶ In conversations on emotional *intelligence*, a recurring issue is whether or not women and men have this quality to the same extent. Are women more disposed to emphatic approaches? Goleman thinks that we cannot claim this with any degree of certainty, but notes that girls already at an early age are trained in interpersonal skills more than boys. According to Goleman, there are no sex differences regarding women and men's attempts to hide their real feelings. The so-called *empathetic aptitude* is the same between the sexes.²⁷ But in regard to the ability to detect another person's feelings, then women are better than men, he thinks, and refers to several American studies, for example, Rosenthal

and Hall.²⁸ Socio-biologists, according to Goleman, stress the superiority of feelings over reason in terms of decision-making and actions but also see emotional intelligence as complementary and separated from academic intelligence. Our feelings help us in situations where tasks are too important to leave to the intellect, for example, situations of threat and painful loss. In difficult decision situations, there is an interaction between feelings and reason. Emotional intelligence arises when there is a balance between reason and feelings. Translated into disaster journalism, this would mean that the journalist is never just journalist or fellow human being but always both and, but, in different degrees in different individuals in different situations.

Concluding remarks

The person – human being – behind the professional role is a decisive factor for understanding how the professional assignment is carried out at the accident site. Personality can be described as an individual's baggage. Some of it is called vulnerability, which is the accumulated life experiences, background, health and current shape. Individual risk factors for developing long-term psychological problems in addition to vulnerability are personal qualities such as sex, age, level of education and parallel life stress. Previous crises can also increase vulnerability, especially if the accident trauma has elements that are reminiscent of, or "trigger," previous experiences. Vulnerability does not only concern how life has been earlier but also how it appears at the moment when the journalist is sent on his mission.

The character of the traumatic event, together with individual vulnerability and interpretation of the event, can affect how the journalist, the person, will react and handle the situation. There are limits to human endurance, even for journalists: Every individual holds both strength and weakness. When existence is falling apart – privately or professionally – it helps having a stable and confident personality. Conversely, weak self-esteem is a risk factor. A person's degree of vulnerability and resilience decides if the trauma becomes a normal emotional crisis, or if it develops into a psychologically harmful condition. Previous studies have shown that journalists as eyewitnesses should be recognised as indirectly affected when reporting on a disaster. The ability to handle this can also be affected by different personality traits. A socially outgoing energetic person reacts differently from an introvert

and passive person. An emotionally stable person is better equipped to handle disasters than an unstable person. Social smoothness and flexibility can also be a tool, as well as a personality that allows for openness to changes. Some people react to a trauma with resilience, and others may describe a kind of "posttraumatic growth," that is, the difficult experience can strengthen them. The cornerstones of resilience are social support and self-reliance. It is very difficult to predict how different individuals will react to the same event, but it is clear that people react very differently to similar experiences.

The person equipped with a certain emotional intelligence and an empathetic aptitude, in Goleman's terminology, is better prepared for traumatic events. The interplay of reason and emotion is important in certain situations, which supports the notion of the indivisible symbiosis between the person and the journalist, the person and the profession. The personality and vulnerability of the journalist are therefore crucial aspects to consider in identifying the cognitive, behavioural, emotional and physical reaction patterns of how a journalist can be expected to react to a traumatic experience. Are there differences and similarities in comparison with responders' reactions and coping strategies? Or is the professional eyewitness's encounter with a disaster completely different?

Footnotes

- ¹ Enander et al. (1991) (1995)
- ² Weisaeth & Mehlum (1993/1997) p. 19
- ³ Goleman (1995), also in Strömberg Eriksson (1999)
- ⁴ Rosenberg (2000) p. 108.
- ⁵ Weisæth & Mehlum (1993/1997) p. 337.
- ⁶ Michel, Lundin & Otto (2001)
- ⁷ Hodgkinson (1991), p. 3
- ⁸ Shay (1991)
- ⁹ Cullberg (1975/1988)
- ¹⁰ van der Kolk & McFarlane (1996), p. 3
- ¹¹ Michel et al. (2001) p. 88
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ McFarlane (1996), in van der Kolk & McFarlane (1996) p. 173
- ¹⁴ Michel et al. (2001) p. 91 f
- ¹⁵ Dyregrov (1992) p. 22
- ¹⁶ Also mentioned as PTE (Potentially Traumatic Events).
- ¹⁷ Meta analysis is a statistical analysis that combines the results of multiple scientific studies.
- ¹⁸ Brewin et al (2000); Ozzer et al (2003), *Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse* (2008); and in Weidmann et al (2007) about PTSD among journalists after the tsunami disaster in 2004.
- ¹⁹ Bonnano et al (2006); in "Crisis support at traumatic events" (Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse) *The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (2008)
- ²⁰ Masten et al (1990) in *ibid.*
- ²¹ Schaap et al (2006) in *ibid.*
- ²² "Crisis support at traumatic events" (Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse) *The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (2008), p. 32
- ²³ Michel, Lundin & Otto (2001) p. 32.
- ²⁴ Larsson & Kallenberg ed. (2003); Costa & McCrae (1992)
- ²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 69
- ²⁶ Goleman (1995), Strömberg Eriksson (1999)
- ²⁷ Graham & Ickes (1997); Goleman (1998) p. 345
- ²⁸ Hall (1984), Goleman (1998) p. 344

5. THE REACTION

What journalists experience, do, feel, and physically react to in connection with a disastrous incident can partly be understood through the findings of studies with a focus on the reactions of rescue service members. Several studies show that many experience a feeling of unreality.¹ Lindström and Lundin showed in a study of the Borås fire, that this is an appropriate response as it enables individuals to focus on their tasks with more energy and attention.² A common emotional reaction is that the feeling is overwhelming. The feeling is at its worst when children are involved, or if the professional responders know any of the victims. A great many dead or injured people are also overwhelming, and feelings may be triggered by details, in particular objects like shoes or belongings which remind them of their own children. Material things in general have a strong symbolic value because they create a feeling that the victim is someone known to them. Sometimes the overwhelming feelings are so strong and painful that some individuals are unable to continue working.³

People affected by an accident or a disaster often say, "it can't be true", "it's like a dream" or "like a film". They may feel like a bystander although they are affected. The most prevalent reaction is this sense of unreality, often accompanied by the absence of strong feelings, which comes as a surprise to the affected, responders and the media members alike. A so-called super memory is not uncommon, which means that they observe details and may have extreme perceptive powers. Often the reaction evokes self-recriminations and the individuals blame themselves for not responding appropriately.⁴

In view of the scarcity of studies of journalists' crisis and stress reactions in the case of accidents and disasters, there are reasons to pay attention to existing research focusing on the category of rescue services. Even if there are big differences between the preparedness and function of the professional groups for such assignments, there may hypothetically be lessons to learn from the research on the reactions of the rescue services.

Journalists are indirectly affected by the drama on the accident scene by virtue of simply being there. By seeing, hearing, interviewing and performing their duties, they are exposed and may become affected by the event. Journalists can, like rescue staff, be afflicted with what is

called *compassion fatigue*,⁵ i.e. secondary stress. It can be seen as a result of all the information about and experience of the suffering of others, in short, a duty beyond the tolerance limit.

It is not, however, an established truth in the profession that journalists themselves can be afflicted by traumatic stress or other psychological reactions. The belief is still held that journalists are immune to emotional impact in such situations, according to Côté and Simpson.⁶

But no matter how trained and prepared a journalist may be for disastrous situations, emotional reactions still may occur – during work and after. Journalists who, without warning, face a disaster for the first time can suffer serious reactions. Some can "...react with paralysis or severe psychological stress," as Blix and Bech-Karlsen point out.⁷ They also suggest that journalists as a rule should be prepared for a disastrous situation, but that minimal efforts are made in reality to provide this support. When the alert is given, it is too late to prepare.

Doing a good job in a crisis situation requires that the person concerned is familiar with his/her own emotional reactions – not the other way around. It is possible and crucial that professionals are prepared for a disaster assignment to some degree on their way to the accident site. The journalist and the photographer have to be given any little piece of information available so they can mentally prepare. The same applies to the rescue services, according to Dyregrov.⁸ They cite the coach accident in Måbødalen in Norway when many responders reached the place totally ignorant of the fact that children were involved. A more exact knowledge of what was in store would have made them better prepared.

Stress reactions

Knowledge of the effects on disaster rescue responders only started to take form in the 1950s and 1960s. A corresponding interest in the journalists' reactions is, however, still fairly new or still slumbering in media employer offices. Towards the end of the 1970s, there was increased interest in rescue team members' reactions concurrent with a generally growing interest in psychological reactions to disasters.⁹ From the second half of the 1980s, awareness of the psychological and psychiatric aspects of major accidents, mass injury situations and disasters has grown in Sweden and internationally.¹⁰ The demand for further training in crisis psychology and disaster psychiatry has increased in medical

undergraduate studies as well as in rescue services' professional development units, the police, health care, the social services and the church.

In Scandinavia, the Alexander Kielland oilrig accident gave rise to a study of professional and voluntary responders' reactions during the acute rescue operation, carried out by the Centre for disaster psychiatry (Kontoret för Katastrofpsykiatri) in Oslo, headed by Arne Sund and Lars Weisaeth. In Sweden, the psychiatrists Britt Lindström and Tom Lundin¹¹ have studied the rescue workers' reactions in connection with the hotel fire in Borås. One of the conclusions was that "professional contact with a disaster situation of this type can entail both inner and outer experiences of crisis and stress types".¹² The descriptions include experiences of so-called "Superman reaction", which is explained as "active action without emotional reactions in uniform". Similar reactions were described by the rescue chief after the Gothenburg fire. He said that "the uniform in us was on duty".¹³

The existing research on rescue team reactions has primarily focused on post trauma reactions and minor reactions during the operation. A conclusion common to several studies¹⁴ is that well prepared personnel who are supported during the work can carry out tasks that involve strong sensory impressions without being afflicted with unnecessary complaints afterwards.

Since the function of a rescue team on site is to help, it means that physical obstacles, wrongly allocated duties and general unpreparedness might produce strong feelings of helplessness in the rescuers. How journalists, arriving at an accident scene as eyewitnesses rather than responders, feel has, on the other hand, not been studied. This thesis addresses such issues.

Other physical reactions frequently reported are nausea, vomiting, tremor and palpitation. Rescue teams have described in studies how they, while carrying dead people, had to go off to vomit before they could carry on.

Wrath is a very common reaction. Wrath, irritation and conflicts may arise between colleagues and also wrath against survivors, next-of-kin or bystanders who make unreasonable demands or hinder work in various ways. Management and cooperation problems within and between professional groups are common.

The cognitive, behavioural, emotional and physical reactions afflicting rescuers are summarised in Table 3.

For a long time, the members of the different task forces and other help organisations have been a neglected affected category. Not until

the end of the 1980s did researchers and employers start to take an interest in rescuers who had been on site at an accident or disaster.¹⁵ Today it is apparent that there are psychological reactions among these professional categories too. Yet, most studies have focused on the responders' reactions after the event and less on their reactions during the operation.¹⁶ Lindström and Lundin have studied the reactions of responders during and after operations in two studies, first the Alexander Kielland oilrig accident,¹⁷ and second, the Borås fire in 1982.¹⁸

Accidents that especially affect rescuers are those involving children,¹⁹ as is described in Chapter 2. Robinson²⁰ found in a study of ambulance personnel that the most stress inducing situation involved taking care of children.

The degree of identification with an affected child or its family might be an aggravating factor in rescue operations.

When children are involved the natural defence falls apart. While helpers usually manage to distance themselves mentally from emotionally charged situations, they do become slightly overly engaged and can identify with the traumatised or dead child and its parents. /.../ Rescue personnel in disaster areas say that they function satisfactorily until they come across a child or a toy, when their efficiency is reduced, and sometimes they even stop working.²¹

Children's vulnerability increases the helper's sense of meaninglessness. Conversely, saving a child means increased joy. A number of saved children can momentarily outweigh the grief over the loss of a considerably higher number of deaths.

Table 3. Stress reactions in rescue service personnel during on site operations, according to Dyregrov (1992)²¹ and ICD 10 with diagnosis number F43.²²

Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioural	Somatic
sense of unreality	overwhelmed	hyperactivity	nauseous
bewilderment	helplessness	underactivity	upset stomach
reduced focus	fear	withdrawal	tremor
memory problems	wrath	excessive joking	freezing
attention deficiency	despondency	abnormal activity	quick pulse
rigid thinking			aching muscles
reduced ability to think			uncoordinated movements

In one study firemen were asked to list the type of incidents that had affected them the most.²³ As many as 98 per cent of the firemen stated incidents involving children. The list included the following items:

- Dead or injured children
- Fires gaining strength and ground with life-threatening situations
- Multifactorial events
- Death
- Life-threatening injuries to personnel or casualties

The Gothenburg fire in 1998 involved traumatic stimuli on at least the first of the items. The rescue services often regard media members as on-site stressors. This is expected in the circumstances, but is also a factor impeding the cooperation on site. Apart from taking care of dead children, a dead friend or colleague is a strong stressor for the helper. Such a meeting can momentarily render them incapable of working. Support, rest and sheltering from strong sensory impressions can bring them back to work. If this fails, the person must leave the accident site.²⁴

A big problem is that rescue personnel and other helpers often work way beyond their tolerance limits for a long time. This applies not least to the chief of operations, who stays on duty day and night with exhaustion and inefficiency as a result.²⁵

Acute stress: a normal reaction to an abnormal situation

Exposure to death and blood, for example, can cause distress.²⁶ The capping of the Alexander Kielland oilrig, however, resulted in very few stress reactions that affected rescuers' efficiency.²⁷

Incidents that affect the individual without warning such as fires and transportation accidents, are termed *potentially traumatic events*, which refers to a situation in which an individual is exposed to very strong emotional influence, totally unprepared and therefore has no time to mobilise potential coping strategies.²⁸

The force of the reaction depends, among other things, on the intensity and duration of the trauma. Other influential factors are personality traits conducive to coping with severe psychological strain. Sometimes a person's normal stress reactions transcend the normal. An acute stress reaction can be regarded as a very strong normal reaction to an abnormal traumatic strain.²⁹ If such a reaction is at hand for more than three days it may fulfill criteria of an *acute stress disorder* (ASD).³⁰

When the disaster strikes, most people involved suffer immediate consequences in terms of state of awareness. Information and impressions are received, processed and stored in a different way than normally. Common acute stress reactions could be:³¹

- altered state of awareness (e.g. sense of unreality, of "a dream"), disbelief, distress
- altered perception of time and "super memory"
- lack of feelings
- bodily reactions
- overreaction – under-reaction

Stress is – contrary to general belief – not only negative. It is rather a resource, enabling mobilisation of mental resources to handle the outer threat; a normal reaction to an abnormal situation, in other words.

Stress reaction may in some cases transmit misleading signals:

At the same time others may be misled into thinking that the person is unusually collected when he/she in reality has not started reacting yet. Some people who during a disaster have appeared in the media seemingly unruffled have developed problems later because of the expectations created about their ability to manage difficult situations.³²

Such a reaction pattern can possibly convey a reduced perception of risk in disaster situations to some people. Such reduced risk perception may also make rescuers perform heroic deeds with the risk of their lives.³³

Why so many people still make good decisions and act appropriately might have to do with intuition through the "quick, automatic use of accumulated experience".³⁴ But a purposeful action in a disaster situation relies on more than intuition. Previous experience and training contribute to "optimal disaster behaviour."³⁵ Basically, it is a matter of skills in handling a situation.

Survivor experience of stress and crisis reactions

Studies of survivors of disasters can be relevant in mapping journalists' reactions in connection with disaster reporting. There is a broad spectrum of the "normal reactions to an abnormal situation" that the survivors represent. When the survivors are children, there are additional reaction patterns, also described in Chapter 2 on the accident site actors.

Many major accidents and disasters generate survivor biographies. Kent Härstedt, survivor of the Estonia ferry disaster, is one example. Many of the crisis reactions described by crisis psychologists,³⁶ are exemplified in Härstedt's book (1995, *Det som inte kunde ske*). Below are some examples, which could all have been taken from the daily papers after the disaster. What seems absurd in the eyes of the journalist and the reader should be understood as completely normal behaviour and reactions in an abnormal situation.

Sense of coherence, situation-based training:

Härstedt describes how he, in the first minutes of the Estonia ferry's violent lurchings, is struggling upwards along the ship's tilting floor, passing panicky, injured people, shouting: "Calm down! Everything will be alright".

I think that it can be a matter of disposition how we react in crisis situation. But I can see that my military training was a help.³⁷

Training and experience hence, make individuals mobilise their coping strategies in a constructive way.

Over- and under-reactions:

In retrospect Härstedt recalls how differently his fellow passengers reacted to the situation:

Many had wide eyes, they were hyper stressed, people in total panic, impossible to get contact with. Others were injured and could hardly move. And some were apathetic, simply sitting there crying. Some struggled intensively with the whole body to get away from the place, while others tried to logically plan to do their best of the situation in cooperation with others or on their own.³⁸

People react very differently to the same event. The majority of the reactions can be regarded as normal.

Altered state of awareness:

The irrational behaviour and the altered state of awareness that commonly occur are also exemplified in Härstedt's text:

On the staircase I happened to run into a girl from behind. There was a tear in her skirt and I tread on her shoe. It fell down the stairs. She turned and looked at me in despair: My shoe, my shoe! I stopped too and looked at her: What is a shoe? But she turned and ran down the boat to get it.

Sense of unreality:

In the upside-down life raft, which was finally found after many abandoned hopes in the Baltic Sea, Kent Härstedt has time to think a lot. Like many people who suffer from traumatic stress, Härstedt is afflicted by a feeling that all this is fictive:

Now and again during the night I had had a strong feeling of unreality – it returned several times in the morning. In the night I caught myself thinking that I was in a bad film. The fact is that when the raft nearly capsized the first thing I thought was: This is not happening. /.../ There is a gap between what we were experiencing and our perception of it.³⁹ /.../ When the helicopters were approaching it was like a film, a war film. Images from Vietnam, perhaps, helicopters collecting people from a battlefield.⁴⁰

A sense of unreality is one of the most palpable and apparent reaction in both survivors and rescue personnel.

A sense of humour:

Humour and so-called altruistic acts are common under stress. Härstedt also experienced this:

And in this unreality there was a strange sense of humour /.../ It can't be as bad in reality; it must be.⁴¹

Only some hours later, Kent Härstedt and Sara Hedrenius became the Swedish media serial drama of a woman and a man who survived an enormous disaster against all odds.

These reaction patterns are not only what journalists on site can encounter but also hypothetical examples of their own possible reactions.

Previous studies of journalist' stress reactions

Journalists' experiences of working in extreme situations raise questions of their psychological condition at the moment of reporting. To date, this has been a largely neglected research field.

Experienced-based documents such as anthologies of professional practices are available in some cases. In this area the U.S. has been a pioneer.⁴² One of the few research articles on the theme was written by the professors Coté and Simpson.⁴³ William Coté, who has a background as a newspaper journalist, has been instrumental in providing trauma training for journalist students in Washington. In line with the Swedish psychiatrist Tom Lundin's view of the members of the media who are indirectly affected by a disaster,⁴⁴ Coté and Simpson even call the journalists victims.

Journalists can become trauma victims simply by doing their work – by visiting scenes of destruction, talking to, and photographing people who have been injured or traumatized. Sometimes they feel the effects after seeing dead or injured people and the debris of deadly events. In other cases by hearing tragic stories and by trying to ease the pain of others, journalists join disaster workers and others.⁴⁵

The fact that journalists at an accident site are exposed to stress is beyond doubt. Those who arrive at an accident site are confronted psychologically and emotionally with the affected in a way that resembles what the responders' experience. However, there is, according to Coté and Simpson, skepticism in the journalist corps to the effect that they see themselves as protected against this type of psychological effects. A common argument is that education and professional experience provide a suit of armour. Another argument is that journalists are assumed to be able to channel their feelings and focus on the job in a way that prevents stress reactions.

Although such attitudes lack scientific support, many share the notion that they lack the right to feel emotional pain or be traumatised.⁴⁶ To

others, admitting to being depressed or anxious seems to be a taboo on the grounds that it may suggest that they are unfit to do their job.⁴⁷ Himmelstein and Faithorn,⁴⁸ the latter a psychiatrist in New York, have studied the context of journalists as eyewitnesses to disasters. They interviewed a number of journalists about their professional experience of stress management, finding that the members of the media are an often-neglected group in terms of psychological and emotional strain in relation to traumatic events.

Himmelstein and Faithorn call reporters and photographers *professional eyewitnesses*.⁴⁹ In a study they especially focused on the personal qualities required of accomplished war and disaster correspondents to keep delivering ethical and expert reporting. In short, they concluded that journalists have a genuine interest in and a passion for their job, and a strong sense of meaningfulness. Journalists' self-esteem – their ego in Freudian terms,⁵⁰ is of great importance in stress management.

The Canadian psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein has, together with a research team, studied the psychological effects on war correspondents across the world compared to a control group of other journalists. Through self-reporting on-line questionnaires and a selection of interviews, the team above all tried to identify symptoms of posttraumatic stress reactions. The war correspondents displayed a three times higher degree of long-term psychological stress compared with the control group. They also used alcohol to a greater extent; the women war correspondents drank five times more alcohol than their women colleagues in "normal jobs." A little more than 20 per cent of journalists reporting on wars suffered depressions and worse quality of life. Three fourth of the studied group managed satisfactorily in the long run, sometimes thanks to medication.⁵¹

Roger A. Simpson and James G. Boggs have studied American newspaper journalists' psychological reactions to accident reporting. They found that the longer a person had worked as a journalist, the greater the risk was that the person would display symptoms of mental ill health. Especially reporters and photographers who had reported on accidents involving car crashes were haunted by obtrusive and disturbing memories. Simpson and Boggs argue that some of the professional tacit codes involve never admitting to being emotionally affected in connection with reporting on violent events or repeated assignments of a traumatic nature.⁵²

The American media researcher Gretchen Dworzniak has studied how accidents and crime entice journalists to make conspicuous and attention-creating news drama in local TV evening news.⁵³ She has also studied how local TV reporters and photographers are affected by what they see as eyewitnesses when they report on a murder, a traffic accident or a fire. Dworzniak notes that there are several studies of war correspondents and war journalism but very few of local minor everyday events, albeit traumatic. The hunt for news and publicity drives journalists, she thinks. Anke Weidmann and other German psychology researchers have studied journalists who reported on the South Asian Tsunami in 2004. They found that nearly seven per cent of the journalists had developed signs of posttraumatic stress disorder eight months after the event. The symptoms could be related to their degree of exposure, and a number of social variables, especially a low degree of support from the editorial staff and colleagues.⁵⁴

There is an international database on trauma journalism at the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma,⁵⁵ which promotes well informed, efficient and ethical media reporting on disasters, violence, conflicts and other trauma. Dart Center is a forum and a resource for journalists as it provides analysis material, exchange of ideas and high quality professional development in trauma journalism. Journalists' psychological reactions at accident sites are a professional problem, indicating the importance of studying journalism in different situations. The conditions and consequences of media reporting on a disaster require an understanding of the norms and deviations of the journalistic assignment; in other words, the ability to see "the specific case."

Interacting with stressed leaders

Functioning as the leader under pressure in an acute traumatic situation involves a great challenge. Our understanding of the conditions of leadership in such a situation derives from knowledge of leadership and organisation theory in normal circumstances. Functioning well in a crisis depends on good leadership in a non-crisis.

Swedish psychiatry researchers emphasise the importance of carefully considering which colleague to send on the assignment, if possible in all situations. The criteria are developed for selecting rescue staff, but are, in my view, partly applicable to the media sphere. In both cases a problem is that the employer seldom has the opportunity to

choose when an accident happens, at least not in the acute phase. When possible, the following criteria can serve as guidelines: carefully chosen selection criteria, a minimum age of 25, thorough training, and special care in finding good leaders for the job.⁵⁶

There is a lot to suggest that people subordinate to leaders more readily in a disaster although a great deal depends on the situation. In a simulation training for new recruits to the rescue services, where the recruits were suddenly confronted with a brutally realistic accident scenario, it was reported that just over one third of the recruits acted efficiently, one third calmly and one fourth passively or not at all.⁵⁷ Weisæth⁵⁸ divided the affected by an explosion/fire in a major paint industry into three groups based on their reaction pattern. The first group, comprising a third of the affected, primarily engaged in "passive following", which means that they copied others, especially in flight behaviour. The second group, about half of the affected, retained their ability to interact and cooperate. The third consisted of those who took leadership initiatives.⁵⁹

In connection with the Gothenburg fire, the editorial leadership involved several challenges. It was a very traumatic event, which is difficult to understand for those who did not witness the events on site. It took place in the middle of the night, with few regular managing editors in their offices. Selecting someone for the job was not an option since very few were on duty. In addition, the fire happened in the night before a non-edition day, an obviously aggravating factor. Many victims were also children and young people of non-Swedish origin, which made the situation more complex to manage. Supervisors in the media industry are seldom in the field, for example, on the scene of a fire. The geographical distance between leader and assigned reporter can create tensions when it comes to understanding the course of events, crisis reactions etc.

According to Larsson et al., a leadership can be regarded as innovative- or relation-oriented.⁶⁰ The former involves the ability to pause and take in the whole situation, to think ahead, and not be overwhelmed by emotional reactions. Relation-oriented leadership is characterised by a clear leadership role, ability to motivate staff for the task, concern for the individual and understanding the need of crisis management after a stressful experience. In an elaborated analysis of leadership styles in stressful situations, Larsson, Tedfeldt and Wallenius describe three ways of leading co-workers.⁶¹ First, there is the non-leadership characterised by *laissez-faire* attitude. Second, there is the

conventional leadership, based on control, demand and reward. Third, there is a developed leadership, based on role models, personal concern, inspiration and motivation.

In a disaster the leadership role is complicated because it encompasses both the task of dealing with colleagues' feelings and reactions while ensuring the continued work in progress.⁶² Leaders should coordinate activities, make critical decisions and take care of their personnel. Leaders, too, are influenced by their stress coping abilities and their personal disposition (physical, psychological and related to life philosophy).

The leader also needs support in critical situations, and they should not be afraid to show grief, Dyregrov asserts. It is possible to grieve and work simultaneously. Recommendations for leadership in crisis and disasters include that leaders should spend as much time as possible with their employees in the time following on the disaster. Leaders should also ensure that co-workers are given opportunities for informal support through social meetings.

Reactions to disasters are very individual and situation-dependent, in a way unpredictable and yet generated within certain given frames. A long line of factors influences the individual's crisis process through complex interactions. Nature and nurture, the current life situation and previous crisis, training and experiences, the present trauma are some examples. Many of the reactions that the affected persons display are also typical of the indirectly affected persons' reactions. What coping strategies are suitable in protecting themselves and having the strength to carry out their duties?

Coping strategies

Human ability to respond to and manage inner and outer threat and stressors is called coping.⁶³ Coping can also be described as a form of stress management. What individual coping looks like depends on how the threat is perceived and on previous experiences of managing imminent threat. Denial of threat is common but the effects of denial are always fateful. Denying means that individuals can put themselves at risk.

There are mainly two ways of managing and coping with stress. One way is *problem focused coping*, which means an ability to seek information, analyse problems and finding feasible solutions. The ability to

communicate and cooperate is also an example of such qualities. Another method is *emotion focused coping*. This method takes the form of positive thinking, self-control, wishful thinking, underestimating risks and dissociation. Flight behaviour is also an example and this can be manifested in an exaggerated focus on details.

In practice, every individual in a stressful situation uses both problem and emotion focused coping, even if one is dominant in certain individuals and in certain situations.⁶⁴

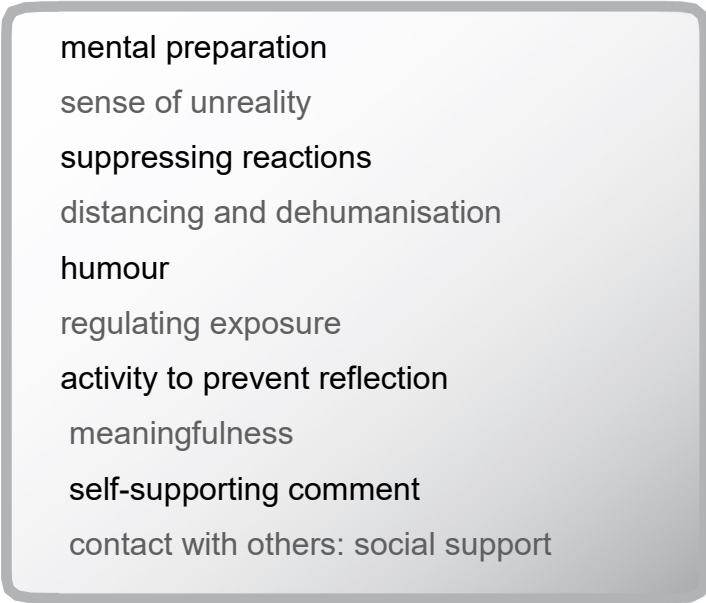
In view of the stress reactions described above, it is reasonable to ask how the professional categories operating at the disaster site respond to and manage the stress. Assessing the performance of mass media personnel in disasters requires taking account of the working conditions.⁶⁵

There is a lack of relevant studies of journalists' coping strategies in connection with disasters. Hopefully, this thesis will generate knowledge in this area. Other material is primarily the press's own articles on reporters' reactions and on-site coping. Such witness reports have been published in Sweden after the Tsunami in 2004, the Gothenburg fire in 1998, and, internationally, there are American biographies and documentaries on media reporting of the 9/11 terror attack in 2001 (see Chapter 1). Coping with the reactions to a trauma and at the same time a very unclear event means a great challenge to the individual. How do circumstances affect impressions and interpretations of the event?

Some answers are provided in the many studies carried out of rescuers' coping strategies at accidents and disaster sites. How the rescuers' manage to accomplish their mission under extreme circumstances is something of a mystery. What makes them persevere?

Dyregrov has, together with Mitchell,⁶⁶ among others, listed a number of tools in our metaphorical toolbox, which were developed to illustrate the coping strategies in the rescue services, but are also interesting in comparison with journalists at an accident site.

Table 4. Coping strategies and defence mechanism in rescue service personnel on accidents sites, according to Dyregrov and Mitchell.



mental preparation
sense of unreality
suppressing reactions
distancing and dehumanisation
humour
regulating exposure
activity to prevent reflection
meaningfulness
self-supporting comment
contact with others: social support

Many coping strategies correspond with the survivor reactions previously described. Gerry Larsson et al.⁶⁷ describe those as defence mechanisms working automatically and mainly at a pre-awareness level. The individual's perception of reality, which partly does not match "objective" reality, can thus be "polished" to give the individual protection against anxiety. The most important defence mechanisms, according to Larsson, are: *repression, denial, isolation, "sensation seeking" and rationalisation.*⁶⁸

Unlike journalists, rescue workers regularly exercise disaster operations. In combination with mental preparation travelling to the accident site, these exercises constitute two appropriate coping strategies. Poor preparation, on the other hand, increases the vulnerability to stress reactions.

Sense of unreality fills the function of keeping feelings at bay. Sometimes responders define the operation as exercise to keep the distance. Another way is to think of something else, gardening for instance as an example of emotion regulation by distraction.

At times, the emotional distance can lead to misinterpretations. For instance a responder at the coach accident at Måbødalen perceived the dead children as life saving dolls: "I thought it was strange that they had brought life saving dolls on the outing."⁶⁹

Alexander and Wells⁷⁰ found in the study of the oilrig Piper Alpha disaster in the North Sea, off the coast of Scotland in 1988, that 99 per cent of the policemen working in the morgue had resorted to humour as a defence mechanism. This form of coping is used with great caution as next-of-kin or other bystanders may be within earshot. Activity is a way of protecting oneself against gushing feelings by focusing completely on the task and on peptalk, for example, "I can do this." Finally, contact with colleagues on site is perhaps the most comforting coping strategy.

In relation to the previously described coping strategies, it is clear that individuals first interpret the situation, then their own resources to manage the situation, and finally employ coping strategies.

One of many coping strategies is called *numbing*.⁷¹ When individuals react in this way, others are "fooled" into thinking that they are calm and collected when they are really in distress and afflicted with a sense of unreality. Numbing is, according to Hodgkinson and Stewart, a defensive manoeuvre, protecting the individual from experiencing a trauma in progress, and sometimes also from the threat to life in a realistic way.⁷² This coping strategy was, for instance, employed among the seamen who after the Zeebrygge ferry disaster in Belgium in 1987, participated in identifying their dead co-workers. Distancing from feelings, using alcohol and resorting to humour became the protective armour against reality.⁷³ It took 6 months before the seamen could talk about their experiences.

It is noteworthy that there is a possible difference between stable coping strategies, which are employed in long-term or recurring strain, and situation-specific coping strategies, which refer to different strategies being employed in different types of situations or at different phases of a certain situation.⁷⁴

Some studies point to the importance of feelings of guilt or responsibility in connection with an incident. Such feelings are assumed to affect the coping strategies used.⁷⁵

Performance – action on site

Performance is an isolated factor in the media reporting on a disaster. Performance includes the journalist's actions and behaviour on site and the result of the media coverage by publication. Empirically, the final publications of photos and texts will not be investigated, but rather

the journalists' experience of their own and others' efforts on site. Previous studies include investigation of performance in the form of journalistic publications, for instance, in the government inquiry into the Gothenburg fire.⁷⁶

Individual, as well as group psychological reactions to the current threat, are triggered in an accident or disaster. Working and functioning as a professional in such situations may be demanding. Performing under extreme pressure is usually regarded as a reverse phenomenon, meaning that the performance can be improved at a certain stress level but dropping at higher levels.⁷⁷ The phenomenon can partly explain the variation of experiences of working at an accident site (Figure 3).

Figure 3 shows that stress has both positive and negative effects and that performance ability is at its highest at a "moderate" stress level. This applies to bodily as well as cognitive performance. The individual's way of reacting to stress is, in addition, very individual. Factors such as good physical condition (absence of illness, tiredness, injuries etc.) and a positive *self-esteem* (realistic and coherent) are two strong resources, while weak physical condition and low self-esteem provide a weaker basis for interpretation and coping.⁷⁸ Gerry Larsson, Ann Enander and Claes Wallenius, military crisis psychologists, have described the stress reaction curve using examples from their field. Attention is reduced so that relevant signs from the surroundings are filtered and the performance deteriorates.⁷⁹ In the same way as the performance ability is affected, our way of thinking is also altered under stress. Our ability to solve problems may become reduced, rigid and stereotypical. There is also the risk of assessing options and decisions unsystematically. A deteriorating ability to differentiate between the dangerous and the trivial is another effect on a person's actions. Acting randomly can increase and so also the number of erroneous actions. The speed of work increases, while precision decreases.

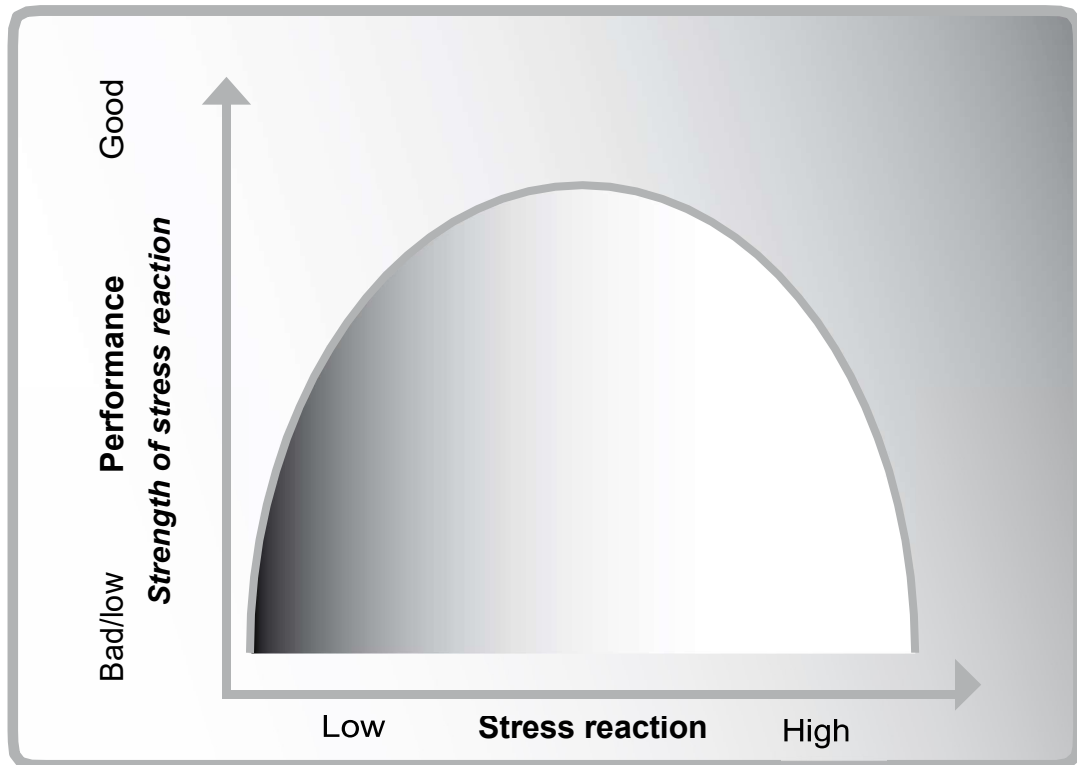


Figure 3. Correlation between the strength of stress reaction (performance) and stress reaction.

Lastly, as mentioned, a sense of coherence has great importance. Aaron Antonovsky, sociologist⁸⁰ has defined ‘sense of coherence’ as follows:

The sense of coherence constitutes a global orientation representing the degree to which one has a pervasively permanent and yet dynamic sense of confidence regarding (1) how stimuli deriving from inner and outer life surroundings are structured, predictable and possible to explain; (2) there are available resources to meet the demands of these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, which deserve conscious attention and engagement.⁸¹

The sense of coherence is in turn built on three cornerstones, namely the sense of comprehensibility, the sense of manageability, and the sense of meaningfulness.

If all these variables malfunction, there is a risk of tunnel vision, increased fear and misguided actions. At the same time the stress reactions can be functional for the individual who can focus on “the threat”/problem and can drop irrelevant details for the moment. Energy is then mobilised for physical efforts and an emotional preparedness for fight or flight.

People who have been in life-threatening situations describe experiencing adrenaline rushes, which are the result of physiological energy addition. Studies of stress reactions in military leaders show that they can lose the ability to survey a situation and look ahead, that they miscalculate time and do many things at the same time, losing their sense of time and priorities, fail to delegate and issue complex and unclear orders.⁸² In an interview study by Wallenius with UN battalion staff in Bosnien-Hercegovina, it emerged that many experienced that fear had a positive and activating effect. Some felt that their powers of concentration and thinking were heightened in an acute threatening situation, but also that the ability to think was reduced – “like looking through a straw” – if the threat was extended in time.⁸³ Hypothetically, there might be a difference between military stressed officers and a newspaper office. The military leaders probably spend more time in the field than the editors do. Considering how being there and witnessing impact on individual reactions, it is reasonable to assume that the editors are spared the most traumatic stress and are therefore better equipped for operative leadership. On the downside they lack the insight, overview and understanding that only witnessing can provide.

Concluding remarks

The reactions of journalists witnessing a disaster – a potential trauma – are important for the understanding of the outcome of their assignment on site. The journalists' reaction patterns are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

Studies of rescue service personnel and their reactions show that, despite strong sensory reactions, there are still remarkably few who experience reduced capacity in connection with stress reactions during a potentially traumatic assignment, but the less distressing the event, the longer the time until a debilitating stress reaction. But in case of a heavy trauma, when the individual does not have time to mobilise coping strategies, some individuals can find it difficult to complete their assignment.

Previous research of rescue service personnel reactions suggests that the most difficult situations to handle are those involving children. Dead and injured children increase stress among staff dramatically, causing severe crisis reactions. The most common crisis reactions seem to be cognitive (experiential), emotional, behavioural and somatic

(physical). Studies of how rescue service personnel have reacted in connection with traumatic assignments have shown that there are usually a handful of reactions in each of the categories.

The most common reactions are the sense of unreality, super memory, self-recrimination and possibly reduced risk perception. The reactions can mainly be handled through two types of coping strategies: *problem focused coping* which seeks information, analyses and solves problems, and *emotion focused coping*, which is characterised by positive thinking, self-control or negative aspects such as, distancing, flight or dissociation.

Rescue service personnel were for a long time a forgotten category after accidents and disasters. Journalists, however, have been an even more neglected category of indirectly affected individuals.

Several researchers think that an "optimal disaster behaviour" can be achieved through an intuitive and quick employment of accumulated knowledge, experience and training in practice. Rescue personnel are trained for this, unlike journalists. The editors face a particular challenge. Existing knowledge of leadership under stress and crisis suggests that there is a conflict between task-oriented and reaction-oriented leadership. The former involves pausing for thought, get an overview and think ahead without being overwhelmed by feelings. The latter is more focused on motivating co-workers and delivering individual support and crisis management. The kind of leadership that the journalist in the field has to relate to probably affects reactions, coping and approach.

The fact that journalists react is described and to a certain extent treated in a few international studies.⁸⁴ But *how* do they react, and how do the reactions in turn affect the professional task as a journalist? How does the conflict between the professional role and the person involved manifest itself? These are the central questions to be treated on the basis of the journalists' reporting on the Gothenburg fire.

Footnotes

- 1 Dyregrov (1992) p. 175 ff; Michel et al. (2001)
- 2 Lindström & Lundin (1982)
- 3 Dyregrov (1992) p. 176
- 4 Dyregrov (1992) p. 14
- 5 Moeller, S (1999)
- 6 Coté & Simpson (2000)
- 7 Blix & Bech-Karlsen (1990)
- 8 Dyregrov (1992)
- 9 *ibid.* p. 166
- 10 Lundin (1992) p. 102
- 11 Lindström & Lundin (1982)
- 12 *ibid.* p. 36
- 13 Englund (2002) and the book chapter "Det journalistiska arbetet" by Englund in Larsson & Nohrstedt et al. (2000)
- 14 Alexander & Wells (1991); Dyregrov (1992)
- 15 Hodkinson & Stewart (1991), p. 196.
- 16 Dyregrov (1992) p. 167
- 17 Ersland, Weisaeth & Sund (1989), also in Dyregrov (1992) p. 166
- 18 Lindström & Lundin (1982)
- 19 Dyregrov (1992) p. 187 f
- 20 Robinson (1984) also in Dyregrov (1992), p. 187
- 21 Dyregrov (1992) p. 188
- 22 ICD10, F45: <http://www.icd10data.com/ICD10CM/Codes/F01-F99/F40-F48/F43-/F43.10>
- 23 Dyregrov (1989), also in Hodkinson & Stewart (1998) p. 197
- 24 Dyregrov (1992) p. 200
- 25 *ibid.* p. 201
- 26 Enander et al. (1993) p. 52.
- 27 Ersland, et al. (1989) Enander et al. (1993)
- 28 Weisæth & Mehlum (1993/1997) p. 26
- 29 Michel et al. (2001) p. 117
- 30 American Psychiatric Association (1994) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (4th Ed.) Washington DC: Author ; Solomon et al. i Van der Kolk & McFarlane (1996) p. 102ff
- 31 Dyregrov (1992) p. 13
- 32 *ibid.* p. 14
- 33 *ibid.*
- 34 *ibid.* p. 15
- 35 Weisæth (1984); Dyregrov (1992) p. 20
- 36 Dyregrov (1992); Taiminen & Touminen (1996); Enander, Larsson & Wallenius (1991) (1995); Folkesson (2003); van der Kolk et al. (1996); Weisaeth & Mehlum (1993); Anthonowsky (1987); Härstedt (1995)
- 37 Härstedt (1995) p. 44
- 38 *Ibid.* p. 45
- 39 *Ibid.* p. 47 and p. 63
- 40 *ibid.* p. 95
- 41 *ibid.* p. 94
- 42 Deppa (1994); Pilger (2001); Bull & Erman (2002)
- 43 Coté & Simpson (2000)
- 44 Lundin (1992), p. 33-34
- 45 Coté & Simpson (1992) p. 42
- 46 Bull & Newman (2003); Johnson (1999), Dworzniak (2006)
- 47 Aiken (1996), Dworzniak (2006)
- 48 Himmelstein & Faithorn (2002)
- 49 *ibid.*, p. 538

- 50 Freud (1923/1961; 1933/1964; 1940/1964); Himmelstein & Faithorn (2002), p. 540
- 51 Feinstein, Anthony et al. (2001) *Risking more than their lives*; Matloff (2004); Strupp & Bartholomew (2003)
- 52 Simpson & Boggs (1999); www.dartcenter.org
- 53 Dworzniak (2006)
- 54 Weidmann et al. (2007)
- 55 www.dartcenter.org
- 56 Michel, Lundin & Otto (2001), p. 37
- 57 Py (1991) in Enander et al. (1993).
- 58 Weisaeth (1989)
- 59 Enander et al. (1993) p. 53.
- 60 Larsson et al. (1999); Michel et al. (2001) p. 208
- 61 Larsson, Kallenberg et al. (2003) p. 158 ff
- 62 Dyregrov (1999)
- 63 Michel et al. (2001); Lundin (1992)
- 64 Larsson & Kallenberg (ed) (2003)
- 65 Lundin (1992)
- 66 Dyregrov & Mitchell (1992); Dyregrov (1992)
- 67 Larsson & Kallenberg (ed) (2003) p. 167
- 68 Se bland annat Wallenius (1991) in Jacobsen & Karlsson (1991)
- 69 Dyregrov (1999)
- 70 Alexander & Wells (1991); Dyregrov (1992)
- 71 Enander et al. (1993)
- 72 Hodgkinson & Stewart (1991) p. 7
- 73 *ibid.*
- 74 Enander, Wallenius och Larsson (1995)
- 75 Enander et al. (1993) p. 39
- 76 SOU 1999:68
- 77 Lazarus (1966/1991)
- 78 Enander, Larsson & Wallenius (1993) p. 85 f
- 79 Larsson, Kallenberg et al. (2003) p. 173f
- 80 Antonovsky (1987)
- 81 Översättn. enl. Enander et al. (1993).
- 82 Larsson, Kallenberg et al. (2003) p. 176
- 83 Wallenius (1997); Larsson, Kallenberg et al. (2003) p. 176f
- 84 www.journalisten.se; *Pressens Tidning*; Dworzniak (2006)

6. THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

Doing research is similar to looking through another person's eyes, according to Stig Lindholm, professor of pedagogic psychology. He also likens the result – the potentially new – as an effect similar to listening to music in stereo. It is not merely a matter of simple addition, but the discovery of depth.¹ In this case, I have looked through the journalists' eyes to describe and explain the conditions under which journalists work at an accident site.

The process towards a complete thesis design is a long and winding road. Thus, this study started off as a study of disaster victims and their portrayal in the media, turned into a study of media content, to finally end up in an occupational study of journalists working on a specific case. The subject of disaster journalism has, however, been consistently central; only the focus has changed.

Investigation method

This thesis began as a case study in 1999, the year after the Gothenburg fire, and a few results were published in the research report "Media at the accident site".² This analysis was to have an extremely important function in the ensuing thesis investigation, namely as a question generator and a source of knowledge. Studying the content of the press raised many questions, which formed the basis of the interview design in combination with the theoretical frames. The media content also provided the reporters, photographers and editors that were judged to be important pieces of the puzzle.

Selecting respondents from the content analysis

The content analysis is crucial to the thesis without being a part of it. It has two main purposes: Firstly, to contribute to the so-called case journal – increasing knowledge of the event and its circumstances; secondly, to generate respondents and questions. The news reporting in the following Swedish morning papers *Göteborgs-Posten (GP)* and *Dagens Nyheter (DN)* and the evening papers *GöteborgsTidningen (GT)* and *Aftonbladet (AB)* were analysed and categorised during the

first days of the disaster. The emphasis in the content analysis is on the first and second days, that is, the 30 and 31 of October in 1998. Most papers printed extra editions at different times in the two days, which meant that text and photos were revised. In some cases the difference is so great that both the first and last edition were analysed. In itself this fact raised many questions regarding press ethics under time pressure, and interpretations and decisions made under stress.

The mentioned newspapers have a different character and are issued in different geographic areas, but share the journalistic task and form of news coverage. The four papers can be said to exist in the same discursive space, which means that the texts in the four papers can be regarded as related in a coherent pattern. We can assume that many readers in this period use more channels than they usually do. Messages, stories and interpretations are therefore synthesised by the individual reader. In this sense, the questions evoked on media content, text and pictures, can be seen as common to all the papers.

There were further reasons for letting the content analysis come before the interviews besides the selection of respondents: The study of newspaper texts provided good insight into the object of study and was an empirical complement to the theories of media and disasters. Since there is a lack of useful theories of disaster journalism and media practice at accident sites, the close reading of the media coverage has given rise to issues that require multi- and cross-disciplinary studies of crisis and disaster psychology, journalistic practice and other disaster research. Lastly, the study of the newspaper articles was a way of generating questions for the interviews. This approach resulted in a kind of "case journal" – a relatively detailed case data bank – described below in the section on case studies.

Delimitation

Working on the thesis has been a funnel-shaped process, which started with an ambition to cover disaster journalism in both breadth and depth and then went through a number of necessary narrowing down steps.

Regarding the three phases of a disaster — before, during and after — the study focuses on the acute phase (what takes place at the accident site). Professional practice involves conditions, implementation and ef-

facts, and implementation is the central aspect in the study. The journalist's practice during a disaster in progress must nonetheless be treated in the light of conditions and effects, but the interpretation and analysis of the empirical material rest on cognitive (as experienced), emotional, behavioural and somatic reactions, and the journalists' descriptions of their interpretations and actions on site.

All types of media were present at the Gothenburg nightly fire in 1998: Radio, TV, newspapers, photo agencies, news agencies. All had a great impact and none was less interesting than another, but a demarcation had to be made. The press was chosen because reporters and photographers were the first to arrive at the site and my primary object of study was journalistic practice during a disaster where the journalist's status as eyewitness is a vital factor.

A newspaper is also in many ways a more permanent document than broadcast media. It has both a short-term and a long-term importance to the reader, not least the persons affected. A printed text remains and can impact on the reader for better or for worse for a long time.

The term 'journalist' in this thesis includes both reporters and photographers. Otherwise it is referred to the categories 'reporter', 'photographer' and 'editors'. Photography journalism has often proved to be of great importance in disasters,³ and including photographers was a matter of course in this study. The investigation covers both the morning and evening press in Stockholm and Gothenburg.

Table 5 below shows the press staffing at the Gothenburg fire accident site in the first hours. Table 5 also shows that press members were the first to arrive and that the selection of papers and respondents make up a high proportion of the journalists and media on site.⁴ When the fire was extinguished at two o'clock in the early hours of the morning, around fifteen reporters and photographers were there.⁵ A substantial number of the press journalists who were on site during the night and in the morning are part of this study. Interviews were made with fifteen reporters, photographers and editors at two morning papers: *Göteborgs-Posten (GP)* and *Dagens Nyheter (DN)* and two evening papers: *GöteborgsTidningen (GT)* and *Aftonbladet (AB)*.

Table 5. Reporters and photographers present at the fire at Backaplan in the night between the 29th and 30th October 1998 (bold type marks interview respondents)

Time	Event: Present reporters (R) and photographers (P)	Head editors included in the study
23.42.02	Alarm	
23.49.50	First rescue team arrives	
23.55 (approx)	GP (P1)	
00.00 (app.)	AB (P)	
00.15 (app.)	GP (R1) , GP (R2), AB (R) , GT (R), GT (P)	
00.30 (app.)	SVT Västnytt (freelance P) SVT Västnytt (R) et al.	GP (managing editor), GT (managing editor) AB (managing editor)
00.30 - 02.00 02.00	In total ca 10 R och P present. SVT2 & TV4 (separate teams)	GP (news editor in chief)
Late night 02.00 -05.00 (app.)	DN (F) The fire extinguished: 15 R and P present	GP (photo editor in chief)
Morning	DN (F)	DN (local editor/project leader)
Lunch and later	GT (R) et al DN (R), GP (F2) GT (F) 120-150 reporters and photographers at the disaster scenes: place of accident, hospitals, press conferences, churches	

The interviews were made via telephone, as described further below. The questions focused on the professional and psychological aspects of the journalistic tasks in relation to the Gothenburg fire. Most of the reporters, photographers and editors (selection see above) were on duty during the first hours of the disaster. Some arrived later, which offers interesting points of comparison.

The category of editors comprises managing editors, chief editors, local project leaders/editors and image editors. The respondents include personnel stationed in Gothenburg and Stockholm, permanent

employees and free-lancers and, by a fortunate coincidence, both men and women, as well as large age distribution.

The same respondents also figure in an earlier report "The Gothenburg fire 1998: A Study of communication, rumours and trust", which deals with other areas.⁶ Parts of the interview material have also been presented in an earlier research report,⁷ which in addition includes some examples of the content analysis preceding the interviews.

The editors are included in the study because they add a management perspective on accident reporting, which is important to the whole picture. The newsroom activities take place under completely different premises than at the accident site. Ethical considerations and discussions are made clear because the interviews include both perspectives. The process from sounding the alarm to publishing is also clearer in the light of the more complex starting-points. Interaction and conflicts, as well as a view of self-evaluation and learning also become more transparent.

Interview as a method

In the introduction to *The qualitative research interview (Den kvalitative forskningsintervjun)* Steinar Kvale suggests that the best way to find out how individuals experience the world is to ask them.⁸ This is the justification of the choice of method, which is simple enough, but the implementation is more difficult. Interviewing is an art and listening is hard work.⁹

The interview method may have advantages if used in the right way. The interviews complement one another in a way that is complex and complementary and not simply a number of additional cases. There is also a subtle interplay, generating pictures of realities.

Interviewing is an art that rests on the judgement of qualified researchers rather than on rules regardless of content and context. In the therapeutic, as well as the research interview, the interviewer is the tool. The result of an interview depends on the expertise, sensitivity and empathy of the interviewer.¹⁰

Witnessing a tragedy such as the Gothenburg fire was a traumatic event for all the interviewed members of the media. Reliving the experience in the research interviews could, for some probably mean renewed pain as well as the relief that comes with "talking about it". The emotionally sensitive subject held deeply tragic portrayals and personal naked stories.

Talking about chaos, suffering and death in a research interview is strenuous for both the interviewer and the interviewee. The present interview study was conducted by phone (more details further on) around six months after the fire. This time period might have had both good and bad effects on the information that the respondents gave. Here are some examples of effects:

The incident was relatively well processed, often mentioned, and therefore easy to discuss on the phone for the affected persons. The risk of memory lapses can have increased and decreased: On the one hand, the long time might have led to the loss of certain details, and, on the other, the risk of memory gaps being filled in various ways would have been greater if the interview had taken place closer in time to the event as an effect of individual distress.¹¹

Respondents' perspectives on the incident and ability to see contexts are assumed to improve with time – to a certain point when some details start to fall into oblivion. However, in this case the recollections were so strong that the respondents were not likely to forget them. In some cases, it was difficult to know if the memory loss was truthful or an excuse not to answer uncomfortable questions, as in this example from an interview with a managing editor: *"Oh, I think I'm afflicted with Alzheimer's now."* (Laughter).

The risk of modified information, conscious or unconscious, increases with time. Since the Gothenburg fire was discussed thoroughly among journalists and editors at the time of the research interviews, the respondents may have added corrected descriptions and clarifications and this is impossible to determine.

How could these interviews be carried out in an optimal way, when there was the added weakness that conducting the interviews in Gothenburg was not optional? After considering various video conferencing options, it was finally settled that telephone interviews would be the most economical and efficient method. The interviews were recorded and the quality was good enough to rule out misconstructions. On the plus side, the target group was defined as experienced phone users and the distanced interview form was thought to reduce the risk of "emotional excesses." A personal meeting would have been more like a therapy situation as the experiences at the time were relatively untreated.

Even if the target group was assumed to be verbal and articulate, many of them pointed out that they were not used to being interviewed.

Interviews were interrupted on some occasions for smoking, need of fresh air or a glass of water: *"Excuse me, I'll need a glass of water. I got something in my throat. Please hold (pause). I'm more used to listening than talking"*.¹² The painfulness of the topic was evident, even on the phone. When a photographer described the scenario on the accident site, and heard "all the 17-year-old girls' light voices screaming," his own voice broke and he said: *"Now I'm getting hoarse too..."*.¹³

The disadvantages of telephone interviews are the possible difficulty in establishing contact and the lack of possibility to interpret non-verbal signs.

A psychological perspective

An important aspect of psychotherapy education, is developing the listening skills required to capture the many nuances and layers of meaning in a narration through empathy and active listening. Patients and clients should be listened to with "evenly suspended attention" as Freud, who regarded the therapeutic interview as a research method, put it.¹⁴

The free and reflecting approach to the research interview is also exemplified in Freud's clinical case studies, where he attentively presents his interviews.¹⁵ It is very difficult to present the relational and covert aspects of the interview situation in the written form, which means that the researcher has to have experience-based knowledge and skills in formulating experience that go beyond the traditional frames of reporting in research.

The open interview format is a characteristic feature of the psychoanalytical interview as reflected in Freud's non-intentional approach of letting himself be surprised at every turn of the process.¹⁶ The interviews in this study, however, were not wholly without intentions, but keeping an open mind to unexpected turns was certainly an ambition.

A similarity between the qualitative research interview and the psychoanalytical interview is the emphasis on inter-human interaction. Therapy skills in the art of listening are also important for professional groups such as journalists and researchers. Moreover, Kvale¹⁷ argues that the journalistic way of conveying an interview atmosphere could be applied by researchers to a greater extent in their reporting of interview studies.

Reconstructed experiences?

After an accident such as the Gothenburg fire, there is a risk that the ensuing debate will impact on individuals' memories. Perby describes how she, in connection with case studies of different professions, now and then would hear respondents' saying that they don't know "in what degree this is my personal opinion", or that she should "ask the others too."¹⁸ The ongoing conversation between colleagues entails correcting memories and opinions. This is the reason why the accumulated impression of the responses is of greater weight than the recollections of the occasional individual.

One respondent in the study contradicted himself when he described his experiences of what was happening around him at the disaster site. In one breath he said that it was not until he left the site that he realised that people had died and in the next he described how the paramedics performed CPR on fire victims:

'...and then there were some they gave up on, and you could tell they were dead. And I thought there were sure to be more dead young people. Maybe five. Or some around five'.¹⁹

The example shows that it is not that easy to decide which experiences were actually made on site, and which are a reconstruction and the result of pooling all the knowledge of the course of events, its causes and consequences. This is an important aspect to keep in mind when analysing the stories told.

Meeting on the phone: advantages and disadvantages

Besides the reasons mentioned above for choosing telephone interviews instead of visiting in person, one further factor was decisive: The studies of the media content preceding the interviews were so demanding that one-to-one meetings might not be desirable. In his introduction to the book *Interviewing (Att fråga)*,²⁰ Bo Wärneryd has compiled a comparative survey of different data collection methods, such as visiting and telephone interviews. The survey is designed for collecting statistical data in connection with survey investigations, but can to some extent clarify aspects of the qualitative interview situations in the present study. Table 6 presents a shorter version based on Wärneryd's survey, revised to suit the present purpose. It is noteworthy that the factors Wärneryd regards as negative in the emotionally charged interview, can in fact be beneficial.

In the study of the journalists involved in the Gothenburg fire, the interview situation was more anonymous but this was not only a disadvantage. However, talking about sensitive subjects over the phone may require long experience of open communication by phone and when the experience is there telephone interviews work well. Based on experience of the method after the fire study, the distance that came with the telephone medium may have prevented the research interview from turning into therapy. The silences or pauses were not felt uncomfortable to the interviewer. They rather generated more information. Silence could sometimes be relied on instead of follow-up questions. Interpreting moods, silent pauses, swallowings, throat clearings and sighings may probably be easier in the absence of face-to-face visual impressions. The assumption that the pressure of the situation would yield quick and superficial answers did not apply to this case. The questions were very short and the answers usually very long, which might be due to the respondents' verbal abilities. In addition, the respondents knew in advance that the interview was expected to take between one and two hours (different for the various categories), which was likely to create a certain mutual expectation of degree of detailness.

Table 6. Comparative overview of different aspects of the visiting interview and the telephone interview. Source: based on Wärneryd (1993).

Aspect	One-to-one interview	Telephone interview
Contact situation	Face to face	Interviewer more anonymous More limited, less flexible
Chance to establish a measurable situation	Big space for non-verbal communication, hard to controll	Only verbal communication, but pauses could be experienced as disturbing
Support information and impact	The interviewer can explain, but major risk for impact	Less risk for interviewer influence
Questions and the kind of questions	All questions possible, even delicate ones, if special measures are taken (e.g. anonymity)	Most topics possible, maybe except the most sensitive and intimate
Pressure to answer	Can involve a pressure to answer	Situation pressure vs. quick/superficial answers

The case study as method

There are many definitions of a case study. Some of the definitions that Sharan B Merriam,²¹ professor of pedagogy, refers to are also mentioned in Wilson,²² who thinks of the case study as a process of trying "to describe and analyse a certain unit in qualitative, complex and integrated terms, often continuously for a long period of time". Guba & Lincoln²³ argue that the case study aims to demonstrate "the properties of the class of phenomena of which the case is an example". Becker²⁴ thinks that the case study should lead to an integrated understanding of the units studied and to the development of general theoretical statements on regularities in the social structure and the social process. In the various definitions, Merriam discerns four basic features that are characteristic of all qualitative case studies. Firstly, they are *particularistic*, meaning that they focus on a specific event, phenomenon or person, but still reflect a general problem. The case study displays how people handle problems of all kinds in an integrated way.

Secondly, they are *descriptive*, which means a detailed and extensive description of the phenomenon. The case study comprises many variables and displays the complexity and interaction between them, usually through a qualitative description.

Thirdly, they are *heuristisk*, which includes the aim to improve the reader's understanding of the phenomenon studied, for example, by providing backgrounds and explanations to a problem. Previously unknown variables and conditions may lead to new perspectives and insights. This perspective is also applicable to evaluations and summaries, which makes it useful in practice.

Fourthly, they are *inductive* and the data generate concepts, hypothesis and generalisations. A qualitative case study reveals new relationships, concepts and new understandings.

A reason for taking case studies seriously is that different situations have different setups. Case studies can give rise to interesting comparisons between disciplines and professional groups.

An advantage of case studies as a research method is the natural delimitation: in time, geography and in the number of possible respondents. The prospects of creating a *case journal* to document the event are good.²⁵ Interview transcripts, reports, and in this case media publications, notes, articles and other material related to the case must be compiled and organised. Merriam quotes Patton, who clarifies the difference between the case journal and the case study:

The case journal compiles and structures the extensive information collected in a more unified, albeit primary, form. The case journal encompasses all the information used in the analysis and in the reporting. /.../ The case journal must be complete and easily managed at the same time.²⁶

Yin²⁷ calls the case journal *the case study database*. The information here is edited, superfluous material deleted and the material has a structured chronology.²⁸ The case journal in this study has four components: literature about the case; press/media publications during the first week; interviews with journalists and my own texts.

Most case studies in the social sciences centre on practical problems in an integrated perspective with the purpose of acquiring deeper insights into a certain situation and how the persons involved construct it.²⁹ The context is more important than the variables.

Anyone who thinks that there is a universal form of knowledge – for example definitions or mathematical systems possible to formulate – cannot focus on the specific in an area; in pursuit of the general, she will constantly distance herself from the living knowledge in the area. Instead, we should take case studies seriously, that is, take the specific and unique – the physiognomy of the domain – seriously. Situations have faces. Case studies in general give rise to interesting comparisons between areas.³⁰

According to Stake,³¹ seeing the case study as a method is debatable. He claims that it is not a matter of methodological choice but a choice of study object., This may be a far too broad definition of a case study. Most research is a case study in Stake's definition. He argues that the knowledge yielded through a case study differs from other research findings in four ways: It is more concrete and in harmony with our experience and more contextual. It is more developed through the researcher's interpretation (something that leads to generalisations when new information in the case is added to old information) and contributes to extended generalisations of different reference populations.³²

The case study is, according to Yin, applicable when a "how" or "why" question is addressed to all concurrent events on which the researcher has no or little influence.³³ Yin points out that this kind of study requires a great deal of planning and precision in formulating questions. One way of reaching a goal is through careful in a more perceptive or insightful way on the subject.

Working on a case study is similar to what journalists do. And the fact is, literature studies and this study is supported by detailed content analysis of a selection of the media production related to the case.

The preparatory studies of literature and press texts did not aim to seek the answers of others to a number of given questions, but *raising questions* as Yin points out that one of the best case studies written was produced by two journalists, namely Bernstein and Woodward. In *All the President's Men*³⁴ the powers that managed to conceal the Watergate scandal for a long time are portrayed. The authors keep returning to two questions: *How* was this cover-up created, and *why* was it necessary?

The two key questions in this study are: *How* did the journalists experience working at the accident site? *Why* did they react and act the way they did – there and then?

Questions and interview guides

Formulating the questions for the interview study followed on the literature study and content analysis of the four papers. The first draft of the interview guide was tested on a journalist who had been on duty when Estonia ferry went down. The journalist was at the ferry terminal where all next-of-kin were gathered. The pilot study was conducted by phone, which both parties found to work well. The revised and final interview guide (Appendix 13⁵) started with basic personal facts such as age, gender, education, number of years in the profession, employment, previous experience of disaster reporting, time of the alert and the arrival at Gothenburg fire site, or time of arrival at the office (editors).

The questions were divided into categories: the alert phase; arrival (if applicable); any instructions; visual impressions; thoughts, feelings and reactions; interaction and conflicts with colleagues and other actors; other actions on the site; interpretations and decisions; the conflict between the person and profession (fellow-human being and/or journalist?); editorial discussions and decisions; press publications; the need of psychological support/relief after the assignment; how/if such therapy was provided and its effect; self-evaluation of their own professional efforts and the paper's reporting after the fire; internal and external learning – at the newspaper and professionally. The managing editors were asked specific questions on press ethical responsibility and leadership.

The questions were not always asked chronologically. Instead, a relatively non-verbal but listening approach was adopted, with the result

that questions in the guide could be ticked without asking them. Most interviews also generated a new question to the guide and to the remaining interviews, which made the material increasingly richer.

Many questions were also on themes that later became irrelevant to the thesis delimitation. In addition, the material comprises issues related to human grief, reporting on collective grief demonstrations, commemorative celebrations and funerals, as well as interviews with survivors in the hospitals, which contain many interesting aspects for further studies.

Studying an occupation

Occupational studies involve detailed study of the multifaceted and specific character of an occupation, and often, as in this case, in a given situation. Professional expertise and skills are explored through a series of interviews with respondents over many years and rests on the idea the researcher and respondents are part of the study object. The researcher lives in and with the study object and the number of respondents are often lower than in more "distanced" research approaches where the same person is only interviewed once. Göranson³⁶ and Josefsson³⁷ are examples of Swedish researchers in the field of occupation who apply the practice-related model with close contact with the respondents.

A literary popular science example of how occupational knowledge can be studied is Yngve Ryd's book *Snow (Snö)* about the Swedish-Sami reindeer owner Johan Rassa and the Sami understanding of snow. The book builds on several years of interviews with Rassa and provides more than 300 words for snow and how the Sami people relate to the snow types.³⁸

Occupational studies of journalists have been carried out at the Department of Journalism by, among others, Weibull and Asp, who have studied the journalist corps as a social group,³⁹ and, unlike the research mentioned above, primarily through quantitative questionnaire surveys. Asp, Weibull and Börjesson, Melin-Higgins and Andersson⁴⁰ have studied journalists' values and attitudes, for instance, their attitudes to press ethics and codes. Some studies also centre on journalists' opinions of the journalistic practice, for example a couple of studies by Löfgren-Nilsson.⁴¹ In her doctoral thesis on journalistic ideals and organisation principles, Löfgren-Nilsson observes that journalism research often lacks empirical links between occupational studies and

practice.⁴² This was her reason for studying journalistic practice in the newsroom for a longer time.

Occupational research in the form of indepth qualitative interviews is rare in the Swedish journalism research. Orre has studied the phenomenon of reporting as an occupational praxis through interviews, but used the model of recurring group conversations.⁴³ A survey of a great number of international journalism studies and a compilation of central conceptions of journalism are available in Weaver.⁴⁴ The different roles in the journalist profession have been described by, among others, Melin-Higgins and Thurén.⁴⁵

Studies of an occupation, means studying individuals and their stories. Sometimes the stories clash, sometimes they complement each other. Exploring an occupation includes all the personal and social factors that are embedded in the occupational role practised.

From interview to text

From the interview to the finished text a great deal happens. Interpretations are made already in the transcription phase, and then the transcriptions are in turn interpreted and analysed before the text is completed. Like the ethnologist, Billy Ehn, one may be fascinated by the transformation of conversation into a research text.⁴⁶

The interviews studied here were interpreted and analysed in two ways, partly through repeated and systematic listening, partly through repeated readings of the transcriptions. Ehn has described this process as an act of creation:

Your read the interviews over and over until ou know by heart, you compile themes, compare what others have said, identify key aspects and delete things that cannot be used. The finished academic text looks deceptively simple when you quote from interviews. In realty it is a complicated and arduous work to choose what to include, where and with what meaning.⁴⁷

Ehn has a point in the apparent simplicity of the interview analysis. To a layman's eyes the quotations can appear to be similar to a newspaper interview. It is difficult to see that several years can lie between the start and the finish.

The thesis is based on 15 interviews, lasting between 1.5 and 2 hours each, which correspond to 20-30 pages of printed text per interview, categorised with the help of close reading of the material. The categories were created on the basis of the smallest meaning-carrying element, that is, not on already constructed models,⁴⁸ but they are also

firmly related to theoretical frames on competence and stress reactions. The attempt was to analyse dimensions of experience, reactions and patterns of action to see in what ways the respondents describe them. The situational context is also analysed and specified to which phase of the publication process they are related.

Knowledge generated by the choice of method

Witnessing the tragedy in Gothenburg was a traumatic experience for several of the interviewed media members. On several occasions during the interview, the interviewer was faced with methodological choices related to reliability and ethics, for instance, the roles of the researcher and the interviewee. The emotionally charged topic of deeply tragic depictions and personal, naked stories gave rise to misconstructions as well as problems in drawing the line when an interviewee talked in a way that was more suitable for a therapy session.

Some factors of uncertainty are always inherent in retrospective interviews, and when they involve emotional experiences (in this case also in combination with professional ideals) there is room for mistaken statements and misconstructions. However, the interview study may be viewed as highly relevant to the key issues of the thesis in design and performance. In addition, the preparation for the interview guides was meticulous, as described above.

The processing of collected material worked well too. The interviews were both transcribed verbatim for reading and recorded on CD for listening and computer processing. In Glaser's terms, the theoretical coding of the interviews was then made on the basis of the following three aspects:⁴⁹ 1) Cause and effect: What were the consequences of certain actions or decisions? 2) Processes in the journalistic work at the accident site: How did the work proceed over time and how did the journalists react to the situation? 3) Strategies for problem solution: What did the journalists do to manage situational problems such as press ethical issues and journalistic decisions?

There will never be a fire identical to the Gothenburg fire, but more tragic accidents are certainly in store. Even if each situation is unique, there are similarities and parallels in aspects of the event and the onsite journalistic efforts that may be similar in the future. This thesis provides a picture of how journalism practice may take shape under extreme circumstances.

Research ethical guidelines

The study has been conducted in compliance with the research ethical principles issued by the Swedish Research Council.⁵⁰ The principles of individual protection were considered with regard to the insight that the nature of the investigation and the population does not guarantee complete anonymity. This was discussed with the interviewees, who consented to the proposed manner of quoting from the interviews in the thesis.

The interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, which means that the requirement of information is met. Since the interview material was originally collected within the frame of another project funded by the Swedish Board of Psychological Defence, the interviewees were primarily informed about that project and about the report to be published.⁵¹ Only a few of the question areas were analysed for the psychology defence report. All participants were later informed that the whole interviews had been analysed for publication in a doctoral thesis.

The requirement of consent has been met because all participants and, when applicable, their editors consented to the interviews being recorded and transcribed for analysis in the report and the thesis.

The research ethical principles involving confidentiality and privacy were the most difficult to meet. The uninitiated reader cannot identify any interviewee. As regards the initiated journalists and all the persons present at the accident site in Gothenburg, the confidentiality requirement is an unreasonable and superfluous rule. The journalist profession is in most cases public. Texts and photos are accompanied with bylines with complete names. A certain newspaper might only have had one photographer on site in the middle of the night, which means that the reference "Photographer AB" is only an apparent anonymity. Some information in the interviews are so detailed that the individuals are fully identifiable to a certain circle of people. This problem was discussed with all interviewees, who were aware of the problem but did not object to continued participation in the interview study. The interviewer also guaranteed that no third party would receive any information of identities through me. The confidentiality requirement has thus been met.

The collected interview material has been used only for research purposes and will not be used in any other way, in compliance with the ethical rules.

The Research Council's recommendations that respondents and informants are allowed access to ethically sensitive parts have been observed to a great extent and whenever deemed necessary.

Closeness and distance

The issue of *closeness* and *distance* has been treated by several researchers in connection with descriptions of qualitative methods.⁵² The role of the researcher is often described as a constant vacillation between closeness and distance, where closeness can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage. This interplay can be observed in several contexts: the interviewees' closeness to the object of study and the researcher's closeness to the empirical material, collected and analysed.⁵³

Conducting emotionally charged interviews means a strain on both the interviewee and the researcher. The latter must imperceptibly accommodate his or her own as well as the interviewee's reactions to what is described, as Sandberg and Thelander point out in connection with an interview study of the poisonous tunnel construction through the Halland Ridge (Hallandsåsen), in the south-west Sweden.

Researchers must never proceed further in the interview than they can manage themselves. They must be able to carry the interviewee's emotional response as well as their own without breaking down.⁵⁴

A risk in establishing a good contact with interviewees is that the researcher deceives or manipulates the interviewee because he/she can be lulled into a false sense of security about the good relationship and disclose more information than intended. The purpose of the interview can be forgotten and the interviewee can forget that statements do not remain private. If the tone is too friendly, the risk increases. "*Thanks for coming and welcome back,*" said an older man to the researchers upon leaving his home.⁵⁵ In the case of the Gothenburg fire, several interviewees concluded by saying, "*it was nice to get it off my chest*" or "*oh, this brings back a lot – a lot surfaced now*".

As mentioned, the interviews in this study were preceded by two months of content analysis, primarily of the press but also TV broadcasts. Filling the days with so much tragedy required a balance between empathy and distance, and mostly the latter; what Devereux, Hungarian-French ethnologist, has called *counter transference* could otherwise take place.⁵⁶ This concept refers to situations where the researchers react to their own observations.

The telephone interview as a method turned out to be a useful instrument in balancing closeness and distance, probably for both parties; a traumatic event leaving permanent scars was to be described and understood.

The case of the Gothenburg fire: A background

During the night of 29-30 October 1998 several alert calls were received at the Emergency Control Centre at 23:43 about a fire in the premises of the Macedonian Society at Backaplan in Gothenburg. This section gives a description of the case to give the reader a chance to understand the enormity of the situation and the conditions under which the journalists did their job.

The emergency operations were very complicated and aggravated by the great number of people who were present at the site, blocking the passage. A further complication was the great many young people in different degrees of distress. According to the emergency service report, many young people also helped in the life-saving efforts. Initially, around 60 persons were saved by firemen, 40 via the stairwell and 20 through the windows. Many saved themselves by jumping from windows.

'I see the utter chaos all around, hundreds of people lying in a jumble, lifeless, you can't tell if they are shocked, injured, severely injured or ... in any case lifeless. People are dragged around /... / there is shouting and crying, the surge of the crowd moves in from everywhere, not just from the premises, but from everywhere, as I recall.'
(Operations squad leader)⁵⁷

Still an hour after the start of the fire, the actors on site have not grasped the extent of the accident.⁵⁸

The Gothenburg fire is one of many accidents that we did not think could happen. The progress of the fire was rapid. In total, 213 young people were injured and 63 died in the tragic fire, 60 of which on site.⁵⁹ More than 100 men participated in the operations: 50 members of the rescue services, 40 ambulance paramedics and other medical staff, and great number of policemen.⁶⁰

The scenario described was witnessed by many reporters and photographers. The journalism practice on the site can, with few exceptions, be defined as reticent. The experience was potentially traumatic also for the members of the media, which affected their work dramati-

cally.⁶¹ The event led to extensive coverage by national and international mass media as the majority of the young people belonged to families with non-Swedish background.

The party organisers were called The Playaz Club. Flyers with the message of disco, hip-hop music, R&B soul had been distributed in schools and in the city in the days before. The entrance fee was 40 SEK and 320 tickets had been sold to a venue holding 150 persons.⁶² Most of the youngsters were 17 or 18 years old and lived in the Gothenburg districts of Hammarkullen, Bergsjön and Angered, which have a large proportion of immigrant families. The party venue, located on the second floor of old converted industrial premises, was rented by the Macedonian Society in Gothenburg.

The fire, which was later shown to be arson, started in a stairwell adjacent to the emergency exits. When the door was opened, the oxygen made the fire accelerate dramatically, and a backdraft was a fact in the heat of 50 to 60 centigrade.

A disc jockey tried to warn the crowd using his microphone. Panic and confusion developed in the partygoers' struggle to reach the only functioning exit. The abhorrent scenes involved young people not getting out, and some who reached the door were stuck there.

Media coverage: course of events

The broadcast media in Gothenburg became aware of the ongoing fire via a personal beeper. The regional Gothenburg daily newspaper *GP* received a signal from the SOS Alarm Centre mini call service. A *GP* photographer off duty but carrying the emergency call centre's alarm seeker happened to be in the vicinity and went there immediately. The regional Gothenburg daily evening newspaper *GT* got a tip from a private person who apparently was listening to the SOS Alarm. A freelance photographer for the regional public service TV based in Gothenburg, *SVT Västnytt*, was reached by a mini call message at home. An editor got a signal message from an alert intelligence service in the city of Norrköping, but did not understand the gravity of the situation. The alert service company continued signalling to Swedish media and at midnight the authorities television news channels *SVT1/Aktuellt* and *SVT2/Rapport* were notified. Shortly after, the news reached the Norwegian newspapers *Verdens Gang (VG)* and *Aftenposten*.⁶³

In Gothenburg, only the newspapers *GP* and *Arbetet* carried the news about the fire in the morning edition. The presses were stopped and at 02:30 the last information of the number of deaths at that point in time came in and Gothenburg edition went to the presses.⁶⁴

The news of the fire reached the world around 01:45 via a telegram from *TT*, a Swedish Newspapers' Telegram Bureau (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå), on the *Reuters* news network. Ten minutes later channel *TV4* broadcast the news of the fire as the first TV channel in Sweden. The Swedish Radio reported on the fire in the national public service radio *Echo News (Ekonyheterna)* at 02:00, and thereafter every 30 minutes and after four o'clock every 15 minutes. The first local Gothenburg radio broadcast was at 02:00 and there were live reports from the accident site in between the news.⁶⁵

The government official investigation report on the Gothenburg fire⁶⁶ concluded that many members of the mass media arrived at the scene only a few minutes after the rescue services and the police.⁶⁷ The television and the radio dominated the news coverage initially and it took several hours before the first papers were distributed. A little more than two hours after the fire alert, the radio and TV media started broadcasting.

Besides *GP*'s reporting in the morning after the fire, the evening papers carried detailed reports and on the following day, several papers issues extra editions despite the press free day (All Saints' Day).

The government investigation report arrives at two important conclusions regarding the media reporting: First, it is noted that it is "natural for the media to interview eye witnesses, but that these should take place with discretion and awareness that distress can change people's personality and judgement." Second, it is noted that the media portrayal of the fire as an ethnicity related event was "justified in view of the great many people of foreign background among the casualties".

Summing up, the report concludes that the information provided by the regular media was nuanced and factual, but the lack of TV broadcasting in non-Swedish languages is criticised. Broadcasts in other languages would have made a great difference to people in this multiethnic event.

Table 7. Timeline for media engagement during the first ten hours of the Gothenburg fire 29-30 October 1998. 66

23:42	SOS Emergency Call Centre receives an alert
23:50	Several media are informed about the fire
00:00 -00:50	Photographer and reporter from <i>Aftonbladet</i> and photographer from <i>GP</i> arrive, soon followed by photographer and reporter from <i>GT</i> . <i>GP</i> 's reporters arrive at around 00:15. A bit later, a freelance photographer from <i>SVT Väst</i> arrives.
00:35 ca	Reporter from <i>SVT Gothenburg</i> arrives
00:50	<i>GP</i> stops the presses when the two reporters return to office
01:21	<i>TT</i> 's first telegram about "some 20 young people victims of an uncontrollable fire"
01:43	<i>Reuters</i> issues a telegram via <i>TT</i> and the news is spread internationally
01:46	<i>TT</i> reports that there are around 50 victims
01:50	Östra hospital's oncall PR officer meets the first reporters and photographers who are already at the hospital
01:55	First national TV news broadcast: a news bulletin in channel <i>TV4</i>
02:00	First newscast in <i>national radio P3/P4</i>
02:00	Report that the fire is out
02:15	<i>BBC</i> 's first broadcast on the fire
02:30	First press conference at the Östra hospital announced via <i>TT</i>
02:30	First local radio broadcast: <i>SR Gothenburg/P4</i> . The Gothenburg edition of <i>GP</i> in press
03:00	First press release is issued by Gårda fire station
03:00	<i>TV4</i> broadcasts live from Backaplan
03:00-04:00	<i>SVT2</i> and <i>TV4</i> post information on their teletext pages
03:30	<i>SVT</i> 's local studio <i>Västnytt</i> is staffed with 25-30 persons
03:30	Press conference at på Gårda Fire Station announced via fax
04:00	News broadcast in <i>SVT/Rapport</i> . The Gothenburg newspaper <i>Arbetet</i> staffs its neswroom.
04:10	<i>CNN</i> presents the news on its website
04:30	First <i>local TV4</i> newscast
05:00	Delayed issue of <i>GT</i> 's Friday edition. Later in the morning <i>GP</i> and <i>Arbetet</i> decide on issuing a special edition for the press-free All Saints' Day
06:57	<i>SVT</i> 's local studio <i>Västnytt</i> 's first live newscasts from Backaplan
10:15	First newscast from <i>SVT</i> 's local studio <i>Västnytt</i>

Media coverage in the press, radio and TV

The Gothenburg fire in 1998 attracted a great deal of attention from the media in Sweden and abroad.⁶⁸ Swedish media, in particular the evening press, appeared to be able to mobilise many people for extensive coverage. Fridays are, for logical reasons, the day of the evening papers and the broadcasting media and the morning papers only ran short items and the occasional photo in their Friday editions. However, both *GP* and *Arbetet* published a 16-page special edition on the normally press free All Saints' Day. Sixty-one staff members worked on the special paper at *GP* and 13 extra persons were brought in at *Arbetet*. The papers were delivered to different meeting-places in Gothenburg where people could collect a copy. *Radio Gothenburg (Radio Göteborg)* announced where the papers were available. The influx of journalists and photographers grew significantly during the Friday. The first foreign teams came from Copenhagen and Oslo but soon world media were in place. Around 130 journalists and photographers attended the press conferences arranged during the day.

The government official investigation of the news coverage and information in connection with the fire included an analysis of different media and the proportion of their coverage given to the various stages such as the progress of the fire, life saving, hospital care, bereavement etc. The report shows that the broadcasting media by far paid the most attention to the fire, while the major city morning press devoted less space to it. The explanation may seem simple. The broadcasting media were on site and on the air very quickly, while the press free day for the morning press obviously meant a later engagement. However, the fact that the broadcasting media, especially TV, lend themselves better for dramatic scenes and life saving acts and the here-and-now experiences can have motivated the broadcasting media's focus on the acute stage. The rescue operation gets most space in the evening press but the morning papers cover this less. Beyond the time difference of media presence on site, this can be explained by the fact that rescue operations are more suitable to the evening press media logic, as the authors of the reports suggest. Regarding the portrayal of human grief, this was most attended to in the morning press while the broadcasting media paid less attention.⁶⁹

To further clarify the nature of the event, a selection of different media portrayals of the fire during the acute phase are presented below as examples of the situation and not as assessments of media content.

The fire portrayed in the press

When the papers *GP*, *DN*, *GT* and *AB* had been selected from the extensive content analysis of the whole media production after the fire and before the interviews, the four papers were the object of close reading and categorisation. A few parts of the analysis have previously been published in the Swedish Rescue Services Agency's (Räddningsverket) report "*Media at the accident site*" ("*Medier på olycksplatsen*").⁷⁰ The bulk of the content analysis has not been published and has served as a basis for the case study and for identifying respondents and designing the research issues and interview questions. Below, the media reporting is described as a background to the case study description and is not meant to provide a complete picture of the media reporting.

GP's special Saturday edition, popularly referred to as the "memorial attachment", later proved to be a very important document for many, not least for survivors and the bereaved. *DN*, however, was not issued on Saturday. Instead it devoted 12 pages to the tragic event in their Sunday issue. Fire reporting dominated the evening papers *GT* and *AB* for several days. The theme of tragedy and grief recurred in all the papers. The age of the victims contributes to coverage. Eyewitness accounts are presented to a great extent except for the first day. Personal chronicles were more frequent in the studied press than usual. Eyewitness journalists and photographers as reflecting fellow human beings were typical features of the coverage during the next days. The personal journalism and personal form of reporting are examples of classic journalism, but here is a context in which the method becomes more prestigious. Photography journalism is another form that was given a great deal of space at this time. Several papers, for instance, carried a single photo on the front page with a short caption, "Gothenburg 30 October 1998" or "The fire site Friday night." In this situation the image seemed to speak louder than words.

Scenes from Hell

The reporting on the fire in the press after the fire is filled with horror, panic and desperation. Grief, despair, questions without answers and a resigned sense of unreality fill the papers.

What was happening? The boy didn't understand. He had been on a visit in hell.
(*DN* 981101)

Have you seen the boy on fire? (a small boy's question to a Red Cross worker). (DN 981101)

'The dead were lying in heaps'. Shocked firemen had never seen anything like it. (Headline in GT 981030)

PEOPLE WERE LYING IN DROVES on the fire site... (Caption in GT, 981030).

'Everybody was hitting and pinching one another, my hair was pulled and no one could breathe.' 'I knew that if I fell it would be the end. People would trample you to death.' (GT 981031)

Shocked young people talked about how their friends died in their arms, how people were squeezed to death or had fallen to the ground in the street outside, coughing. (AB 981030)

A young girl had stopped breathing. Around her wrist was the rescue services' green tag with the words: 'Non-urgent'. (GT 981031)

He saw young people jumping from windows onto the police cars below. How they were killed, injured. How they were pushed through the windows. A boys' desperation over his burned girl-friend. (DN 981101)

The eyewitness accounts are many and often bluntly put. *GT* let a young man describe how party-goers tried to escape the raging fire by jumping from the narrow portholes:

A 16-year-old boy who had gone out for a bit of fresh air was the witness of macabre scenes. I saw a guy jumping out head-first. He probably cracked his skull. (GT 981030)

The article continues to describe what it could have been like inside for those who did not get out:

Many didn't get that far. Inside the burning building many young people fell to the floor.

Some managed to get up again. Others didn't have the strength and were lying on the floor while others in panic trampled all over them. (GT 981030)

In *Aftonbladet*, a girl – her picture next to the article – recounts how she had run on top of people lying on the floor to save her life:

'Everyone trampled on others to get out. Me too. Some were sure to be dead, others unconscious, but I couldn't manage to think about them', said Yocelin. (AB 981031)

The descriptions are reminiscent of a statement made by a Dane who survived the Estonia ferry disaster. He said, "I survived by trampling on others". The statement, which became a favoured illustration

of desperation and survival instinct in the media, was cabled out to the news network. These words led to years of guilt feelings for the Dane, which is described in his book *I wanted to survive (Jag ville överleva)*.⁷¹ Strong expressions like this can make the person who said them feel guilty, especially if "the world" knows who said them. Nearly every major disaster is accompanied with similar phrases, which reflect powerlessness, and primitive survival instincts and probably describe the situation accurately. And one may wonder if it would be possible for papers to quote similar statements without attaching them to a specific person in a picture next to the article? An already dramatic situation is amplified by the dramaturgy of news media.

Another example of the conflict between understanding and entertainment described in media theory⁷² is detailed descriptions of suffering and death. The need to know the facts of the naked truth is pitted against the violation of privacy. It is not unproblematic to describe the face of sudden death in detail and with literary embellishments:

An unbearable silence has replaced the chaos. /.../ The ambulances have been driving dead bodies to the Sahlgrenska hospital all night and all morning. Now there are only three left on the morning damp pavement. One is very small, lying on the back. I see a pair of black boots and hands that seem to be folded on the tummy under the yellow blanket. (AB 991030)

The medical disaster expert Per Örtenvall, at the Östra hospital, can give more accurate information in a *GP* article where he says that most of the young people died from smoke poisoning, not from burn injuries. Many have asked the question and on the basis of previous experiences he elaborates on the answer:

He has experience of the ferry catastrophe on the Scandinavian Star. Smoke poisoning was the cause of death in 152 out of the 158 casualties.

A qualified guess is that the conditions here were similar. Very likely most of them died from smoke poisoning. (GP 981101)

The concluding impression – without evaluating the journalism – is that the newspapers were filled with unpleasant reading about a diabolical event. The question is if the unbearable could have been portrayed in a tolerable way.

The fire on the radio

The first national radio broadcast on the subject of the fire took place at 02:00. Both national and regional radio channels *P3* & *P4*, followed by broadcasts every half hour until 04:00, when they came on air every fifteen minutes.⁷³

The first newscast by the national public service radio news programme *The Echo (Ekot)* was introduced as follows:

In view of the disastrous fire in Gothenburg, here follows an extra newscast. You are listening to the nightradio in *P3* and *P4* (the standard *Ekot* signature tune), *Ekot* is on the air because of the severe fire on Hisingen in Gothenburg around midnight, where around twenty persons have been carried out dead and there may be as many as fifty victims.

Swedish Radio's (SR:s) local newscast via *SR Gothenburg, Channel P4*, started at 02.30. There were newscasts every 15 minutes and in between live interviews from the fire site. In addition, official information was provided according to the "Urgent Message to the Citizens" (VMA – Viktigt meddelande till allmänheten),⁷⁴ with current telephone numbers to hospitals and crisis supporting services. *Radio Göteborg's* first newscast directly after the *Echo* newscast cited above, included a plea to the youth of the city.

And this is Sveriges Radio Göteborg, *P4*. We are on the air now because of the disaster on Hisingen in Gothenburg last night, as reported on the *Echo news*. Information has it that around fifty people lost their lives in the fire, a fire that broke out at a disco arranged by the Macedonian society in Herkulesgatan in Gothenburg. Dead and injured people have been taken to the Mölndal hospital, to Sahlgrenska, to the Östra and to Kungälv's hospitals. If you are safe, please call home to say that you are OK and alive. In short, tell your family because so many are worried and call the police and the rescue services after the disastrous fire on Hisingen last night where around fifty people may have died.⁷⁵

In this stage, the local radio acted as much as a community informer as a newscaster. The public service organisations and *Channel 4 (TV4)* and recently also some commercial broadcasting media have, by agreement, a special role as informers in crises and disasters. In situations like the Gothenburg fire the public service *Sveriges Radio* should – locally or nationally – communicate messages from the authorities "which are "of great urgency to citizens".⁷⁶

Eventually, the rescue operation staff decided to allow the media to walk through the premises where so many young people had died. The radio listeners were taken along on this painful walk in a charred inferno by Kristina Hedberg, whose breathless and moving report in the

national public service radio lunch news *The Lunch Echo (Lunchekot)* attracted a great deal of attention.

‘Here on the staircase it’s very wet of course because of the firefighting. There are hosepipes and barriers. And here in a corner... a pile of scorched down jackets, and boots, sneakers... I’m climbing to the next halflanding. And now we have reached the entrance to the discotheque. Here everything is soaking wet and masses of clothes, shoes and handbags and it stinks of... it stinks of old smoke! Everything on the walls is black and charred ... and sticky of ashes and water on the floor. And it’s really (coughs) ...it’s really terrible in here.... Oh, my God!’⁷⁷

The report continued and it was made abundantly clear that the place at the time was ghastly.

The fire on TV

The first Swedish TV report from the fire site was broadcast by *SVT’s Västnytt* at 06:57. The first extra newscast from the same news studio was broadcast at 09:00:

‘Sixty dead and 190 injured in the most severe fire disaster ever in modern time Sweden last night. /.../ According to the rescue services, it could be a case of arson.

The national public service TV news in Swedish Television, *Report (Rapport)* sent their first extra newscast was at 04.00. Notably, *SVT2’s* tape copies of all broadcasts 04.00 till 09:00 are missing. These were not available for the government investigation, led by Professor Kent Asp, which among other things mapped the news coverage of the fire,⁷⁸ and therefore could not be included in the preceding content analysis either.

Documentary *After the Fire (Efter branden)*, *SVT 2*, 25 January 1999

Three months after the fire disaster in Gothenburg, the filmmaker/photographer Tommy Wiberg and the producer Lasse Weldeborn made an hour-long documentary about the Gothenburg fire. Fragments from the documentary are presented here because they serve as a summary of *SVT’s* coverage of the first hours of the fire and an important part of the case description. Wiberg and Weldeborn both reported from the October accident site.

The documentary includes stories of how young girls prepare for what they thought was a private party. Shirin, aged 13 (who lost two sisters in the fire), and Marcus, aged 15, alternate in describing how the party started and developed. They describe the unreality of it all when the

Disc jockey shouted "Fire!" during the dancing in the Macedonian Society's place at Backaplan in Gothenburg.

'The Disc jockey said that there was a fire, but no one took him seriously, really, some got on the stage and started singing and then /.../ after some time ... there was smoke ... horrible, strong smell of plastic.' (Marcus, aged 15)

Then they describe their own and others' struggle against the smoke, the crowd and the stoppage: How they were lying on the floor on top of others and under others; how there was still time for showing concern and giving comfort before the poisonous gases made the struggling young persons cry, wail, and become silent. They give expression to everything from resigned thoughts of "I will die" to hopes of divine intervention:

'I struggled and prayed to God at the same time... that I would make it... that I wouldn't die in this way ... please help me'. (Marcus)

The fireman Reine Carlsson describes the inhuman priorities he had to make in a situation where more people could have been saved if more life saving resources had been available. But now he is alone and and there is a girl in the corner of the crowded room:

'While I was there working, people clung to me, my mask, my hosepipes and clothes...people I couldn't help because I had decided on that girl. /.../ It felt really, really good to know that I had at least saved ONE from this inferno.' (Reine Carlsson)

As in many descriptions of the fire and its consequences, heroic deeds are implied, for instance, how children lost their lives in the attempt to save others:

'A boy came up to my mother and said, "I carried out your daughter"... and she said, "where is she, which hospital?"... He said, "I don't know, I just carried her out and then I don't know any more". Then another boy had come up and said, "I carried out your daughter too". Then we understood that she had come out with smoke damaged lungs and had run back in again, and probably died in there with Jasmine [the youngest sister]'. (Shirin, aged 13)

Efforts of this kind can be the result of reflex attempts to save a sibling, but there are also medical and psychological explanations to why people return into a burning building. Fire gases and oxygen can affect consciousness and judgement abilities. Returning into a fire is extremely dangerous, not least since bodily exertion in combination with smoke poisoning can quickly lead to sleep and unconsciousness. The Swedish Accident Investigation Authority writes in their report on the

Gothenburg fire that people in general tend to underestimate the danger if they have no previous experience of similar events. "Tunnel vision" caused by the stressful situation can lead to the wrong priorities and quick actions rather than appropriate action.⁷⁹

The TV cameraman, Tommy Wiberg, participated in the programme himself. His story illustrates the journalistic dilemma clearly: having to complete an assignment, more or less willingly, in a situation difficult to assess and chaotic, where anything besides saving lives appears as a provocation. In a film sequence a young man reacts with words and gestures, which can be understood as an attempt to keep off the media. Tommy Wiberg says in the film that "the only thing to do was to put down the camera and embrace them."

'I don't think I have ever done such a bad job. /.../ I've been involved in many dramatic events, which I have managed to keep at a distance, and also to keep my professional glasses on. But as soon as I arrived at this place and heard their desperate cries, and saw all the young persons lying around... it was very hard to work there. On my way to the TV building... then I couldn't hold back... everything snapped... I started shaking. Yes... (weeps). (Tommy Wiberg, film photographer, SVT Göteborg)

In interview sequences from the live broadcasts in the night and morning, it is clear that the scope of the fire was difficult to assess. The operations squad leader, Sten Schäaf, first says that there are "many casualties /.../ probably over thirty," whereupon an apparently distressed reporter repeats: "Dead?" and the squad leader confirms: "That's right". The death number climbs to 50 and later to 60. In an interview Schäaf describes how the rescue operations has affected him:

'I think around the clock more or less... and still the fire pops up... the sights and scenes I've faced out there. It will all stay with me for a long, long time to come. Or forever ... since for me and for everyone else, I think, it was the worst thing I've ever experienced.'

Sten Schäaf conveys his appreciation of all civilians who helped in the rescue operations, but he also points out that there is a limit to such assistance. Schäaf implies that many young people can have got the wrong idea from films about the feasibility of heroic action in real life.

'You can't run into a raging fire... films such as Backdraft and Rambo and whatnot... they can do it, save ten, fifteen persons and running out... in the world of films ... reality is different.' (Sten Schäaf, operations squad leader)

In Kent Asp's government investigation report on the fire it is clear that both the press and the broadcasting media gave a lot of space to

the young people's criticism of the police and the rescue services' efforts, and of the speculations that the cause of the fire was arson.⁸⁰ The report also notes that several of the broadcasting media journalists went too far in their interviews with distressed teenagers.

Live broadcasting media do not have the opportunity to editorially review the kind of critical segments that the complaints against the police and rescue services exemplify. The press has a better chance to edit even if newspapers too work under radio-like conditions with printed and electronic newspapers. This is an explanation and not an excuse to how the reporting turned out the way it did in *SVT's* broadcasts and to some extent in local radio.

Confrontations on the site

The grief process in bereaved people is affected by the degree to which the dead person's body is damaged or maimed. It is also of importance that someone can be held responsible for the death.⁸¹ In the latter case, mass media are always eager to find a scapegoat. The word 'scapegoat' derives from the Old Testament where it is described how the Jews confessed their sins by placing their hands on the head of a goat and then driving it into the desert. Their sins were thus transferred to the goat. In terms of social psychology, the individual can relieve their own inner conflicts and anxiety by singling out a scapegoat to project anger and guilt on.⁸² In the case of mass media, it is often more related to speculations than factual analyses and facts.

There were many confrontations at the Backaplan site as a result of the traumatic situation and people with stress reactions. Rescue service staff and journalists were objects of the young people's anger, which was difficult to take for many.

They shouted murderers to us, even though we had saved 60 persons /.../ They confused us with the people they had to escape from in their home countries. /... / For the first time ever we got beaten – physical violence – by teenagers who didn't like our priorities.⁸³

The confrontations between survivors and rescue workers and the criticism launched at the rescue operations units were a prominent theme in the newspaper texts studied for this thesis. One article in *Aftonbladet* refers to a radio interview in *Ekot, Sveriges Radio*, with a boy, who managed to get out, in the following way:

I fell down the stairs and wanted to go back in, but the police stopped us. We were

not allowed to go back. The boy is noticeably shocked. He does not know yet how many of his friends have survived. (AB 981030)

The article highlights two problems, which are related to the effects of acute stress reactions. The first is that the reporter notes that the boy in the interview is in severe distress. This reflects on the judgement of the radio, and in *Aftonbladet's* reference there is no name, which protects the boy's anonymity appropriately. The second is the criticism of the police, which featured in several media and which, in all probability, was a result of both psychological and medical effects.⁸⁴

The police's efforts to stop teenagers from returning to a building on fire should be regarded as perfectly reasonable, but there may also be other causes for the young people's behaviour towards the police and rescue personnel, which is discussed in the next section.

"The police stopped us", "The police were wrong". These headlines are from *GT* (981031) but could be from any other paper. There was a great debate on the way several papers chose to portray the police and the rescue service operations in days after the fire. In a great many articles, survivors were invited to react to the rescue operations:

Mohammed is very critical of the police.

'Yes, they stopped us. We are certain to have got out more persons otherwise. The police were completely wrong. I am very disappointed.' (GT 981031)

In *Dagens Nyheter's* editorial on 1 November 1998, it is noted that many of the young people in distress were very critical of the police and other authorities, arguing that many more could have been saved. Such criticism is common after every disaster, the editorial points out, since no one can know exactly what really happened.

But already the fact that the debate has started and the accusations made must be taken very seriously. No effort to map and inform can be too big, everything must be done to prevent further misunderstandings. The terrible event must not be allowed to develop in new directions. (DN 981101)

In *GT*, a man, who allegedly saved at least 20 persons from the fire, is quoted in the headline, saying, "We could have done more." Fifteen hours after the fire he is photographed at the accident site together with his sister:

Abbas K pushed aside policemen blocking his way and threw himself into the burning building. /.../ But several of his friends who did the same perished in the flames. /.../ Abbas K is furious at what he sees as acts of omission to save lives on the part

of the police. 'They only stood there and said that we should take it easy and wrap blankets around us.' (GT 981031)

Below the headline, "Tears, wrath and uncertainty at Hammarkullen", it is described how the state of uncertainty and lack of answers lead to frustration and aggression; "I will kick journalists soon," says the Reverend Gunnar Kampe, according to the article. Many young people are described as frustrated because no information was provided in the afternoon meeting:

In the absence of information rumours were spread, mixing grief and anger. How many police and fire brigades had arrived if the fire had been in upper-class Askim? Then they would have done their best, said Ehti Karinian, who was reading aloud from *Göteborgs-Posten*. An older man said that he heard something about a bomb over the loudspeakers. One suggested the Nazis. Others talked about guards not doing their duty, police stopping them from saving their friends and how strange it was that a disaster should happen to immigrant youths. (*Göteborgs-Posten* 991031)

Below on the same page *GP* tries to explain the rumours mentioned in the quote above about the police stopping young people from saving their friends. Per-Erik Gyllestad, responsible for the crisis and stress management at Swedint, explains:

'My spontaneous thought is that people in such a situation fall into what we call stress cone, which means that the more stress a person is under, the less that person can use their intellect.' 'Actions are instead governed by routines, by whatever is lodged deep inside /.../'

'Trying to stop such a person from running into a house without physical intervention is very difficult.' (*Göteborgs-Posten* 981031).

"There is no manual on how to act in extreme situations," says the chief of operations, Sten Schääf, in a *GT* interview. He describes the unreal scenes played out in front of him and his colleagues. And he confirms that the police had stopped young people from running into the flames to save their friends:

'We had to prevent a lot. You can't simply watch young people in panic trying to kill themselves. Very shortly after the start of the fire, there was not a chance of going back in,' he explains. (GT 981031)

On the next spread in the same paper criticism of the rescuing services is launched again through one of the young people who claimed to have played an active role during the night:

'But the fire brigade was not what I saw. People were jumping out of the second floor windows straight into the tarmac. /.../ There should have been more firemen helping out,' she continues. (GT 981031)

Aftonbladet refers to the event in a slightly more objective way in some of their articles. The tumult is recognised without apportioning blame.

Many hysterical teenagers wanted to get back into the building, risking their lives to save their friends. There were altercations when the police and firemen stopped them. In ten minutes the firemen managed to save around 20 people with the help of ladders and around 50 through the main entrance. (AB 981031)

Further on in the same paper there is a picture of Police Inspector Jan Edmundsson, who is quoted in the headline to say, "We used violence to save lives", and in the article he explains the police's rough behaviour:

'Someone has said that the police were racist. If you call saving lives, comforting and supporting crying immigrant children racist, then you have missed out on something important in school,' says Jan Edmundsson.

He is convinced that he and other policemen saved many lives thanks to the rough methods. (AB 981031)

In all the papers studied, there is criticism of the police and the rescue services in varying degrees, and also, however, a striking absence of the chance to respond for the two professional groups. In view of the massive and, according to many, totally unwarranted criticism, it appears extremely inadequate that the rescue services were not offered the opportunity to give explanations and counter views. One of many explanations could be that many statements were given in a state of distress, grief, and anger, which was also in some way commented on in the press. Other reasons for the attacks on, above all, the police are assumed to be possible cultural experiences of police behaviour in their home countries. Such theories have sometimes been considered at the management level of the rescue services, for example, at a seminar on the fire disaster at the physicians' annual meeting in 1998⁸⁵, and at a research seminar organised by the Swedish Contingency Services and Fire Research 2000.⁸⁶

Conflicts between professional groups at an accident site always deserve attention. "It is a normal part of cooperation", says the former police press spokesman, Claes Cassel.⁸⁷ Journalists, readers or anyone else do not gain anything from a misquoted fireman, a policeman wrongly accused or any other rumours and inaccuracies spread through the media. Meetings with professional groups and discussions on a joint operation have proved fruitful. Conflicts and inaccuracies in the media are often the result of ignorance. An evening discussion in

Gothenburg a week after the fire disaster 1998 was, for instance, a rewarding meeting between reporters, photographers, the police, firemen and medical groups. All of them were on duty at Backaplan fire site during the tragic night on 29-30 October 1998, and had a multifold of different experiences of events in the night and the morning regarding the interaction between the professional groups.⁸⁸ Comments on other professional groups tend to be channeled through the media. Internal criticism of a professional group in the professional branch discussion fora has, on the other hand, only referred to the respective professional group.⁸⁹

In the following chapters, the journalists' experiences and reactions in connection with the reporting of the Gothenburg fire in the autumn of 1998, approached in terms of the theoretical model of analysis presented in Chapter 1.

Footnotes

- 1 Lindholm (1999)
- 2 Englund (2002)
- 3 Nordström (2002); SOU 1999:48
- 4 Sources are the informants of this study, and SOU 1999:68, p 36 f
- 5 Larsson & Nohrstedt (2000) p. 50f
- 6 Englund in Larsson & Nohrstedt (2000)
- 7 Englund (2002)
- 8 Kvale (1997)
- 9 *Dialogues (Dialoger)* (2002)
- 10 Kvale (1997)
- 11 Also in Wärneryd (1993) chapter 7.
- 12 Reporter GT/Ex
- 13 Photographer 1 GP
- 14 Freud (1977) p. 73
- 15 Kvale (1997) p. 246
- 16 Freud (1977) p. 73
- 17 Kvale (1997)
- 18 Perby (1995) p. 211
- 19 Photographer 1 GP
- 20 Wärneryd (1993)
- 21 Merriam (1994) p. 25
- 22 Wilson (1979, p. 448) in Merriam (1994)
- 23 Guba & Lincoln (1981, p. 371) in Merriam (1994)
- 24 Becker (1968) in Merriam (1994)
- 25 Merriam (1994)
- 26 Patton (1980), also cited in Merriam (1994) p. 139.
- 27 Yin (1984), also in Merriam (1994)
- 28 Merriam (1994) p. 196
- 29 *ibid*, p.9
- 30 Molander (1992) p. 219.
- 31 Stake (1981)
- 32 Stake (1981), p. 35 f, also described in Merriam (1995), p. 28 f.
- 33 Yin (1994)
- 34 Bernstein & Woodward (1974), also cited in Yin (1994) p. 16
- 35 The interview guide in Appendix 1 is a representative example. From this template the other interview guides was customized into some different versions for reporters, photographers, editors in chief and staff covering different stages of the disaster.
- 36 Göranson (1990)
- 37 Josefsson (1991)
- 38 Ryd (2001)
- 39 Asp & Weibull (1991); Asp (2007)
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 77 The Lunch Echo (Lunchekot), national radio news, P1, 1998-11-31
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 79 Statens Haverikommission: Rapport RO 2001:02, p.91 ff
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 81 Kallenberg (1987).
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 16 mars 2000. Arranged by the Swedish Rescue Services Agency (Räddningsverket) and the Fire Pro-
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7. THE SITUATION: WITNESSING HORROR

The journalist's first task on arriving at the accident site is to identify the situation. What type of accident is it? How extensive is it? How widespread? How many and what categories are affected? Is the situation controllable or uncontrollable and is it clear what has happened? Who can give an account of the situation, the cause and the consequences? The journalist has to address a stream of questions as well as relating to the other actors present: affected people, responders, the public and other eyewitnesses and colleagues from their own paper and other media. Establishing contact at the accident site is tentative. Reporters and photographers are mostly left to their own judgement, their own command of the situation, interpretations and decisions. Gradually, more colleagues and perhaps supervisors may arrive, but the lone individual – the journalist – is one of the first to encounter the horrific situation, and it is an extreme situation.

The event

”There's a fire at Backaplan”

In the night of 29-30 October 1998 many journals in west and mid Sweden were awakened by a message saying, ”There's a fire at Backaplan. Go there.” Some got more information such as ”many casualties” or ”a great many young people.” The occasional reporters were already on duty and had been alerted via their beepers.

I got the alert via SOS emergency centre, and before I notified the reporter, I got up and put on my police radio and listened to the fire brigade. And then I happened to hear that there's a major disaster and they're calling for ambulances. Many, many young people injured. Then I shouted to my wife: ”Ring NN (the reporter) and ask her to grab a taxi and go straight to Backaplan.” That's all she knew when she went off.¹

The newspaper *Aftonbladet* photographer recounted that he got reports in the car on his way to the accident site that there were both dead and injured people, which meant that he ”...really stepped on the accelerator, and the adrenalin level rose even more.”

One of the newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* photographers heard talk about a major fire on the rescue services' "fire radio" and requested reinforcement via the SOS radio.

I heard that they were all shouting /.../ and said that there was a big fire at Herkulesgatan or Backateatern.²

The photographer drove towards the site and the closer he got the more distinctly he heard the calls on the emergency centre's communication radio.

They mentioned that it was disaster-like, but that's hard to grasp what it is. I first assumed that the Backa theatre was on fire. I was absolutely certain about that.³

The SOS emergency centre's dispatch of rescue service forces often triggers a mental reaction in the reporter or photographer who gets into a car to go to an accident site, which a freelance photographer testified to:

The adrenalin level rises in me. I mean, it rises as much in me as it does in them [the responders] when they are on their way.⁴

An editor, who was awakened in the middle of the night, first thought the call was a wrong number because he couldn't imagine that it was a business call:

Since we were not issuing a paper the next day, I thought it was a goddam drunkard who was trying to get a taxi and had dialled the wrong number.⁵

A photographer made the same reflection when the message reached him late at night:

Well, if someone calls at four o'clock in the morning and says that 96 have died in a disco fire, then you think that someone drunk and crazy is calling. I mean, these things just don't happen ... The number [of dead people] mentioned was unbelievable.⁶

The meaning of the phone message eventually became clear to the photographer. This is when the effort to get as good a grasp of the situation as possible starts and work is organized.

A reporter described the sense of the unreal hitting him when he was contacted by his editor in chief just as he had gone to bed. He got up and put on the Teletext to read the news and relived the evening when he had similarly read the news of the assassination of the Swedish primeminister Olof Palme in 1986:

And it didn't really register, you know, but that's what it said ... it took a while to take in, you see.⁷

Another reporter was prepared for a deer hunting assignment when the phone rang around four in the morning and the following request was delivered:

*Hey, forget about the deer hunt. You're going to Gothenburg where 60 young people have died in a fire'. I said: "This is a bad time for a joke" /.../ I mean it's so bloody unlikely. Things like that just don't happen. But, there was nothing to do but grab the toothbrush and be off.'*⁸

An uncontrollable situation

When it was clear that the disaster was still in progress with many people fighting for their lives, the journalists were confronted with uncontrollable chaos with no chance for them to intervene in any way.

*At the entrance there were about 50 people, trying to pull people, and there was fighting because they wanted to get in. Some tried to stop them, and some were furious and started hitting one another.*⁹

And despite the fact that all rescue and emergency services were in place, the eyewitnesses could see that the intervention was not enough.

*What hit me was that oh, my God, here are the very foundations of the citizens' basic security gathered: the fire brigade, the police and the ambulances. All those who are expected to save lives: they are all here, but it makes no difference.*¹⁰

Ambiguous uncertainty

Arriving at an accident site and witnessing an ongoing tragedy is a stressful experience hard to cope with. The journalists' encounter with the chaotic disco fire at Backaplan is a clear example of this. One of the *Göteborgs-Posten* photographers described how he arrived at what he thought to be a fire in an empty theatre:

I drove into the backstreet of the Backa theatre... and there's no one there. It was completely empty. /.../ I checked the theatre and saw nothing in there but I could smell smoke from the corner. I turned the corner and another corner. I was hit by such a sound wave...everyone screaming, people running towards you ... and people had jumped down on police cars. /.../ I think there was a police car and two fire engines, and on fireman was on his way up to extinguish the fire with a hose but seemed to change his mind and climbed down. He'd rather save lives, like. So, they [firemen] started running towards the exit

*and there were perhaps 50 people blocking the other entrance and carrying people out.'*¹¹

A reporter described a similar sight on arriving at Backplan:

*I felt the smell when we crossed the bridge, and then I thought that this must be pretty awful. /.../ The first thing I saw when I turned the corner was someone dying. /.../ And everyone sitting there ... they were not exactly approachable.*¹²

The event was very difficult to understand for those who were first on the scene. The live interviews during the night of the fire and in the morning after clearly indicate the difficulties in grasping the extent of the fire. The operations squad leader first said that there are "many casualties /.../ probably over thirty," whereupon an apparently shocked reporter repeated, "Dead?" and the squad leader confirmed, "That's right".¹³

The death number climbed to 50 and later to 60.

*You don't understand what has happened. You don't even get that people were injured. And dead people were unthinkable... I didn't get that until I returned to the paper.*¹⁴

Causal relations were unclear and the situation was difficult to interpret:

*The first thing that made me realise that this was a matter of life and death was the boy, I think it was a boy, lying on the ground. He was black. And I thought, "That's right, the Macedonian society, they would be dark-skinned." I looked around and saw what I took to be Africans and Somalis. Then I saw the little boy again and finally I understood that he was badly burned.*¹⁵

Many strange situations and misconstructions arose as a result of the chaos and the tragedies at the accident site. An evening paper reporter, for example, contacted a colleague who was to replace her at the site and said:

*'Bring warm clothes'... for I had the idea that the kids needed extra clothes ... for so many were cold. But he seemed to think that I was cold so he brought extra clothes for himself.*¹⁶

Confusion is a common effect of a stressful and traumatic experience, and perception of time is also affected in crisis situations. A photographer who was at the accident site for one and a half hour thought he had been there for 20 minutes.¹⁷

Unpreparedness and other stressors on the job

When journalists have to go to an accident site at short notice, only knowing that an accident has happened, there is little opportunity to prepare. This was a contributing factor to the trauma affecting the first journalists at Backplan. As one of them put it:

*If I had known I was sent to a disaster, I would have been mentally prepared directly because I have covered disasters before. I didn't know... it was a nightmare really.*¹⁸

A photographer described that he could not relate his presence there to work. The chaos was total. It was his day off. And now he found himself there:

Then I remembered that ... I have to take pictures of this. I felt a bit... It's difficult to take pictures when it's like this... You know, you want to help people but you don't really know what to do.¹⁹

The photographer then described a problem he experienced, namely that the young people who were running out of the building had a pretty good idea of events: A major fire, many people inside, many injured and some dead, and a great many people who could not get out. The photographer knew hardly anything of this on arrival, or the degree trauma afflicting the involved. He arrived under orders to take pictures, which was provocative to many of the young people:

*They must be wondering why you go there to take pictures of them. The atmosphere was pretty aggressive.*²⁰

The uncertainty of the extent of the accident was also hard to cope with for the reporters and photographers. A photographer said that his assessment was that a handful of people may be dead:

*I mean, when you get there among the first, you don't know if there are 63 dead or one or 63 injured.*²¹

The proportions of the disaster were impossible to take in. The idea that the little hall would swallow so many young people was unreasonable and horrible.

When a photographer returned to the office after an hour, he put his film in the developing machine and went to talk to his colleagues, who were listening to the police radio and the fire brigade radio providing continuous updates on the fire:

*And then someone said: 'There seems to be more than 50 dead.' And it hit me like lightning. I couldn't grasp that it had happened; that I had just seen this.*²²

Documenting an event of which the circumstances are unknown demands a great deal of reporters and photographers, and no accident site is like another.

A photographer described graphically the feeling of approaching the unknown as follows:

That thing about arriving at an accident... It's like driving a car on a country road, and you're driving at a hell of a speed. And then you drive over the hilltop. You don't know what's on the other side. And just on the other side – bang – there's the accident. So you don't have it in sight when approaching but drive straight into it. And you need to tackle the situation at this particular accident. The situation can be different in so many ways. There may be many injured people on the ground, like it was here, and there are not enough rescue service officers. Or it could be an accident where people are already on the stretchers. Or an accident where they are stuck in their cars and people are working hard to get them out.²³

The affected

”They are children. Only children”

The stressors that disaster responders rate as the most difficult to handle, events involving children are mentioned most often. In view of this, the journalists' unprepared encounter with an accident site full of children and young people indicates the degree of potential trauma that they were subjected to on arrival at Backaplan.

A photographer described his first sight of the scene, which led to the first reflection on the nature of the disaster, i.e. who the victims were:

They are children. Only children. /.../ I didn't see any adults apart from the firemen. It seemed like a parent-free party going... completely wrong.²⁴

And the children there constituted a visual battlefield:

Some girls lay there in their underwear. /.../ They had jumped out and lost their clothes, and they were shoeless.²⁵

In the first chaotic hours of the night the situation was very fuzzy to all present. Assessing the condition of the injured seemed impossible to all the journalists.

It was difficult to say if they were only lying there, still but alive, or if they were dead. But someone took pictures of a resuscitation attempt. They didn't succeed in their CPR efforts. And I was certain that they would manage, so I took photographs of their efforts. And then I noticed that they covered him and then I understood that – oh heck he died there.²⁶

A reporter who arrived early said that she never noticed the many nationalities among the victims:

No, it wasn't clear to me until I read about it in the paper. /.../ But most of them were Swedes, although they might have had different coloured skin and strange names. But I mean, to me they were Swedes, and behaved like Swedish kids (laughs)/.../ I talked about this with one of my colleagues in Stockholm who asked if they were immigrant kids. "Well, I don't know," I said "because most of them speak Swedish." And if you speak Swedish you were probably born in Sweden. That's what I thought.²⁷

The reporter thought that the issue of nationality lacked significance at least in the acute phase of the event:

The fire was a fire. It was a disaster as it was.²⁸

The fact that it involved children and young people was an emotional obstacle to many of the journalists compared with how they experienced other accidents.

Estonia (ferry disaster) was terrible. Absolutely awful. But here there were kids. That's the big difference. Just teenagers. And this, I think, is the reason why so many journalists experienced this as an equally horrible story.²⁹

Meeting survivors, eyewitnesses and other people affected by a disaster is an enormous strain, causing very strong feelings, and placing high demands on the journalists in their interaction with very vulnerable people. This was also something that the journalists felt was extremely difficult to handle at the accident site:

The hardest thing was to photograph the people who were sitting around crying ... without displaying them in the paper /.../ but one has to work discreetly, sneaking around to take pictures when people turn around.³⁰

What I knew was that if people are screaming it's really good because they are alive, breathing. But those who don't scream³¹

Accident site as a workplace

The investigation revealed several examples of threats and aggression towards journalists and photographers at the accident site. The strong reactions were displayed by surviving youngsters and other eyewitnesses. Many journalists said that they had a hard time handling these reactions at the site but that these, in retrospect, appeared as normal effects of traumatic experiences. Some journalists tried to tackle the problem by discussing with the teenagers on site. Others said that they initially had problems tolerating being attacked and challenged and recounted how they tried to refer to the logic that all professional groups were there to do a job.

Many were aggressive and attacked. Some of them I talked to, so I didn't completely ignore them. [The photographer says that he lost his son some years ago]. Then a guy came up and said, "Go to Hell, you don't understand anything." "Yes, I do indeed", I said, and told him the story of my son. And he said nothing, just went off.³²

On the occasion of the interview, the photographer still thought that he had handled the situation correctly and according to the code of journalism. When the media cover an accident or a disaster, they are always open to criticism, but if they refrain from covering an event, this is criticised too. It is a professional paradox, he thought, and stressed that "the trouble-makers" were just a few and that most of them were calm and took care of each other.

Journalists and responders

"We showed consideration for each other"

The interaction with survivors and rescue service members, the sight of dead people, the pressure and/or the support of editors, the demands of making ethically and professionally correct decisions, their own crisis reactions and the interaction with colleagues – the list of demands on the journalists at work at the extreme and temporary workplace of an accident site is long.

The areas of contact between actors described in Chapter 2, also emerged at the Backaplan fire. To a great extent, the reporters and photographers worked without communicating orally with the rescuers, or as a reporter put it:

You can't disturb officials in such a situation. You can't approach the fire brigade or the police – they are very busy, after all.³³

A photographer took advantage of his previous contacts with local rescuers:

*Because I'm on these jobs so often here in Gothenburg, I know so many firemen and policemen. /.../. Luckily, my friends happened to be on the scene first. Then I can listen to their radio channel. Very few people have access. So I can listen to their conversation when they are inside a burning building. So I got reports all the time about events inside.*³⁴

It is common that photographers assigned to cover accidents on a regular basis are acquainted with the local police and the rescue services. This was the case with one more photographer.

*I knew the policemen that were there very well because I had been riding with the special police van a year before. /.../ Somehow we cooperated because they knew they could trust me. /.../ and yes, we knew how to handle each other.*³⁵

Most interpersonal contacts taking place were with teenagers, whether injured or otherwise affected, and other eyewitnesses or affected people gathered. A photographer thought that the interaction changed tangibly over time. As one of the first photographers on the scene, he was spared many of the later confrontations, because "then so many photographers arrived at the same time that people became hostile to them."³⁶

The attacks and questioning of the photographers can be understood as expressions of distress rather than as a rational wish to stop pictures being taken, a photographer suggested. An accident report without pictures would not have been reasonable, he thought:

*In the moment being there, you get shit. And if you hadn't been there, you would have got shit too for not documenting it.*³⁷

While several photographers felt attacked by the distressed teenagers, the reporters present did not feel the same:

*No, no one was angry with me, quite the contrary.*³⁸

The presence of the media at the accident site is taken for granted in the Swedish disaster organisation. The general instructions of the National Board of Health and Welfare³⁹ emphasise the role of the media at an accident site. But what is the interaction between the active rescue forces? The journalists on site at Backaplan were on the whole satisfied with the interplay between the media and the rescue forces. As one observed;

*I thought it worked very well. /.../ The problem was that the police and the rescue services couldn't really give any information, but one has to respect that in this kind of situation.*⁴⁰

This reporter never witnessed any conflict between rescue service members and journalists. On the contrary, she said, there was cooperation:

*The operation leaders could ask us for help – as when I asked where to send the kids and they said, 'Oooh, yes, you can do that. Do this and that,' they said.*⁴¹

A photographer was completely positive to cooperating with the rescue services at the accident site and in the phases following and never felt hindered from doing his job by the rescue services. There were other complications:

*Yes, I think we showed consideration for each other in the first days. /.../ But then these live broadcast vans appeared. It was like a FUNFAIR in the end... with all these live broadcast vans from all over the world... then it got more troublesome and messy....*⁴²

Several of the reporters who were on the scene first, while the disaster was still in an acute phase, felt that it was very difficult and unreasonable to intrude on the rescuers to ask for an interview. A chief of operations is always under too much of a time pressure to be disturbed:

*Stealing two quotes from him would have been like stealing two lives, you know. /.../ We were there during the most intensive phase of the rescue operation. It was very different for those arriving half an hour later.*⁴³

*Everyone understood that this was an absolute disaster. Please don't talk to me, like. People nodded when they saw each other. /.../ No one felt like talking ... they probably felt awful too.*⁴⁴

According to the study made on the media- and communication situation at the Gothenburg fire by Larsson & Nohrstedt (2000), the contacts worked well between the authorities and the media actors. Both parties testified to good cooperation and good relations between the professional groups when contact was made.⁴⁵ The police on their part noted that having existing relationships with the local media was very valuable in this context. Frequent press conferences were mentioned as particularly valuable. A problem arose when the media were given access to the burned premises when a body was still there, which the fire investigator and the rescue services didn't know at the time. Police inspector Rolf Johansson from

the Gothenburg police technical department deplored this in a statement in *DN*,⁴⁶ in which also Hans Carlsson, chief inspector, criticised the media's access to what was in fact a crime scene. In this context it was also discussed whether the media access had compromised the technical investigation. According to the Gothenburg police, the journalists and photographers were only permitted to enter a very limited part of the burnt disco hall. The three-minute walk was filled with anxiety, carried out shortly after half past eight in the morning after the fire, and was described as an agonising eternity by the *Aftonbladet* reporter in an article:

More than enough. By the door downstairs there were vomit, shattered glass, blood, and upstairs heaps of shoes, on the second floor /.../ a mountain of melted and partly burned shoes and clothes, jackets, jumpers, trousers... . (AB 981031)

Collegial interaction

While newspaper journalist colleagues were constantly aware of the media competition, the collegial feeling was also strong beyond the employment loyalties. Seeing and talking to journalist colleagues at the site was very important to the reporters and photographers. The collegial interaction primarily took place in a kind of tacit agreement. There were few conversations but instead quick glances and other non-verbal hints of collegial community: "Some quick words. A nod, you know."⁴⁷ But contact was not only made professionally but for more personal reasons:

*It was really important, because (laughs) it was kind of comforting to get confirmation that everyone feels awful. /.../ My understanding is that most of the journalists were like me. They were walking around there, patting kids on the head.*⁴⁸

In some cases, informal cooperation was set up. The *Aftonbladet* reporter described seeing a freelance photographer and shouted to him:

*'Can you work for us if there's something?' Whereupon the answer was: 'Absolutely!'*⁴⁹

The Swedish-Norwegian cooperation, usually arising when something happens in Western Sweden, was also in place. *Expressen* and *GT*, cooperated with the Norwegian counterpart *Dagbladet*. An interview with a disc jockey by a *GT* reporter was the result of a tip from a

colleague at *Dagbladet*, who in turn had heard the disc jockey being interviewed on *Norwegian TV*.

*Sometimes we share our texts /.../ although not in the sense that my texts are published in their papers. There is union conflict about reimbursement for this now. But we simply help each other in the field.*⁵⁰

Similarly, the international media group Shibsted newspapers *Aftonbladet* and *VG (Verdens Gang)* collaborated.

Journalists on site when the fire was out

The first arrivals on the scene encountered chaos, panic and anxiety to the greatest extent and also experienced helplessness. Just a few hours later the situation had changed for the arriving journalists. What was cognitively known was, however, still difficult to imagine.

The difference between first and later arrivals' experience of the event is striking. Journalists arriving in the night and the early hours of the morning had more information about the scope and nature of the disaster, but at the same time it was hard for them to picture the reality of events.

*At five in the morning you know that 63 people have died. And then you arrive at the accident site and you see a barricade tape. There are heaps of clothes, ambulance blankets. No ambulances are there, only some fire brigade vehicles. And then you ask yourself, how the hell could 63 people die here?*⁵¹

When the dead and injured people had been transported from the site a new journalistic phase started, which, like the acute phase, involved many ethical deliberations and difficult decisions. One of the evening paper reporters arrived by chartered plane around seven in the morning:

*To be honest... there wasn't very much one could do there. Most of us were simply standing there feeling that everything seemed very unreal. They had just removed all the dead, and what remained was a big building with big, black gaping holes in the wall.*⁵²

In some cases, the inconceivable and chaotic situation meant that calling in more staff did not work smoothly. *DN's* Gothenburg photographer was awakened at three o'clock at night by *DN's* web editor in Stockholm, checking that the photographer was in place:

*My reporter colleague in Gothenburg had forgotten all about me – he thought *DN* in Stockholm would call me but they didn't.*⁵³

The photographer then had a drive of 35 km to the accident site. He contacted a reporter colleague but not the office at this point:

I just took off.

I arrived when the drama was over. /.../ roughly at the same time as city residents who had heard about it came.../.../ So I was not present during the actual turmoil. /.../ I felt rather irresolute: "what should I take photos of here?"/.../ The bodies were at the back of the building. And we can't have dead people in the paper. Not even stretchers with blankets. So there was nothing much to shoot. There was a bit of smoke, like. /.../ The ambulances drove slowly and quietly off with the bodies, you know. So it was very undramatic.⁵⁴

Eventually, family members and other mourners came, and marked the beginning of a new phase because, "then we have to show them a bit of consideration too".⁵⁵

The situation: conclusions

An unreal and incredible event, which "didn't really register" were the impression voiced by reporters and photographers who came to the accident site at Backaplan in the night of the fire in 1998.

Identifying and defining the situation and the task turned out to be a great challenge. On their way to the site most of them felt uncertain about what to expect and "rising adrenalin levels". On arrival, many experienced a nightmare-like situation difficult to assess and uncertainty as to what had happened. Many asked themselves what they should do there and felt that what they saw could not be the truth. The encounter with death and suffering, the deceased as well as the physically unharmed survivors, was strainful. The young age of the affected made the situation even worse.

The interaction between the members of the media and the responders on the accident scene was characterised by a wordless communication and reciprocal consideration. Several members of different professional categories were already acquainted, which many of the interviewees felt was an advantage in terms of interaction. Some described the whole thing as "tacit cooperation" and an unwillingness to intrude on the rescue operation.

The journalists had difficulties in assessing the condition of the survivors. Many wanted to help the responders saving and caring for the

victims. Several journalists also said that they had tried to provide social and psychological support to the young people gathered outside the burning building.

Some confrontations with distressed teenagers were described and experienced by several of them as a hard-to-handle aggressiveness. Likewise, there were several confrontations with other eyewitnesses who questioned the media presence.

The interaction between journalist colleagues from the same paper or other press and media was relatively brief, if happening at all. However, the contact seeking and collegial support among the colleagues was greatly appreciated.

The journalists who arrived first, mostly worked alone and with a high degree of independence in decisions and actions. Teamwork did take place, both in pairs of reporters and in the constellation reporter–photographer. In practice, however, the inter-collegial contacts were scarce.

The mobile phone was mentioned by most interviewees as an indispensable tool in the contact with colleagues on the scene and between the reporter and the news office.

For the media members who arrived later in the night or in the early hours of the morning the situation had changed radically. The drama was over, but the event still seemed unreal. It was difficult for the late arrivals to understand that chaos had raged before on the scene. One wondered, *“What can I do with this?”* Others pointed out that the late arrivals had more time to give more thought to the report. The morning papers had gone to print and they could work with existing facts and later deadline.

The situation was extreme and demanding for the journalists. Defining the situation and reporting on it was a challenge. Many still thought that they could handle the situation despite the chaotic circumstances, the high degree of unpreparedness and their psychological reactions: they completed their tasks as the articles were written, the phone reports called in and the photos were taken.

Footnotes

- 1 Photographer AB
- 2 Photographer 1 GP
- 3 Photographer 1 GP
- 4 Freelance photographer/AB
- 5 Photo editor in chief GP
- 6 Photographer DN
- 7 Reporter GT/Ex
- 8 Reporter DN
- 9 Photographer 1 GP
- 10 Reporter GP
- 11 Photographer 1 GP
- 12 Reporter AB
- 13 From SVT:s live broadcast from Backaplan , the night before 31 october 1998.
- 14 Photographer 1 GP
- 15 Reporter GP
- 16 Reporter AB
- 17 Photographer 1 GP
- 18 Reporter AB
- 19 Photographer 1 GP
- 20 Photographer 1 GP
- 21 Freelance photographer/AB
- 22 Fotograf 1 GP
- 23 Freelance photographer/AB
- 24 Photographer 1 GP
- 25 Photographer 1 GP
- 26 Photographer 1 GP
- 27 Reporter AB
- 28 Reporter AB
- 29 Reporter AB
- 30 Photographer DN
- 31 Photographer 1 GP
- 32 Freelance photographer/AB
- 33 Reporter AB
- 34 Freelance photographer/AB
- 35 Photographer 1 GP
- 36 Photographer 1 GP
- 37 Freelance photographer/AB
- 38 Reporter AB
- 39 (1991:2, rev.1996)
- 40 Reporter AB
- 41 Reporter AB
- 42 Photographer DN
- 43 Reporter GP
- 44 Freelance photographer/AB
- 45 Larsson& Nohrstedt et al (2000). p 50
- 46 DN (981105)
- 47 Photographer 1 GP
- 48 Reporter AB
- 49 Reporter AB
- 50 Reporter GT/Ex
- 51 Freelance photographer/AB
- 52 Reporter GT/Ex
- 53 Photographer DN
- 54 Photographer DN
- 55 Photographer DN

8. THE PROFESSION: REPORT!

Even if a reporter or a photographer is not ordered to go to an accident site, it is an impulse or an unwritten job description to set off when the alert is given. The journalist is supported by the public mandate to report on events of public interest. An accident or a disaster has a given news value, and the media have a duty to inform as much as to investigate, and in some situations to alert and caution. The editorial job is to report on the situation in the best way possible, as closely, interestingly and truthfully as possible within the frame of press ethical regulations and the professional codes of journalism. There is also a great deal of dramaturgy in the reporting, and the ambition to sell as many single copies as possible, at least for the evening papers. In the case of the Gothenburg fire alert and similar cases, it can be difficult to assess the nature of the incident and therefore also the news value. If there is little information, the journalist goes to the accident site to form an opinion, possibly anxious but also "news triggered," with an open mind to what is in store. Most journalists on their way to an accident site are driven by an ambition to get correct information quickly, to be able to describe and explain events and to publish something of high news value. Ideally, the ethics of confidentiality, reticence with taking photos of the affected and the need to respect personal dignity are second nature. However, in a severe situation with time pressure and perhaps under the influence of stress, the imbued ethics may be compromised. Boundaries can, as most know, be transgressed although few journalists are ignorant of where the lines should be drawn.

Uncertain assignment

In the case of sudden and unexpected events, a common occurrence in media organisations is that reporters and photographers become aware of the event before the editors do. This is what happened in the case of the nightly Gothenburg fire. A photographer notified the newsroom:

I rang and said, 'send all the reporters you have'. And then I hung up.¹

According to two *Göteborgs-Posten* reporters, they received news about the fire a few minutes before midnight via their SOS Alarm Centre beepers. The pillar of smoke could be seen from the newsroom window. At the same time they received a call from the photographer mentioned above. He was off duty but heard the alert on the police radio in his car and drove immediately to Backaplan. On arriving, he phoned the newsroom with the information "many injured".

After a while, two *GP* reporters came. The photographer had promised to meet them there. He tried to describe the situation without having a full understanding of it:

*They started crying or they stood there holding each other.*²

The photographer's recollection of the reporters crying has not been confirmed by them, but it is apparent that they were very affected by the situation. The photographer met the reporters once more during the night to coordinate the reporting.

*They had talked with someone... and, well, they had had what they could take, if you see what I mean.*³

It came as a surprise to many that the professional role could be affected. A reporter looked around where she was standing and tried to understand where the burning hall was in the building, but all she could see was a cloud of smoke. A ladder was raised against the wall and people climbed in and out. In such a situation it was a difficult experience for her not "having access" to her professional role as was normally the case:

*I was a bad journalist on this occasion [laughs] but I don't care, sort of. /.../ The professional second nature is pretty absent [in such situations].*⁴

Information and directives and instructions were initially delivered in an inverted direction: bottom-up instead of top-down.

*Well, I phoned them at an early stage and told them that "this was an absolute disaster, send all the people you've got to the scene," I said. /.../ Both me and the reporter said that to them. And then they sent photographers from Jönköping, Östergötland, Malmö, and even from Stockholm.*⁵

During the night of the fire, the newspapers allegedly reinforced their staff to cover the event immediately. *Aftonbladet's* editor in chief confirmed that the mobilisation was considerable and the decisions made quickly: "It was a matter of getting people down there at all".

Once in Gothenburg, the reporters and photographers formed teams. The first team – reporter and photograph – worked through the

night as a team until a colleague replaced the reporter. Around five in the morning, the first photographer started to edit his photos, concurrent with more *Aftonbladet* photographers arriving in Gothenburg. *"But then the shitty work was done, what we did, me and NN [the reporter],"* said the paper's first photographer on the scene. He thought that there was nothing to take pictures of when his colleagues came to the accident site, other than shots of the hall when the journalists were invited to a form of 'tour' in a group.

During the first hours after the alert, the chances to choose staff for the assignment were limited. The short time left before the printing deadline did not allow for any delay. Several of the interviewees thought that some of the media members arriving early at the accident site were too inexperienced for this type of job.

"You picked those you could get hold of"

When *GT*'s reporter received the call from his news editor at home in the middle of the night, requesting him to go, he answered, *"Yes, of course."* The reporter's wife, as well a colleague, was also asked but declined because of her pregnancy.⁶ The *GT* reporter agreed to flying with a chartered plane from Stockholm to Gothenburg and was given a few hours sleep before he went.

The *GP* reporter who was on the verge of finishing his shift and hand over to a colleague, made the decision himself to join the newly arrived colleague, who had just arrived at the office.

*I froze to ice and I felt that we should both go. I honestly think that I felt like a moral support from the beginning. Something told me that we should both go.*⁷

Also the *GP* editor, who, like one of the reporters, was about to sign out, remained.

When those who "happened to be on duty *'had gone to the site – You picked those you could get hold of'*"⁸ – the reinforcement efforts started.

*It was such a quick decision so that there was no point in sitting down to wonder: "Is this or that one suitable? It was rather a matter of getting started and phoning a great many chains. And we got hold of many reporters who were off duty and somewhere in the west or south of Sweden, and we got them on the move to Gothenburg directly."*⁹

For the chief photo editor at *GP* it was not indisputable to send as many as possible, and not everyone who wanted to. He was contacted by staff offering to go in the night but he declined.

I knew that it didn't end with this particular day but that we needed to manage the next day too. So I said, "No, thank you, but turn up for work fit for fight in the morning, early tomorrow morning."¹⁰

DN's local editor also described how members of staff got in touch to offer assistance, among others, two journalism students who had done practical placement at the paper. They had local knowledge and in some cases also personal contacts that could be useful to the paper.

It soon turned out that they managed beautifully on their own.¹¹

Distribution of work

"A clear-cut news reporter and an observer"

At Backaplan, ca. 10-15 minutes after the alert, the two *GP* reporters' reached the decision to split up: "I said to my colleague: 'Walk around and see if you can find someone to interview while I stand here and watch'"¹²

GP's reporters stayed at the scene for around 40 minutes. Later, in connection with the interviews, the paper's editor in chief said that the approach of "a clear-cut news reporter and an observer was an ideal constellation."

The degree of teamwork varied between the media. One photographer thought that the cooperation between photographer-reporter was particularly important in delicate jobs such as this, because then "the photographer can do more...do more research...and that is a condition for a good job"¹³ Another photograph described it as a giving and taking:

It was both and. /.../ Some inexperienced photographers, they sort of tag along after the journalist and just shoot whatever he points at... well, perhaps not what he points at, but everyone he talks to and so on... But I'm pretty experienced so often the journalist has a hard time keeping up with me. But often we work individually. And if one of us finds something, we tell each other.¹⁴

Also work models that are normally only applied in events of the same nature as the fire disaster were used. *Aftonbladet* used a kind of flying report writing and a joint byline in the first edition, which means that most articles were co-authored. Reporters called in information to

one or more writers in the office, who wrote the articles adding their own information and telegram news:

*I phoned and got phone calls all the time and sent interview quotes and eyewitness accounts to the Stockholm colleagues. The writing was done in Stockholm. It was writing from a distance.*¹⁵

When the *GT*'s Stockholm reporter landed in Gothenburg, he had to write two articles first thing in the morning, of which one was to be an interview with someone in a leading operational function. In the taxi to the accident site he started working. He half completed one of the texts by listening to an interview with the chief of operations on the local radio. When he arrived he found the same person and added some questions for him to answer. The finished text was sent via his mobile phone to the news office for inclusion in the extra edition. This work model, according to the reporter, is different from evening paper journalism:

*This kind of journalism is similar to radio reporting. It's so quick and succinct. /.../ Extra editions don't work in the same way.*¹⁶

Later in the morning, the reporters and photographers were invited to "walk" through the burned building, as previously described. The *GT/Expressen* reporter took part and then returned to the *GT* building to write the article: *"Then we had 15 minutes, or something, to do it in so there was plenty of time [laughs]."*¹⁷

From *DN*'s Stockholm office a number of reporters and photographers got into a car and arrived in Gothenberg shortly after lunch. There was no time to plan anything, *"just to take off in a panic"*.¹⁸ Later, the local reporter, who travelled from Stockholm and was on duty in Gothenburg, was appointed teamleader from the afternoon after the fire.

Reporting on the next days

An evening paper reporter said that colleagues who were assigned to cover the events after the fire – days two and three – went to Backaplan on their own initiative to see the place and *"try to understand it"*.¹⁹ This can be compared to the difficulties of the journalists to imagine the scenario at sea after the Estonia ferry disaster. An empty burned building at Backaplan and a deserted yard are also very far from the scenes played out to the eyewitnesses during the fire.

Job instructions

”There was a tacit approach”

The extent of instructions given varied between the media involved in the study of the Gothenburg fire. A comparison between the instruction tradition in the police force and the rescue services in relation to major and minor incidents shows that the media have something to learn in this respect. Even if the latter did not go to the scene to help and save lives, the situation there is still extreme and stressful. Several of the journalists in the interview study called for better routines and ”manuals” for the procedures that should apply in a crisis situation. Job instructions can in some cases be implicit, as an evening paper reporter said.

*It may sound a little cold and mechanical, but, especially at the evening papers, there are those who write a lot of this, an ”editorial machinery” sets in at major events. You know automatically how to proceed... since it's a well-oiled machinery. I can't say that this is something that we sat down to decide that now we'll work in a different way than we normally do.*²⁰

In the case of *GT/Expressen*,²¹ the work organising for the Stockholm reporters started in a taxi to Stockholm Bromma Airport. Planning continued at the gate, in the plane and in the pre-hired cars at Gothenburg Landvetter Airport. On their way to Backaplan, the hospitals and other places of relevance to the fire, the reporters received *”explicit assignments based on the needs for the extra edition to be printed roughly in two hours”*.²²

Around 15 persons were flown down from Stockholm at this point. In addition, *GT* had a great number of Gothenburg reporters and photographers on the move into the morning. Two hours later, there was a 50-page paper edition in print...

*...with a massive amount of information. That's how the tabloids work, and it wouldn't work if each individual was sitting there wondering what they would like to write that morning. It simply needs to be lead. You get your assignment and you complete it as best you can in the morning, as quickly as you can, that's it.*²³

Obviously, journalists or photographers sometimes ignore both directives and instructions. The reporter on the scene can get an idea of the incident that makes management directives or intentions debatable. At other times, there may be consensus between the reporter or photographer and the newsroom.

The press ethical directives given by a chief photo editor mostly had the character of little reminders in passing.

*One thing one didn't need to say all the time – it was in the wind – was never to barge in with "here is the press" and to be considerate . /.../ There might be one or two persons that you stressed that a little more to.*²⁴

The chief photo editor hinted that he modified his instructions based on how he perceived the respective photographers personality, work approach, and need for instructions.

Most questions were raised after the reporters and photographers had arrived at the accident site. *"The questions were acute and were asked again and again"*.²⁵ People's skills were highlighted as an important quality in an editor in major events such as the Gothenburg fire and one of the chiefs himself made the following observation:

*If I hadn't known the photographers so well, I would have had to be much, much clearer...with some photographers. With others there was no need at all. There was an implicit attitude and approach to the work.*²⁶

In some cases, the instructions for reticence were explicitly given. One photographer said:

*My boss said to me when I talked to him': "For Heaven's sake, be considerate! Now we must show consideration." "Yes", I said, "that's exactly what I'm doing." "I couldn't care less about good pictures – consideration is the key word here. For this is so bloody awful, and we have to think carefully.*²⁷

... and a reporter said:

*They were especially clear at home even before we went actually /.../ that what counts was 'to be extremely careful, don't intrude on people, we will not force you to make interviews if you don't want to, respect people's integrity' /.../ Lie low, basically. Which was a comfort to know, that there was no demand on pressuring a poor kid who had been there on the first day to give an interview. /.../ I wouldn't have done it differently any way. But it felt good to know and sharing the same attitude.*²⁸

Disaster and leadership

”A very competent leader in place”

Quickly appointing a local leader in Gothenburg was a successful move according to the Stockholm based press members. Good management is very important in the acute phase, a reporter thought, in the newsroom as well as in the field.

*My experience was that the paper had good people from the top all the way down.*²⁹

Dagens Nyheter did not issue a paper on All Saints Day (Friday) but worked instead on the next edition. *DN* quickly appointed a local project leader (local editor) in Gothenburg, who was sent from Stockholm and was in place in Gothenburg on Friday, the day after the fire. The editorial management, who happened to be at a conference, made the decision at breakfast on Friday. One of the paper's reporters commended this solution of a project leader at the local scene, as did his colleague at *Aftonbladet* above:

*It worked well... organised and with good coherence in the job we did... Having him here was very valuable.*³⁰

DN's local editor was stationed at the local office in Gothenburg, but he decided to visit the fire site:

*I felt I needed an understanding of the feelings and moods around.*³¹

In the first days *DN* had twelve persons working on follow-ups of the fire. The newsroom in Stockholm kept perhaps four or five persons busy with the story. They mainly wrote background material to the accident such as the fire progress and its consequences.

The model with a local editor for the Stockholm-based *DN* was a good way of organising teamwork, the leader thought.

*With the teams I had, I could have several teams working in Gothenburg at the same time, which means that I had great opportunities to cover everything I wanted to cover.*³²

Since *DN* did not come out on All Saints Day, the editors had more time but the pressure for a good result increased. Leading *DN's* coverage in Gothenburg was a job the local leader described as ”nervous” but not unmanageable.

*I was nervous about the assignment, more because it was so big and I had to think about so many things, then because of its nature. I had no problems leading it.*³³

”Management conveying calmness and confidence”

It was clear from several interviews that the size and uniqueness of this disaster made many press members commit to the job totally. Several said that this explained why there were so many special editions, supplements and quick reports despite everything.

It was clear that the management's approach was important to the journalists on duty during the acute phase. An editor in chief, who was not on duty during the early hours of the night, recounted what the journalists said about the support they enjoyed from the editorial management during the night:

*The journalists said in retrospect that the reason that they could act so calmly and confidently was partly because the management conveyed calmness. And, I suppose, if you have experienced the accident site, then you are upset and in need of a management conveying calmness and confidence.*³⁴

Professional acumen

”The first thing I saw ... was the poster picture”

When the reporters and photographers came to Backaplan on their journalist mission the professional role was shattered for some, while others experienced that their professionalism and acumen increased in the acute phase.

*Already when I was on my way, I started to plan how to organise the photographing. Where should I park the car, what equipment should I bring, and stuff like that.*³⁵

Depicting a traumatic event and meeting people in distress means meeting oneself and the professional role, confronting one's own ideals and values, and testing ethics, morality and emotions, and daring to be a journalist. Many journalists expressed amazement at their presence of mind in the chaos. There was room for professional thinking in the strong personal experiences:

*The whole courtyard was full of injured and dead young people/.../ And the first thing I see is a fireman, squatting with the helmet on the ground next to him, and he is squatting because he is giving CPR to a boy. My first thought when I saw him was ... this was the poster picture. And so it was.*³⁶

The photographer said that he, the whole time in the courtyard, tried to think professionally and act by reflex: *”Most of my assignments involve*

injured and dead people". In this case many, many more people were affected, but *"I never had time to slow down and reflect on what it was all about"*. It was not until the first dead were being carried out of the building and the first report of around thirty dead came that the photographer began to take in the enormity of the event.

"I saw in my inner eye the newspaper in print"

What the editors wish and the reporters or photographers want to deliver often constitute a field of tension in journalism. Reporting from a disaster entails an extra challenge to the field of interplay as the difference between being there, observing the event and forming an opinion from an office is immense. It is only logical that views will be different.

A recurring theme in the issues of the difficulties to tackle an acute and unexpected event such as the Gothenburg fire, is the impossibility to prepare for it because the assignment is completely unspecified. Some thought that *"you can never be prepared"*, while others thought that routine and experience actually made a difference. There was a paradoxical discrepancy between the news editor's interpretation that the journalists were calm and confident thanks to the editorial management's calmness, while many colleagues testified to the opposite, namely that the assignment was very unclear. One explanation may be the time difference. No editors visited the fire site at the acute phase in the night when the assignment was most uncertain and clear instructions were missing.

A chief photo editor, who had grasped the situation in the night and made decisions directly without second thoughts, thought that his experiences of previous disasters were very valuable. He knew what material he wanted to receive.

*So, I saw in my inner eye the newspaper in print. Before it was produced, that is... I could see spreads and how they would work.*³⁷

Around 11 o'clock in the morning after the fire, the chief photo editor 'knew' how the next edition would look like, and the most important thing is the tone set by the frontpage photo.

The content and layout of *GP's* extra edition to a great extent framed the works of the reporters and photographers because a team member had a "brainwave" and suggested that the newspaper should be edited in spreads.

It was template streamlined from the start. All writers were told how much they should write about this and that, and where it would go in the paper. And where various photos would be inserted.³⁸

The assignment: conclusions

It was to a great extent the reporters and photographers who informed their editors of the fire at Backaplan in Gothenburg. During the first hours they advised the news office with requests such as "send all the people you have", or "prepare for this or that." Several journalists felt that too many young and inexperienced colleagues were sent to Backaplan to cover and report on the fire.

The reporters and photographers who happened to be on duty carried on alone or spontaneously teamed up with others. Two reporters from the same paper, working as a team, appreciated the reciprocal support and developed a clear distribution of tasks in which one had the role of "clear-cut reporter" and the other the role of "observer", that is, a professional eyewitness.

Someone remarked that paper's disaster journalism in many ways resembles radio journalism. When articles are co-authored with joint by-lines, and reported via iPhone and written by someone else, then the press is similar to the radio.

When job instructions for the journalists and photographers eventually were issued from the newsroom, they often came in the form of vague messages such as "*Go there*" and "*Don't go too close*", sometimes with clearer appeals such as "For heaven's sake, show consideration"; "*Be extremely careful*"; "*Lie low*" or "*Don't intrude on people*". Whether or not these are retrospective reconstructions in the interviews, is impossible to know. In any case, two issues appear to be central: "How should this be done?" and "Where is the line drawn (for how close we can go)?" Most questions did not arise until the first journalists arrived at the site.

More explicit instructions were allegedly given only to the journalists arriving later. At this point the assignments as well as the paper layout were more streamlined in form and content.

Many also referred to a kind of "editorial machinery", which in a more implicit way affected and controlled the work approach, or as someone said: "*You know more or less automatically what to do and*

how to do it.” An important aspect mentioned was good personal contact between the editor and reporter/photographer, which made interaction in tacit concert possible.

Colleagues who had a local editor in Gothenburg thought him to be an important link between the journalists in the field and the Stockholm newsroom. The degree of closeness to the accident site was also an important factor for how editors understood the journalists' reactions and feelings about the event.

Generally, the importance of a calm and confident editorial management during the disaster reporting was emphasised, especially in terms of what they wanted: *”So, I saw in my inner eye the newspaper in print,”* said one of the editors.

Regarding rules and instruction times, these were stated explicitly in the form of instructions. A factor specific to disaster journalism was the inverted direction of job instructions – from the reporter and photographer at the site to the editorial management. This was especially the case here since the event took place in the night and newsrooms were sparsely staffed.

It was difficult to assess the importance of preparation for the assignment because most of the interviewees said that it was impossible to prepare, while others thought that having as correct information as possible of the event would be a useful preparation before arriving at the scene.

In a long-term perspective, preparation was understood as routine and experience of similar events, which they thought facilitated mental preparedness.

The descriptions of the professional acumen that many testified to were very palpable. This phenomenon is one of many coping strategies under severe stress as shown by studies of disaster responders.³⁹ This study shows that individuals in the professional journalist corps react in the same way. A photographer immediately saw the poster photo in his mind, for instance. He retained a clear focus on the professional task despite ongoing and unimaginable trauma.

Footnotes

- 1 Photographer 1 GP
- 2 Photographer 1 GP
- 3 Photographer 1 GP
- 4 Reporter AB
- 5 Freelance photographer/AB
- 6 The wife did come to Gothenburg after a couple of days, to report for GT/Expressen together with her husband.
- 7 Reporter GP
- 8 Local editor DN
- 9 Local editor DN
- 10 Photo editor in chief GP
- 11 Local editor DN
- 12 Reporter GP
- 13 Photographer 2 GP
- 14 Photographer DN
- 15 Reporter AB
- 16 Reporter GT/Ex
- 17 Reporter GT/Ex
- 17 Reporter DN
- 19 Reporter AB
- 20 Reporter GT
- 21 *GT (Göteborgs-Tidningen)* was co-produced with *Expressen*.
- 22 Reporter GT
- 23 Reporter GT/Ex
- 24 Photo editor in chief GP
- 25 Local editor DN
- 26 Photo editor in chief GP
- 27 Photographer DN
- 28 Reporter DN
- 29 Reporter AB
- 30 Reporter DN
- 31 Local editor DN
- 32 Local editor DN
- 33 Local editor DN
- 34 News editor in chief GP
- 35 Freelance photographer/AB
- 36 Freelance photographer/AB
- 37 Photo editor in chief GP
- 38 Photo editor in chief GP
- 39 Dyregov(1992);Michelet al(2001)

9. THE PROFESSION: ASSESSMENTS AND DECISIONS

Despite a relatively clear professional assignment, reporters and photographers at an accident site have to face an extreme situation requiring assessment and decision-making. The same goes for the editors, but in their case without the crucial factor of being an eyewitness subjected to mentally stressful scenes. Being on site, the journalists have to interpret and assess the situation and make press ethical decisions on their own. The decisions lead to actions, which result in the publications based on the reporting. The actions and their effects do not only comprise the publications but also the journalists' actions. In terms of both professional conduct and the final editorial product, the journalists walk a thin line between rules and their consciences. Reporting an unbearable event is in many ways an unreasonable assignment. Should the professional role be revealed or concealed? Should the journalist help the affected people or simply describe them? How close is it acceptable to be? Which sequences of events cannot be depicted in words or images and must be omitted? All this requires professional maturity and experience. This chapter reports on the journalists' own descriptions of the assessments, agonies, compromises and decisions they had to deal with in the night and the morning of the Gothenburg fire, and comments on the actions and consequences that their decisions can have had.

Words of the editor in chief

”It was an historic decision ”

During the night of the Gothenburg fire in 1998, the editor in chief at *Göteborgs-Posten* was not informed until reporters and photographers had returned to the office with texts and photos. Then a reporter notified him in the night. The editor of the online *GP Direct* immediately became the key person at the office, according to an interviewed reporter. *GP* made the decision early to issue an edition on the following day, although it was the press-free All Saints Day, because of this ”historic disaster.”

We might not have realised immediately that it was an historic decision to issue a paper on a non-edition day. /.../ And this in combination with thinking about the numerous things that had to be done... finding all the key people.... get the technical stuff to work. /.../ It worked brilliantly. Much, much better than I could have imagined.¹

Regarding photo policy, the GP chief photo editor decided from the start that the situation called for a moderate practice because the photos "should reflect events, but still respect people, and the fact that they were young and in shock".² Another editor gave examples of decisions on refraining from using pictures and instead trying to describe grief in words.

I don't think anyone can find the photo of the mother crying for her child who had burnt to death in our material. Perhaps a reporter has written about her without identifying her in person.³

An editorial decision to publish turned out to be a press ethical violation. This concerned an article on a missing girl in *GT* some days after the fire.⁴ The paper published the article on the request of the family. A few days later, the girl was found in the burnt out building and was until then an undetected victim. In retrospect, the newspaper should have been more careful in the reporting, an editor in chief said.

It was our way being committed. /.../ but in this case we should have refrained from publishing... it was very uncomfortable... I have felt bad about it.⁵

The newspapers adopted different approaches to multi-ethnic nature of the fire. Some thought that the term "immigrant" was just as natural to highlight as the fact that many victims had various national backgrounds. Other papers considered the ethnical aspect to be of secondary interest and said that they had chosen the approach that Swedish children and young people had been affected. Most newspapers were clear about the immigrant aspect from the start.

I remember that people interviewed had opinions to the effect that 'this will hit the immigrant communities in Gothenburg hard', which was a kind of statement that we – if relevant in the context – published. We didn't suppress anything like that.⁶

Ethical considerations did not influence the choice of words either. It was rather seen as a matter of whether an opinion "was relevant in the context" or not.

"That's the issue we deliberated on".⁷

While some thought the ethnical aspect important, others tried to tone it down or adopt a neutral approach.

We never discussed highlighting or toning down the issue. /.../ I managed the work for three-four days. In that period of time the focus was on the human tragedy so of course we noted that it involved immigrants and told our readers this and interviewed immigrant organisations and imams etc. But to actually address this side of the horrible reality was not on our agenda, I think, at least not at the beginning.⁸

Input from the field

”My words had weight in the news desk discussions”

The interaction between the editorial management and the photographers and reporters, respectively was in many ways pressed and tested, as shown earlier. Despite that, very few examples of hot discussions or differences in opinions in the course of work were mentioned in the interviews. This might deviate from more normal situations at work for various reasons such as time, emotions or practicalities. Minor discussions or differences of opinions occurred in some cases the closer the deadline came, but reporters and photographers had the power to make decisions on site, at least judging by how the situation was described after the fact in the interviews.

A DN photographer was in contact with his chief photo editor during work, but since the chief was in Stockholm and the photographer on site, it was only logical, the photographer said, who should make the decisions on which photos to publish: *”I can decide better what to do on the spot. Besides, I’m pretty experienced.”⁹* But later in the process, when they were approaching publishing time, the word of the editors carried increasing weight: *”And then... you’re not always part of that discussion, which pictures to publish.”¹⁰*

At the same time, the photographer thought that sometimes in these kinds of situations there may a discussion between the photographer and the desk on the photo material. If there is time, the photographer is invited to make a proposal. A colleague thought that being shown trust is important to a photographer.

Editors being sensitive to me and my expertise and my judgement... That was a strong feeling. And that was positive; that my words had weight in the news desk discussions.¹¹

*However, it might not be ideal if everyone agrees all the time. Some arguing and discussion on photo selections is only creative, the photographer said, since it is "always fun to argue a point not shared by the editors [laughter]."*¹²

Ultimately, the editor decided, even if they disagreed:

*In this case I think the photographer wasn't there at all but out on a new assignment at same place, I think... But there was nothing wrong with the photographer, but a judgement call that had to be made here.*¹³

A photographer confirmed the importance of editorial support for his courage to make the right decision – taking "the right" photos and daring to refrain from taking others, if needed: *"Sometimes I felt, sort of, hell, am I too scared? Should I be tougher?"*¹⁴ In this case the editor guided an ethical decision in the right direction, the photographer said, and *"as soon as I had talked to him I felt that I needn't be [scared]"*.¹⁵

A photo that was rejected by GP was taken by a photo agency and published in another Swedish daily paper and internationally. The photo showed a long row of covered bodies behind burnt building at Backaplan. *"Imagine the thoughts of the families: 'Is that my daughter or son lying there'."*¹⁶ To the GP chief photo editor there was only one possible decision: Do not publish!

Professional conscience

"I nearly thought ... sorry"

Performing good journalism, while being a decent empathetic human being¹⁷ can be a difficult art to master in many contexts. The tasks are not incompatible but difficult to reconcile. The experience of many journalists in Gothenburg was a both/and. A kind of professional conscience emerged.

A photographer said that he got the following question from someone: *"Were you a journalist or a human being when you arrived at the site?" And his reflection was that "you don't walk around being inhuman when you're a photographer."*¹⁸

There were several descriptions of guilt feelings and comparisons made between their self-experienced suffering and the suffering of the afflicted, for instance, *"I can hardly allow myself to think that it's awful if I think of what it was like for people."*¹⁹

Concern was a given emotion for both reporters and photographers. "For every photo taken ... I nearly thought... sorry... in my head for shooting it. It was as if I swallowed with every picture".²⁰

The will to help

"I would like to save some lives... and write"

Several reporters and photographers described how the line between the professional role and humane helper was shaky. All the time the impulse was to contribute to the rescue efforts and that it was "okay and right" to permit themselves to be a fellow human being.

*I had a hard time doing nothing. /.../ I thought about sending my colleague home to write and stay myself. I had worked as an auxiliary nurse, but it was 16-17 years ago. Could I do something? But no, I realised that I can't do anything without instructions, and it was clear that the rescue teams didn't have time for that.*²¹

Many journalists tried to help out with basic and practical tasks. A reporter partook in guiding injured persons to the right bus for transportation to a hospital, and lent his mobile phone to people who wanted to call their parents.

*One of the girls tried to take off... So I talked to her friends and they fetched her. The sort of things I did. No journalistic work at all.*²²

Priority was given to helping and supporting, which took precedence over the professional duty.

*What I tried to do mostly was checking on people, trying to help, sorting a bit, who were injured and in what way and trying to find blankets. /.../ I contemplated driving people in my car and giving CPR. But then I thought that if I put them in the car that might kill as much as save them. There was fresh air outside and better if a nurse had a look. /.../ We like to help people even when we don't really know how.*²³

Despite the understanding that they could not and were not expected to take part in the rescue operation, the sense of guilt remained for a long time with some of the journalists.

*I went through some very, very tough weeks before it abated. And then the guilty conscience has ceased. But I really wanted to save some lives... and write.*²⁴

A photographer said that if he had had CPR training, he would have been able to do more. Many of the interviewees shared this wish, and some time after the fire the photographer had the opportunity to undertake such a course.

It can be a severe strain on professional identity to dare to practise their profession in an extreme situation since there is an author/photographer byline. Another photographer wondered about the readers' thoughts when they saw his photos in the newspaper.

*I imagined that they were thinking along the lines of was he here taking pictures and didn't help at all? I mean it might look as if you are taking a picture of someone being beheaded. Then most people would think why are you taking a picture of this? Why don't you help instead? But you don't know if you would have helped or not. You can't draw any conclusions.*²⁵

It is interesting to note how the photographer saw lifesaving as part of his duties – at least a kind of general human duty at an accident site. What he meant, however, was that journalists seldom have to make the choice between helping and reporting. It is only if they happen to arrive on the scene before any other responders that helping may be what is required, he thought. But then it is the action of a private person and fellow human being, not as a professional.

*Then you don't take any pictures. Then you help until the ambulance arrives. Then you might start shooting, but from a distance so you don't interfere or annoy people too much.*²⁶

A telling example of the journalists' wish to help instead of reporting was their misconstruction of the following interview question: "How would you assess your own efforts at the accident site?" Many understood the question as referring to their own rescue efforts. The question, of course, referred to their journalistic achievement, as journalists do not have the mission to help and save on the site. "Well, what I did to help was neither here nor there," a photographer answered.²⁷ When the question was clarified – that it referred to his profession – the answer was different: "I could not have done it better." The misinterpretations could be an expression of the journalists' spontaneous wish to help and of what from others at the site.

Identifying as a journalist or not

The press ethical rules involve dilemmas for journalists on an accident scene. On the one hand, they are expected to "meet reasonable requests from interviewed persons to be informed in advance of how and where their statements will be used." This means identifying as a journalist. On the other hand, journalists should "show the victims of crime and accidents the greatest possible concern", which can be understood to

mean that victims should be left alone. The approach taken by journalists in the Gothenburg study was not consistent. Some thought it was important to be open about their professional role on the scene, while others lay low so as to avoid provoking anyone and also because they were afraid of hostility and threats. Journalists' presence in the acute phase of major accidents and disasters, as mentioned, often evokes strong emotional reactions from those affected and the responders, which can be seen as natural and understandable in retrospect, but can be hard handle for the individual journalist at the time.

Not identifying as a journalist

"I hid the camera behind my back"

The first journalists to arrive at Backaplan were most anonymous, as it was not clear to the injured and the survivors that several of the adults on the scene were reporters or photographers.

I was lucky to start with, being there on my own. No one knew that media were there. I didn't exactly wear a cap saying 'Press'... so I think that people took me for a partygoer, as I'm pretty young. I didn't stand out there.²⁸

The photographers could not hide their profession and their intentions in any way. The camera was a visible instrument. The result was some confrontation when distressed young people wondered how they could take pictures when their friends were dying.

I didn't get involved in any lengthy discussions with them but explained a little why I was there, but no one understood, so I went away, tested a bit, shot some pictures and quickly left to avoid confrontation.²⁹

A reporter described similar experiences.

I admit that I felt a bit threatened. /.../ People were running about crying 'help us, help us, they're dying'. Standing there with paper and pen ... it was absurd.³⁰

Another reporter hid his notepad and pen and made notes furtively.

When I felt that – 'this I will not remember' – I went away or round the corner or something. I felt great resistance to openly showing that I was a member of the media.³¹

The latter reporter thought at the time of the research interview that this behaviour was a form of being considerate. But at the same time he also mentioned that the threats made to the photographers on the

scene might have influenced his decision to conceal his professional role.

The interviews indicated various ways of hiding the professional role, sometimes in self-defence, sometimes because of a sense of shame and embarrassment: *"I hid the camera behind my back, so no one saw it"*.³²

A photographer described that he had been unobtrusive because he felt that the young people were provoked by his presence. He tried to interfere as little as possible, that is, taking few pictures and keeping the camera out of sight as much as possible to avoid having to explain his duties on the site.

*You can't explain on site why you're taking pictures. They are not interested when they have just lost a friend.*³³

The unobtrusive approach was shared by several others: *"I usually work very discretely"*.³⁴ A photographer, who arrived around four or five in the morning, thought the photo assignment was a strain, albeit in a different way than for those covering the fire in progress:

*The toughest job was to photograph the persons who were crying . . . without pointing them out in the paper.*³⁵

Identifying himself to the young people was never on the table, according to the photographer. That would have been a violation of ethics – interfering with their grief. Asking permission was also out of the question.

*No, no. It's not done. You don't approach a person crying over a lost friend if you take a picture.*³⁶

Identifying as a journalist

"Notepad visible the whole time"

There were also reporters who wanted their professional role to be apparent for the same reason that others wanted to be unobtrusive, namely as a kind of protection.

*I had my notepad visible the whole time to show who I was, and I had the cell phone in the other hand. /.../ I mean, I'm not a nurse, I'm not a curious bystander walking around gawping in the courtyard either.*³⁷

This reporter thought that he had been better treated because he had chosen to be open about his profession. For several of the press members who arrived early to Backaplan the aim seemed to have been

”simply being”, observing, helping and taking notes, but not really engaging in regular journalism. The role seemed ambiguous and the journalistic task elusive.

*Then one of the girls said that she thought a friend who was co-organising the event was still inside, and then my head rattled. I could get the first names of these girls...but it was not an interview. You don't do that with people who are in a bad state.*³⁸

”You don't select on site – or?”

Traditionally, journalism – particularly among photographers – has proceeded in two ways at an accident site. One approach has been ”vacuuming the area” for pictures and information while on site. This requires great efforts regarding selection and censorship at the office later. The other approach involves a great amount of restraint on site. The latter comes with two advantages: consideration of the afflicted and quicker selection process before publishing. Sometimes the two approaches are applied after strategic decision. But after the Gothenburg fire, many testified that the approach simply ”presented itself”. In most cases the reporters and photographers acted with consideration and minimised the number of interviews and photos: *”All in all, I shot 16 photos, and I was there for about half an hour.”*³⁹ In comparison with a more normal news event, this photographer would have taken between 70 to 140 photos, as he said: *”I just took some pictures for the paper. Then I put down the camera and fetched blankets instead.”*⁴⁰

One of the photographers working at Backaplan during the night deviated from the normal approach of taking fewer pictures by taking more pictures than usual.

*It was perhaps good to take many pictures so I didn't have to get involved emotionally on site. I might have landed in an impossible situation rendering me incapable of taking photos if I had been less busy.*⁴¹

One of the editors declared that ethical decisions normally rest with the editors and the journalists should only collect material and not select anything on site.⁴² This approach, he claimed, also applied at the Gothenburg fire. But most of the interviewees of all categories thought that ethical considerations should be made on site, while also saying that this required an interaction between the journalist on site and the office management.

Not so long ago, the idea was that the photographer should 'vacuum' the area, and leave the rest to the newsroom. That time is gone. If

*we worked according to this motto today, we would not have been able to produce the paper we did now.*⁴³

Several had doubts about the vacuuming principle. One photographer said: *"I don't share the opinion that we should shoot everything and let others select. It's a strange view on the part of the editorial office"*.⁴⁴ But it was also difficult to select on site, a photographer thought.

I know that the Göteborgs-Posten said in the paper that 'our photographers are unique – they censor on the accident site when they take the photo.' And when we go out we know what the paper wants and what they don't want'. /.../ Of course we may take the occasional offensive picture. But then we rely on the night editor and photo editor; it's a decision for them to make on which pictures to publish.

INT: Do you think they do that?

*(Sighing) Yes and no.*⁴⁵

Although there is a responsible publisher, the photographer has a great responsibility for giving the right information when submitting a photo, he thought.

*When they came out with NN (the last survivor), it was pitch black. All I saw was someone coming and took a picture. I didn't see what was happening at all. I didn't see what they were carrying, and I didn't see if her face could be seen. I didn't see anything. It was when I was developing the photo and saw this picture when – wow! – what the hell, is this NN? So this is what I did /.../ when I sent the pictures, I wrote in the caption, 'These pictures are not suitable for publication in a Swedish paper'.*⁴⁶

The pictures, however, were sold and shown all over the world, he said. And because he judged that the ethical censorship varies with the geographical distance, he wanted to share the photos. This was a freelance photographer with economic interests in the sales, which may have influenced his decision. The attitude to the relation between ethics and distance may have changed since the Gothenburg fire in 1998. At that time there were already different views on whether or not the distance had any relevance to the ethics of photo publication. In a globalised media world, it is reasonable to ask if non-domestic publication can in fact cause publicity damage to the exposed individual.

Press ethics – acting and publishing

Good press ethics – is that to refrain from certain publishing, or to refrain from certain actions? Is it an ethical violation to *take* a photo or only to publish it?

The ethical rules primarily clarify and assess what can be published. Perhaps unpublished photos should be assessed too, that is, also behaviour on the accident site should be assessed to a greater extent than now. Several photographers volunteered this suggestion.

*But, of course. So much has been said about the fire and that the 'press kept a serious approach.' I don't think so. Therefore: what applies to the place... applies to publication. But, if people crawl into the faces of grieving people to get a good shot, and it's not published, then I don't think the press is serious.*⁴⁷

Often the editorial management is too "lenient" in censoring photos, an evening paper photographer thought. He said that he often has conflicts with editors when they don't want to publish a photo of an identifiable person that he wants to publish. But in connection with the Gothenburg fire, there was no occasion on which the editors wanted to prevent the publication of a photo the photographer suggested.

Most of the interviewees agreed that journalistic ethics was more than publications but also behaviour on site, although some emphasised behaviour and others the final publication. An interviewed editor thought that it was a more active step when a journalist continues an interview with a person in distress than when a photographer takes a photo of an afflicted person. The journalist can withdraw an unwritten text, while the photographer cannot regret a photo taken.

Professional ethical choices

"No way – we're not printing that"

Most interviewees – all categories – claimed that the assignments related to the Gothenburg fire included a great many ethical discussions: *"It's clear as mud that there were many discussions on what to do and not to do"*. The ethical discussions were seldom explicit but a kind of undefined approach, an unspoken everyday ethics.

*This is a morning paper, and we basically have our own special ethics. We don't throw ourselves at people; we don't accuse a reporter who's been on a job of missing news because he didn't walk over bodies. We have an every day ethical approach.*⁴⁸

It is noteworthy that the chief news editor of the morning paper compared his own paper's everyday ethics with an unnamed rival, clearly the evening press.

A reporter thought that consideration was highly prioritised on the scene, although the job had to be done: *"I think I made the decision to do it [the job] trying to disturb the people as little as possible."*⁴⁹ The reporter thought that this choice had consequences for the paper.

*It took a longer time for DN to interview the survivors compared to the evening papers and the broadcasting media. Because we decided not to approach people directly.*⁵⁰

Some managers said that they made important ethical decisions at an early stage. The *GT*'s editor in chief said that he decided on two things two hours after the fire: (1) to be very careful with suggesting that the fire was deliberate, and (2) not publishing photos of people that might be dead.

When a journalistic job is reviewed before publication, ethical issues often surface such as *"Should we run photo X or Y?"* But often the photographer has already sifted the wheat from the chaff so the possibly unethical photos are never presented to the editor. That is what it was like after the fire, according to a photo editor. *"There was only one photo, and I said 'No way, we are not publishing that.'"*⁵¹

In the interviews, the photo material seemed to give rise to more ethical discussions than the texts. At *Aftonbladet*, the choice of photos and photo ethics were at the top of the agenda at the beginning of the reporting:

*Yes /.../ because pictures are so revealing in such contexts. Photojournalism is mostly more important than how to depict an event in a text.*⁵²

In this paper there was, relatively speaking, a great deal of "masking" of faces to conceal identities. The time factor also affected the outcome:

*To be honest, we didn't mask in the first edition /.../ no face was masked which we discussed a lot and decided that we'd made a mistake./.../ We should have masked then, which we did, in the second edition immediately. /.../ But before the first edition we didn't discuss at all... until we saw the paper.*⁵³

At *Göteborgs-Posten* the ethical considerations of the photo material for the Friday edition were made very quickly. The photographer scanned three of his 16 photos digitally. The task was to scan the front

page photo first. As often happens, coincidences influenced the choice of photos. The photographer described how the first three got in the paper because they were on top of the heap and the paper was going to print. The photographer had to make a quick decision, and it was as difficult then as on site to decide who was dead and who was alive. He elaborated on his criteria for assessing the condition of the photo objects. The starting-point was that some people, after all, had to be photographed.

*Those I knew were alive, those who were screaming and walking around – clear signs of life. But you try to hide the injured and the deceased. Only for their sake, and because no one should have to see their children in the paper.*⁵⁴

The categorisation may seem rough, and is it really possible to distinguish between crying survivors, the injured, unharmed and dying people? If nothing else, it indicates the difficulty of making proper assessments and choosing (or not) photo objects.

One of GP's photographers exemplified how he had made an "ethical check" of a photo of two grieving girls, leaning against each other.

*This photo circulated in the office to three-four editors and none of them thought that it was offensive or inappropriate in any way. Then I showed it to the editor in chief and he agreed with the others.*⁵⁵

Some days later, he visited a school and saw the photo on a notice-board with recollections of the fire, which he took as confirmation that the photo did not violate any ethical principles.

Regarding ethical considerations, there is reason to note the degree to which the affected and shocked young people were interviewed directly. DN partly chose one specific strategy:

*In several cases we let reporters be in place and instead of interviewing people they were asked to write their personal accounts of how they experienced the atmosphere /.../We used it consciously instead of letting shocked people cry out their pain or anger.*⁵⁶

In practice, also DN's staff interviewed survivors and eyewitnesses. But they were very careful to get interviewees' consent. One example was the surviving disc jockey.

*We wanted to interview him, but couldn't just barge in/.../ at an early stage, he had been very cocky and 'outspoken', so we considered not interviewing him at all at that point, but he had interesting information and vivid descriptions of what had happened. We chose to ask his mother to be present at the interview.*⁵⁷

Did he think that this was a correct journalistic decision? Yes, even if the boy was more subdued with the mother present, as "he didn't say as much as he would have if we had talked to him alone,"⁵⁸ the DN local editor was still satisfied with his decision.

One of many considerations the journalists faced in their reporting was their freedom to interview and their responsibility for young people's naivety regarding the consequences of their statements. The journalists and the media shouldered responsibility in varying degrees.

It was not self-evident to the reporters to think that it was ethically and morally acceptable to interview young people who had just survived a fire. Some even asked if it was at all conceivable to interview a family who had just lost a child. "*We arrived at the opinion that you should and you must, even if it is hard*".⁵⁹ The question how they reached this agreement was not answered. A likely explanation is the nearly inconceivability of the idea that a reporter should return to the office without interviews and then have to face the consequence of the decision. The question is also to whom the reporters thought it would be hard. Perhaps for both parties: the interviewer and the interviewee.

DN had a so-called immigrant intern, who helped interviewing in the Serbian language in some cases, which facilitated contacts with the afflicted.

*...because she was a fellow-countrymen and spoke the same language. But we discussed a lot whether it was at all ethically acceptable to interview them.*⁶⁰

In the days that followed, there were continuous discussions, an editor said, on what should and should not be done. 'Should we ask for permission to take a photo?' and so on. And the discussions were seldom initiated by the editors. As one editor said: "*It was rather me that had to deal with my staff's questions.*"⁶¹

Publicity rule no. 9: Always show consideration for the victims of crime and accidents

A core issue in press ethics is individual integrity, because individual integrity must be protected while the journalists' understanding of their duties is that events and people should be depicted. This dilemma also applied to the Gothenburg fire situation.

Yes, my spontaneous reaction was that the people deserved to be left alone. They have experienced something truly horrific. And they

*shouldn't have to deal with journalists too. I thought that was very tricky. At the same time I was there to do a job, and I knew I had to do the job.*⁶²

This professional self-image warrants reflection. The statement "I had to do the job" indicates the professional driving force. The idea to refrain from the assignment is not entertained by hardly anybody. As important as showing consideration is not overdoing it to the point where information is affected, as an editor pointed out: "*We should always ask the question: 'Do we show too much consideration?' In other words: 'Are we taking it too far?'*"

In the debate after the Gothenburg fire, there was criticism of the media's unethical and insensitive behaviour in dealing with shocked and bereaved people. But if the ethical boundary for violation of integrity is the same as talking to victims at all, journalism will be impossible to engage in. An editor in chief put it in this way:

Then the history of Sweden will never be written. We would only report on the number of police cars and firemen. A clinical reporting.

The editor thus included the writing of history in the media duties. A human dimension of major incidents is important but can clash with ethics, he observed. "*A no is always a no,*" in good old journalist praxis. But is a yes always a yes? Informed consent can be deceptive in a disaster situation because of the mental and physical condition of the afflicted.

Publicity rule 11: Be careful with pictures

A photographer related how he wanted to refrain from taking too many unnecessary pictures. No photo should be wasted, or taken without purpose.

*I thought like this/.../: I can't go around taking a chance. So I practised at a little distance from the worst drama, and checked if I knew exactly how close I would have to stand to people to cover as much as possible. And adjusted the camera... manually.*⁶³

Moderate concern involves catching the right moment. Protecting the individual does not always equal anonymity. There are generally differences in degrees depending on who and what are portrayed. Protecting the individual can mean taking a picture when a head is turned, or a face is covered in hands. This difference means that the "same" picture can be taken in a protective or revealing way "*depending on if the photographer has chosen the right moment or not.*"⁶⁴

A photographer illustrated in words how the pursuit of publishable photos was affected by the nature of the incident and how the way he worked differed from his usual ways in other situations.

*Often when you do a job, you look for the strongest photos /.../ But in this case you looked for the opposite and tried to find something you could photograph and something that could be published.*⁶⁵

Also in the offices a stronger ethical assessment was made of photos compared to procedures in other major events, according to several editors. When there is a major disaster in progress, it could be easier in theory to take liberties and advantage of the journalistic space. But as in the case of the Gothenburg fire there was professional responsibilities to safeguard.

*It's the easiest thing in the world to get dramatic photos of people who are in a panic because of grief. To expose them like this, 'bang swoosh'. You can be standing 50 meters away and take close-ups of people who are crying. Piece of cake. But in some way it's a question of portraying it without exposing people. /.../ It's different if you visit people in their homes to interview them, and they're sitting on the sofa aware of the situation. This is different from being at a fire site and sneaking a photo of people when they are grieving.*⁶⁶

The line between freedom and responsibility in journalism involves who to photograph and in what context. One photographer said that he was always clear about '*differentiating between people*'. And in some cases he would show no mercy.

*A municipal commissioner in a porn club. I wouldn't think twice about going there and flashing a bulb in his face ... I wouldn't regret that at all. But ordinary people who happen to fall into situations /.../ the people who came there to find out that their children had died. That's a helluva difference.*⁶⁷

Rejected

"The many pictures I didn't take"

It was clear from the interviews with the reporters and photographers that ethics has its applications at several levels in the chain of production. Assessing what not to document on site in the midst of chaos requires instinctive ethical decision making and a mental condition allowing for sound judgments: *"I refrained from many /.../ 'better' photos. Yes, or juicy ... stronger."*⁶⁸

One of the first photographers to arrive at Backaplan thought that he had made several press ethical decisions on site:

*If you think that the photos from the fire were awful, this is compared to what I rejected because I couldn't cope with taking them. There's a limit to how vulture-like you can be.*⁶⁹

Another photographer made similar decisions on photos to take on the scene:

*Yes, there were many photos I didn't take, which would have been very dramatic. Their grief was beyond anything, with children screaming and hugging one another, which I didn't photograph but would have been 'good' pictures. But I held back.*⁷⁰

In connection with the fire, a commonly discussed issue was the failure of the media to anonymize people, whose medical condition was difficult to assess whether survivors or the dead, in the photos, as mentioned in the section on professional ethics. The TV media were criticised for showing too much of identifiable young people during the rescue operation.⁷¹ The *Aftonbladets* first edition on Friday 30 October 1998 carried unmasked pictures in spite of the fact that several faces were clearly identifiable. "It was a mistake", said the editor in chief. In a later edition several faces were pixeled in the photos. The most noteworthy example was a picture of a girl being carried out in a blanket by a rescue worker. In the unpixeled edition, the readers could look straight into her eyes. The caption read 'SAVED'...". But could we know for sure? The pictures gave rise to further questions that did not only apply to *Aftonbladet*: Is it enough to mask a face when the person is easily identifiable through clothes? Should pictures needing to be pixeled be shown or should the anonymization be done in the act of taking a photo? Some papers had a policy to avoid publishing pictures that had to be pixeled. It was primarily the two evening papers *Aftonbladet* and *GT* that published pictures with pixeled faces. The morning papers seemed to have adopted the principle that the photo angle should hide the faces of the people in the picture.

A morning photographer said that he tried "not to look people straight into their eyes."

*You have to work discreetly and sneak around taking pictures when people turn, and so on /.../ it is easy to stand with a telephoto lens and take photos of faces without anyone noticing. But I didn't do that.*⁷²

Several photographers reacted with restraint in their photography: "You simply get shy in your professional role". In some situations, there was no option:

*If a half-naked fourteen year-old girl is lying dead on the ground, you don't stroll over to take a photo.*⁷³

There was a variety of attitudes, opinions, and prejudices at work among the actors on the scene at Backaplan; between young people and rescue workers and between young people and the media and between the media and the rescue workers. The journalists assumed that some attitudes were rooted in the young people's previous experiences of warfare or flight, for instance, which surfaced in the chaotic night. For many, this was hard to cope with when many youngsters expressed harsh criticism of the police, and there were journalists who "bought" the arguments and reported the criticism in the paper.

*I think that even if we cannot talk to the police and the rescue services, we cannot let the young people throw dirt on them either. To me it was all about protecting the young people.*⁷⁴

An editor in chief said that he had stopped the publication of material on several occasions; he had, for instance, toned down criticism of the rescue services' lack of efforts, and also recounted conflicts between the young and the police.

Explicit arguments on journalistic ethical considerations were sparse in the newspapers in the days studied. There were, however, examples where the journalist states in the article that he has refrained from detailed descriptions of certain scenes of panic, etc. A case in point is a description of a couple of smoke divers' tentative entrance into the smoke-filled hall in *Göteborgs-Tidningen*:

What they saw and felt with their hands in there, in the smoke, is not fit for print.
(GT 981031)

Also the local DN editor gave examples of how colleagues had refrained from a certain kind of journalistic material as a result of being considerate, especially in the later stages of the reporting, beyond the chaos of the accident site, when the focus was on grief and sadness.

We abstained – especially in the first few days – from publishing a great many photos. Even if people are willing to be photographed, a feeling spread among our photographers that this was wrong. For instance, once we had a very good text covering the outside of the Hammarkullen Church, but the photographer there, he... after discussions with me... refused to photograph the people, and just took pictures of

the church, the cross, the church entrance etc./.../ They sighed a bit at the home office [in Stockholm]...⁷⁵

A clear change in the ethical approach was noticeable regarding the reporting of mourning rallies and commemoration. This may have been because of less time pressure, less stress on the reporter compared to the situation at the accident site.

Press ethical mistakes

"I thought...that they looked very much alive"

The time factor affects ethical considerations and decisions to a great extent. A photographer described what could happen in the office under time pressure in the night when photos from the photographer are received.

Everyone is working full steam ahead, and I'm just one of the photographers sending photos to the paper. Then they have put a paper together. And they read the picture captions⁷⁶ arriving with photos /.../ And then it's pretty easy for the night editors to publish the wrong photo because the information attached is wrong.⁷⁷

His pictures were only some among many delivered to the office, and the management had to make correct ethical decisions quickly. The photographer thought that the text attached to the picture (the photographer's information to the editor) is always crucial to making the correct decision.

If I send a picture: 'Here is Daddy on his knees next to his injured daughter'. And they publish the picture. Then it turns out that the girl was dead. /.../ Such a picture can easily be published if the caption is wrong.

INT: But the question is still: How could it happen?

It's like this: It's three o'clock in the morning. The paper is in print. There is no chance to check the information. They trust the photographer who wrote the text. /.../ That's why it's so important that the caption is correct.⁷⁸

In this case the time pressure and lack of routines had dire consequences since it turned out that the girl was dead. Everyone involved should learn from this never to take a chance on an assessment or speculate about the condition of an afflicted person, but choose another caption or refrain from publishing the photo. But never take a chance. The consequence hit Gothenburg especially since the evening papers'

first editions were also the least ethically acceptable. The editions geographically most distant from Stockholm (e.g. Gothenburg) were printed – as always – first. The ethically ”better” editions were printed later and stayed in Stockholm. The editions with the potentially greatest offensive content were spread among the people who were most vulnerable: in Gothenburg.

The grey zone of press ethics

”You should be on the line”

There is a kind of theoretical line drawn for what is sound and acceptable journalism. But where it is and how elastic it is depends on the individual, the news editors, and the situation. Perhaps it also depends on a national arena. In Sweden journalists talk about ”keeping within the line” or ”crossing the line”. But where is it and how close to line is it reasonable to stay? The question was put to the journalists covering the Gothenburg fire.

*I think you should be right there [on the line]. This is when it's best. But there has to be expertise in the office to make the assessment. At the same time you can't shake off the personal responsibility, but you have to stand up for what you submit.*⁷⁹

Dwelling in the press ethical borderland entails great risks such as violation of personal integrity and anonymity rights. The problem with photographing an accident victim whose condition was not easily assessed was a case in point for the photographers at Backaplan.

*You didn't know then either. Those who were alive were carried out to the ambulances. And the dead were not brought out the same way as the living. They were carried out through the backdoor.*⁸⁰

The photographer made the assessment that the girl was alive ”because they hadn't transported any dead persons to the hospital”. But he couldn't be absolutely certain, he said. So this is only an example of the balancing act between the media's factuality and fictionality, between good and bad ethics. A caption only functions as reinforcement of the picture. This requires great care and attention to the facts.

*If they had written 'Here one of the injured is carried out', it can be turned around two days later: 'The injured person carried out two days ago has now died in hospital.' But it's more difficult to write 'saved'.*⁸¹

In the borderland of press ethics, "injured" can mean deceased and the person "saved" can die. A misjudgement or a premature conclusion can have painful consequences for the family. The photographers' chance to assess the conditions of the people they took pictures of was limited in the situation for reasons of lack of knowledge and time.

*The picture on the front page – on that I was pretty certain that they were alive. But I still don't know if they lived or not, those who were there. But I thought when I took the picture that they looked very much alive.*⁸²

The cynicism of distance

"Consideration diminishes ... with the distance to the event"

Major accidents and disasters of international interest often constitute examples of how different media reporting can appear, depending on the distance between the media distribution area and location of the event. This fact is illustrated in connection with the Gothenburg fire, summed up in *"As I say, consideration diminishes proportionally to the square of the distance to the event"*.⁸³

Previous studies have shown that the local editors at an accident place are more careful than incoming journalists from the national press.⁸⁴ Others think that the differences between Swedish media are marginal and irrespective of their locations. The differences are clearer in an international context. But the global media situation has also reduced the differences between the national and international levels, as a photo editor observed: *"Going back 30-40 years, we could show any picture of a German – and nobody would react. That wouldn't work today"*.⁸⁵

The present globalised world partly bridges the geographical distance. Showing pictures of accident victims requires a rigorous ethical assessment even if the incident takes place abroad.

*Today it's not certain that we would show photos [on the ethical line] of people on the Balkan, for instance, as it's very likely that there are relatives and family members here [in Sweden].*⁸⁶

However, nothing is clear-cut, rather contradictory.

Last week we had a pretty awful photo from Kosovo. And some thought that it was too much, sort of. But we can't censure war. And

the reason for publishing it was to shake people up a bit... saying, 'This is the grim truth.'

INT: Would it have been possible to publish the picture if it had been taken in Gothenburg?

*No ... it's hard to say. But if it had been an accident instead of war, then I don't think it would have been publishable here. But in war something is different.*⁸⁷

This statement poses questions suitable for a different thesis: What is the difference between war journalism and accident/disaster journalism? Would journalists and the general public make the same assessment depending on the causes of trauma?

There are also economic interests in the selling of photo material, which can contribute to increased generosity in the delivery of photos not publishable in the home country. This was the case after the fire.

*My photos were sold all over the world. They brought in extra staff to distribute them [the photographer describes a photo of a badly burned girl that was not published in Sweden]... but was on the front page of nearly every paper in Germany. It made the front page in Spain, in France, in Belgium and everywhere in the world it was published.*⁸⁸

*My pictures were sold for SEK 70-80 000.*⁸⁹

The photographer had no qualms about this: *"Ethically speaking I think it's okay."* His reason was that the exchange was reciprocal as photos of disasters in other countries are sent to Sweden. *"We can see photos of maimed people every day in our papers."*

Several photographers testified that colleagues showed a lack of consideration and ethics. The reasons that members of the same professional category can display different approaches are several: cultural differences and the pressure of the home editors were mentioned. Some said that covering an event far away from home is more likely to lead to transgression. Other causes could simply be *"stupidity, thoughtlessness and ignorance."*⁹⁰

The *DN* photographer doubted that the event would have been covered differently if it had taken place in Stockholm instead of Gothenburg.

It would have made no difference. I don't think so. It's possible that more dramatic photos had been taken, and more close-ups of people crying, and possible that some had been in the paper. But I'm the photographer down here and I decide what photos to take.⁹¹

This may indicate that the person factor and previous experience are more decisive than job location and editorial belonging.⁹²

Press photo

"A hundred times better than words"

Several previous studies have noted that the news photo has a prominent role in accident and disaster coverage, for example, Gert Z Nordström and Stig Hadenius et al., who studied the Estonia ferry disaster in the media.⁹³ When words fail us, the picture may convey a feeling and describe a moment better. Who does not remember the TV footage of the plane crashing into the World Trade Center in 2001? It is so unbelievable that it has to be seen again and again. After the Gothenburg fire, *Göteborgs-Posten* had a photo covering the entire front page and the caption: "The Disaster Site Friday Night". As a *GP* photographer put it: "Yes, a picture is a hundred times better than words. Together they are very descriptive. But a picture speaks more about what is happening than a text does."⁹⁴

At the same time as the press photo is mentioned as a key factor in accident and disaster coverage, the time pressure in news production also affects the photographic work.

*More and more a single photo is taken. This increases the risk of arranged photos. And then you are really on thin ice, the whole paper, if this happens. If you plan to tell a story with more than one picture – then you have to be good at arguing a case (laughs).*⁹⁵

The photographer suggested here that the really good photo coverage of a major event is often done by freelancers, as the employed photographers work under a greater time pressure and the demand for the 'single photo' is his lot. He hoped, however, to see more visual narratives in the future press.

That the pictures we look at in the present press are manipulated in various ways is not something the general reader reflects on. Also the news photos from the fire were in several cases computer processed to satisfy both the photographer and the editors. Often this involved small, apparently harmless corrections, but they might be significant to know about.

*You could describe it like this: If there is a group, hugging one another, as in one of the photos [I took]. And there is a fire in background. Three meters away from the group in the photo there is a single person. Then I might remove that person from the photo to get a more unified picture of the group.*⁹⁶

*In several cases the photographer cropped the pictures from the scene to, as he said, "reduce the distance between the camera and the injured and between the camera and the fire."*⁹⁷

Most things are technically possible today regarding computer-aided image manipulation. The example above is a distortion of reality worth discussing. But there are limits to what a press photographer can consider doing. Removing an object is one thing, adding is another: *"My limit is /.../you can add people to a photo. I would never do that, the photo is the original"*.⁹⁸

But removing a person from a photo to protect their identity?

*It happens. For instance, I was on a police story /.../ and there were plain-clothes detectives in the picture [the photographer describes how he removed them from the photo] /.../ And I did that because they'll have a difficult job if they are identified in the paper.*⁹⁹

The reason he complied with the police request in this case (the fire) was, he said, that as a photographer he is reciprocally dependent on a good cooperation with the police for future assignments.

Assessments and decisions: conclusions

The journalistic job can be described as full of professional challenges and paradoxes. The press ethical considerations are many: Should journalists show their professional identity or not? And are their decisions based on consideration or fear? The journalist covering the Gothenburg fire did both, or either or. Some of them hid their notepads and pens; others displayed their attributes clearly. Some photographers kept their cameras behind their backs; others went close to take many photos. Some reporters interviewed, others observed. Some photographers were alert enough to see immediately what pictures needed taking. Others simply shot a great number "to make sure".

The editors also adopted different approaches to the job in hand regarding if they should vacuum the area and let the editorial staff make the selection, or let the photographers select on site.

Can a photographed image be an ethical transgression if it is not published? This is a delicate question to which there is no given answer, just as there is no answer to the question whether or not it is a transgression to interview people in shock even if the interview is not published or anonymity is protected. All interviewees stressed in unison that there was a policy – or decree from the management – not to go too near the afflicted at an accident site. But did the journalists have the knowledge to assess who was comfortable and invulnerable enough for an interview? And did the photographer know if the girl in the photo was unharmed, injured or dead?

Many expressed a lack of knowledge regarding the medical and psychological effects of the traumatic Gothenburg fire. A very clear and collective tendency was that all expressed a wish to help in some way. The professional conscience made a photographer “nearly say, I’m sorry” when he took a photo. But the photo was taken. Was he a good journalist and a rotten fellow human being? No one would be likely to blame him for this, but many of the journalists judged themselves although their mission was to report and not to save lives. And what is sufficiently ethical to take photos of in a situation characterised by chaos and traumatised young people?

Examples of editorial decisions made were issuing a paper on a normally non-edition day, to what extent consideration should be given to all the affected people in the choice of photo material, and what approach to adopt on the multi-ethnic character of the event. The editors also gave examples of decisions that they thought erroneous in hindsight, for example, the article on a missing girl, who was later found dead in the burned premises.

The category that had the greater say varied. At the accident site, the reporters and the photographers had a great influence, while the opinion of the editorial management grew in importance the closer it got to the time of going to press. The staff expected the management to be responsive to the staff members’ expertise and also said that they were treated with respect in this sense.

Someone stressed the importance of knowing that the management was really prepared to stand by its decisions. A critical issue turned out to be the newspapers lack of routines in crises and disasters. The reporters and photographers as well as their editors appealed for better guidelines for media crisis management and organisation in connection with major accidents and disasters.

Reporters and photographers described their professional performances on site in varying terms. There were, however, similarities. Both categories had in the main acted on the basis of two alternative strategies: either by revealing their professional role and presence explicitly by showing notepad, pen and camera or identifying themselves, or by concealing their professional identity and trying "to hide" by keeping attributes out of sight, and trying to "fit in". Someone went round the corner to make notes because it felt so provoking being there as a journalist, and some photographers took a minimum of photos. The reason for these behaviours, according to journalists themselves, may have been a combination of being considerate and the experience of feeling threatened by distressed and upset young people.

Photo editors as well as photographers thought that there were, by tradition, two approaches to an accident site. One is to "vacuum" the area for photos, the other is to be restrained and select objects on site. Both approaches were practised at the Gothenburg fire, even if the latter later appeared to have been most common.

When the photos were taken, the censoring or "gate-keeping" took place on several levels. It was, for instance, decided which pictures should be published in Swedish and international press, respectively. Freelance photographers and all newspapers (and of course photo agencies, although excluded from this study) also had economic interests in the photo material. This aspect was not "in the picture" when the work was in progress, but it was a result of the assignment.

The professional performance on site included both acting and refraining from taking the strong photo or interviewing vulnerable people, but also daring to do all this within reason. Many journalists shared the experience of having a greater responsibility to protect individual integrity than a duty to report.

The skills normally expected of a journalist either came to a head or out of play. Some ethical rules, for instance, were especially highlighted, while other norms of standard journalism did not apply. Several situations accentuated that disaster journalism constitutes a kind of press ethical state of emergency. The photo material was discussed much more than the texts, which is typical of accident and disaster journalism, as some pointed out, because the pictures were so exposing and it was so hard to assess the condition of the photographed young people. The use of pixelated faces varied considerably between the newspapers.

Several press ethical dilemmas involved the responsibility for both acting on the site and publishing. Often press ethics and publishing are equated, but in this study many issues of how reporters and photographers could and should act in different situations on site were highlighted, indicating that professional conduct is not only guided by professional codes, but also by personal qualities such as vulnerability, stress susceptibility and crisis reactions. This dimension is the subject of the next chapter.

Footnotes

- 1 News editor in chief GP
- 2 Photo editor in chief GP
- 3 Local editor DN
- 4 Also in Larsson& Nohrsedt et al (2000)
- 5 Editor in chief GT
- 6 Local editor DN
- 7 Local editor DN
- 8 Local editor DN
- 9 Photographer DN
- 10 Freelance photographer/GT
- 11 Photographer 2 GP
- 12 Photographer 2 GP
- 13 Photo editor in chief GP
- 14 Photographer DN
- 15 Photographer DN
- 16 Photo editor in chief GP
- 17 Also see Lamark & Morlandstø (2002)
- 18 Reporter 1 GP
- 19 Photographer 1 GP
- 20 Photographer 1 GP
- 21 Reporter GP
- 22 Reporter AB
- 23 Photographer 1 GP
- 24 Reporter GP
- 25 Photographer 1 GP
- 26 Photographer 1 GP
- 27 Photographer 1 GP
- 28 Photographer 1 GP
- 29 Photographer 1 GP
- 30 Reporter GP
- 31 Reporter DN
- 32 Photographer 1 GP
- 33 Photographer 1 GP
- 34 Photographer DN
- 35 Photographer DN
- 36 Photographer DN
- 37 Reporter AB
- 38 Reporter AB
- 39 Photographer 1 GP
- 40 Photographer 1 GP
- 41 Freelance photographer /AB
- 42 Editor in chief GT
- 43 Photo editor in chief GP

44 Photographer 2 GP
 45 Freelance photographer /AB
 46 Freelance photographer /AB
 47 Photographer DN
 48 News editor in chief GP
 49 Reporter DN
 50 Reporter DN
 51 Photo editor in chief GP
 52 Editor in chief AB
 53 Editor in chief AB
 54 Photographer 1 GP
 55 Photographer 2 GP
 56 Local editor DN
 57 Local editor DN
 58 Local editor DN
 59 Reporter DN
 60 Reporter DN
 61 Local editor DN
 62 Reporter DN
 63 Photographer 1 GP
 64 Photo editor in chief GP
 65 Photographer 1 GP
 66 Photographer DN
 67 Photographer DN
 68 Photographer 1 GP
 69 Photographer 1 GP
 70 Photographer DN
 71 See f. eks. Larsson & Nohrstedt (2000) and SOU 1999:68
 72 Photographer DN
 73 Photographer 1 GP
 74 Reporter GP
 75 Local editor DN
 76 Written information from the photographer to the desk, about delivered images. Sort of suggested captions.
 77 Freelance photographer/AB
 78 Freelance photographer/AB
 79 Photographer 2 GP
 80 Freelance photographer/AB
 81 Freelance photographer/AB
 82 Photographer 1 GP
 83 Photo editor in chief GP
 84 Alström (1997)
 85 Photo editor in chief GP
 86 Photo editor in chief GP
 87 Photo editor in chief GP
 88 Photographer 1 GP
 89 Freelance photographer/AB
 90 Photo editor in chief GP
 91 Photographer DN
 92 Also see earlier sections about media ethics.
 93 Hadenius et al (1996); Nordström (2002)
 94 Photographer 1 GP
 95 Photographer 2 GP
 96 Freelance photographer/AB
 97 Freelance photographer/AB
 98 Freelance photographer/AB
 99 Freelancephotographer/AB

10. THE PRIVATE PERSON: ONLY HUMAN

The interview study with the journalists did not include personality assessment. However, the journalists themselves reflected on their personal strengths and weaknesses regarding their ways of reacting to the fire disaster. Many also related their observations of colleagues' reactions. Statements like "he is a man of steel and yet he fell apart" testify to the shattering of the myth of the journalist as the Superman or John Wayne during the hours at Backaplan in Gothenburg. Who endured and coped with the situation psychologically and who "broke down"? Who was overwhelmed by feelings and who could embrace them with presence of mind? When the journalist, with private and professional person, arrives at an accident site, the professional person is also overwhelmed by the impressions, feelings and reactions that the private person is affected by. Finding one's role immediately is not automatic. Should I help or report? An elaborate discussion of the conflicts between the private and professional person is presented in the last chapter. The next section gives an account of how the journalists at Backaplan experienced their vulnerability and stress susceptibility, as well as their reactions and coping strategies.

Vulnerability

"I have to cope with this"

The professional journalist is to a great extent shaped by the individual assuming a professional role. A tension – or rather process – described by the Norwegian media researchers Lamark and Morlandstø, illustrates how the individual and the journalist encounter the ideals, norms and regulations of the profession.¹

Journalists given the task to cover a traumatic event can never renounce normal human reactions. But the professional mission is a very strong incentive that can help postponing the strongest reactions into the future. This is what many of the journalists in Gothenburg experienced.

*You can't just sit down cry, which would be the natural reaction. You... I at least ... dissociate from it in some way. You can't allow yourself to feel too much, but simply get the job done.*²

The journalists' experiences were marked by a sense of unreality and powerlessness:

*I walked around with a feeling of 'this is not true, this is not real, this can't happen in Sweden.*³

One year after the fire in Gothenburg, the Swedish Television showed a documentary of the incident. One of the strongest parts of the programme was made by the TV photographer Tommy Wiberg. His story illustrates the journalistic dilemma clearly: having to complete an assignment, more or less willingly, in a chaotic situation difficult to assess, where anything besides saving lives appears as a provocation. In a film sequence a young man reacts with words and gestures, which can be understood as an attempt to keep off the media. Tommy Wiberg says in the film that "the only thing to do was to put down the camera."

I don't think I have ever done such a bad job. /.../ I've been involved in many dramatic events, which I have managed to keep at a distance, and also to keep my professional glasses on. But as soon as I arrived at this place and heard their desperate cries, and saw all the young persons lying around... it was very hard to work there. On my way to the TV premises ... then I couldn't hold back... everything snapped... I started shaking. Yes... (weeps).⁴

A newspaper photographer interviewed for the study described the reaction of this colleague on the site, which was a joint workplace at that moment:

*I've known him for 25 years. He is a MAN OF STEEL, you know. So what happened to him is very interesting. But he was there when it happened. So I can understand him. I think it's very strong of him to make this public.*⁵

Many feelings raged among the journalists who encountered the disaster and the aftermath. One way of reacting to such situations can also be through a perceived absence of feelings, but guilt and shame were central to most of the interviewees.

*Yes, except for that feeling of shame haunting me all the time. But I think it's a result of the winding up in the stress situation and the endorphin rush I get, knowing that I have to deliver now and later, several different articles to different editions. I can't have a break-down. I have to cope with this.... I cut off all feelings and just worked.*⁶

Acute stress reactions

”Then I was in real distress”

The first reactions for some journalists came already on their way from the office to the assignment:

I had a real adrenaline rush when we ran to the garage. I felt all of me had kick-started. And we were very tired that evening. I missed the staff dining room when they closed and was very hungry and exhausted. But it vanished all of a sudden. I was all go. From toes to top.⁷

Arriving at the site, there were other reactions, physical as well as emotional reactions such as the feeling of inadequacy:

When a boy approached me, I felt a bit dizzy. I felt: God! He is one of many! ... I started ...pumping blood ... with my knees, because my head was empty and I felt nauseous.⁸

Another reporter lost all energy for a while:

I felt completely useless. Perhaps for the first ten minutes. Then I was in real shock, you know, ... totally useless and not like a vulture, but I realised that as a journalist there was no task for me there, then. Other than to observe.⁹

The same reporter remarked that she was totally unprepared for this encounter with death.

I have never seen a human being die in that way.... Twice earlier but that was from heart attacks... and standing there watching people die near your feet... it was impossible to spare myself from that. Once I had seen it.¹⁰

There were very few examples in the study of journalists who had not completed their assignment. One reporter, however, said that the job had been left incomplete.

My journalistic performance was pretty bad, I thought, but all considering I don't think that anything could have been expected. /.../ It annoys me, I must say, that I felt so bad...it's terribly annoying... I have thought so much about it afterwards; I can't recall so many clear images either. /.../ I would have liked to be a bit more of a journalist... let's say I'd arrived five minutes later, then everything would have been completely different. If I had known that it was a disaster, I could have worked more like a journalist. /.../But I did my best in the circumstances, and I gave a lot to colleagues and so on, but not stuff with very much substance.¹¹

*There were many, both journalists and photographers who were standing in the corners, feeling bad and crying. /.../ Some sort of disappeared, but that could have been me not seeing them. I was probably one of those who should have gone home directly. If I'd had some sense left.*¹²

The later arrivals had a better chance of "postponing" their reactions to mobilise some kind of energy reserve instead and keep a total focus on the job.

*I was pretty high, actually. And we worked round the clock for about a week. And it worked. I didn't feel tired or anything.*¹³

When faced with horror, individuals may become one with their emotions. An evening reporter walked around in as if in a glass bubble at the office in the hours after his experiences at Backaplan: "*I was walking around there like a zombie, green in the face so probably nobody wanted to talk to me, I think*".¹⁴

For the incoming journalists staying in hotels, the work was in some cases less lonely than for the free-lancing Gothenburg press members. Someone thought that the socialising with colleagues in the hotel was very important support, while other thought that there was little time for talking with colleagues or catching your breath in the hotel room.

*We worked 20 hours a day, or 23 hours on the first day. We didn't exactly wonder about the carpets in the room (laughs). No, you just hit the sack, dead tired.*¹⁵

Personally affected

"She could definitely not go"

Inevitably, journalists find themselves covering a story that involves a personal connection, for instance, reminds them of what once happened to a close friend. One of the photographer recounted (as mentioned) how his work was affected by the accidental death of his son three years earlier. Some of his son's friends died in the fire. His daughter also had friends among the victims and survivors of the fire, "but I didn't know that when I went there," he said. The photographer soon realised that this was the very same party that his daughter wanted to go to and suddenly remembered how he had "*blankly said no*" to her, which he did after having checked with the police who the organisers were.

They were boys selling tickets in the school-yard and they had no control over how many they sold. They always sold more than what the place could hold. /.../ So I checked, and she could definitely not go.

INT: 'It's probably a totally needless question – how does that decision make you feel today?'

*You can ask her. I feel bloody good.*¹⁶

Another aspect of the accident that the photographer said he recognised from his daughter's life was the way young girls borrow clothes from each other when going to a party.

*Now I have spoken to her about how difficult it is for the police to identify children when they are not wearing the clothes they left home in. /.../ I told her that... see how important it is to wear your own clothes.....*¹⁷

A reporter recounted that she had been involved in two fire incidents in residential buildings, which had to be evacuated. Perhaps these incidents accentuated her fear of fires when she witnessed the Backaplan fire, she pondered.¹⁸

Coping

"I have never been so perceptive"

A number of factors help professionals to cope with the situation at an accident site. Several of the reactions may belong to this category. In the effort to manage the situation, these reactions may become a recourse. A sense of unreality is common, suppression of reactions as well as dissociation and keeping active to prevent reflection.¹⁹

Among reporters and photographers on the accident site in Gothenburg there were many examples of coping strategies. Having a 'sufficient ability' to cope with the situation and perform their duty was the goal of many. In several cases, their mental acumen and focus were increased as an effect of their coping strategies: *"I was so observant that I don't think that I have ever perceived something so intensely. Apart from delivering a baby."*²⁰

*I have never been so perceptive in my whole life, I think. I went all in to be a professional photographer. I've never had such well exposed photos in my whole life, I think. It's weird, but... I was so aware of not failing with these pictures.*²¹

The professional duty was predominant for most of them despite their distress.

*All the time I tried to think professionally /.../ I never had time to slow down and consider the situation. Not until we were just about leave, when they started to carry out the bodies... then I started to think.*²²

Distraction is an indispensable coping strategy to do this kind of job. Many of the journalists applied it.

*You can't sit down and cry, which would have been the normal reaction, but you... at least I distracted in some way... You can't allow yourself to feel too much.*²³

One way of reacting to crisis situations is with humour. There were only a few examples of this strategy among the journalists in this study. A reporter described such an attempt: *"I know that I tried to perk up and be chipper, type... joking...and I failed miserably."*²⁴

One of the photographers had also noticed such reaction among the survivors.

*In the midst of all the misery... there's one thing I'll never forget... there's this guy I give a blanket to and two buddies. One was injured, his face was burnt, so we laid him down on the street. Then they talked to each other and I heard it all. They started to make fun of each other and one asked; 'How do I look?' And the other said: 'Bloody awful, but you will get girls anyway.'... It was pretty absurd in the chaotic situation.*²⁵

Delayed reactions

"I only saw people running"

Different types of stress reactions – early and delayed – were described by the journalists and photographers reporting on the acute phase of the fire and they mentioned many of physical and psychological reactions that responders may experience. Some examples were: insistent memories and thoughts, anxiety, despondency and grief, sleeping problems, concentration loss, fatigue, soul-searching and guilt, changing values. This supports the view that media members may also be affected by a disaster²⁶, and raises the question of how this state affects the way an incident is reported.

Several interviewees described how the reactions to the fire did not appear until they were on their way to the office.

Then we get into the car and drive off and I say to NN [the reporter] ...Blimey, there seems to be 50 dead.... 'Yeah, so what?', she

says. /.../ Then I realised that she was totally out of it. Gone, if you can say that. I looked at my watch and thought, 'Hell, now they want pictures'.²⁷

A photographer described that he was haunted by horrible images and couldn't sleep in the first days: *"I only saw people running... and I thought that people were falling from the window. And I ...wasn't the least bit tired."*²⁸ A colleague reacted in the opposite way – slept without any problem: *"I have never slept so well in all my life [laughs], because then I was terribly tired, you know."*²⁹

But not only journalists on site were affected by the disaster. Colleagues in the office and editors were also affected by the fire disaster. An editor thought that in this case he could not, as usually, repress his feelings during work: *"In this sense, the fire differed from other similar incidents."* He continued:

I worked more than 24 hours and then flew to my summer house, and when you just sit down, all the feelings surface and you realise what has happened, which you don't do when you're in the middle of it. And you get very affected and tears start streaming.³⁰

Many of the reactions that the journalists and photographers described can in retrospect seem slightly absurd. But at that point, in the morning of the fire, they could be viewed as a reflection of coping strategies.

Back at the office, a photographer went through his photos to send them to Stockholm and started to recapitulate: *"That's when you're prepared to take it in. You've known it all the time but kept it at a distance."* He continued working anyway, sending his photos until half past ten in the morning. Then he went home, and fell asleep against his expectations: *"... I simply fell onto the bed immediately."* Waking up in the afternoon his reporter colleague rang, *"because she needed help and then I felt a bit bad too."*³¹ At that point they both decided that they needed professional help.

A photographer who arrived at the scene when the fire was out, also experienced reacting with delay.

Yes, well, the reaction came a few days later I think. You get fucking depressed with it all. It was slightly unreal, actually.³²

For others, the reactions surfaced when they got home.

I really tried to go through this pretty unaffected. But when I got home the reactions set in.³³

Memory loss is described by several journalists, reporters as well as photographers.

*And I've thought about it so much afterwards. I can't even conjure up clear visual memories. Unfortunately, I wish I could.*³⁴

Still after six months, many journalists experienced the situation at Backaplan only vaguely. And some reactions would still appear:

*Yes, I'm so totally exhausted that I don't even really know who were there.*³⁵

*Actually, I'm still dizzy. It's true.*³⁶

Memory loss was also something that affected the survivors even worse, as a photographer thought:

*I remember people that were there, but none of the fire survivors remember me being there. /.../ So they must have been more traumatised than me. Many suffer memory loss from that place.*³⁷

In the even longer term

"In the end you feel bloody worn out"

Time does not heal all wounds. Sometimes, salt is rubbed into them, as the memory gradually returns

*It's not like I've become a superman as a result of this. I mean, it drains you a bit every time. In the end you feel bloody worn out, you know. And you sort of want a year's holiday.... But of course... you get used to it, too.*³⁸

The atmosphere in the city was noticeably affected for a long time, as a photographer put it: *"There was a weird atmosphere in Gothenburg for months afterwards."*³⁹ But to live and work in the afflicted city in mourning can have advantages in the form of processing it, he thought: *"Now I'm part of the de-escalation. It's a form debriefing too. /.../ All my colleagues were there."*⁴⁰

A long time after the Gothenburg fire reporters and photographers found it difficult to think and talk about the fire. An evening paper reporter tried to find out the time she arrived at Backaplan through her saved taxi receipts, but when she couldn't get hold of the financial officer directly, she dropped it altogether: *"I didn't want to think about it unnecessarily."*⁴¹ A photographer thought that the memories of the fire were worse than the experience of the actual fire.

*To me, the fire wasn't as awful when I was there. It was more horrible afterwards, when you understood that people had died and so on.*⁴²

How much can a human being endure – how much can a human being stand to see? Is there a saturation limit?

*Yes, perhaps. But you get over it with time. And then maybe there is something else happening. And then that is hard. It's not like I'm adding on thing on another. I'm not the cause of these things. They happen whether I'm there or not.*⁴³

A reporter's comment on the experience of observing and reporting on the fire disaster was: "you could do without it".

Reactions and coping: conclusions

Some factors clearly distinguished the reactions of the journalists at the accident scene in Gothenburg from the reactions of responders described in previous studies.⁴⁴ Against the backdrop of the professional assignment to observe and report rather than save lives, the journalists suffered shame and guilt feelings because of their presence on the scene. Other emotional reactions were powerlessness, being overwhelmed, dissociation from feelings, distress and a sense of uselessness. Among the somatic reactions were increased heart rate, nausea, dizziness, weeping, tremor and adrenaline kick. Examples of cognitive reactions were sense of unreality, confusion, memory loss and dissociation. Behavioural reactions were reported by the journalists as hyper activity (being "triggered" and "speeded"), under activity ("was useless", "should have gone home"), and withdrawing.

The reporters' and photographers' combined descriptions of their own reactions stretched across the whole spectrum of crisis reactions in responders (Chapter 5). The only type of reaction often appearing in responders that was not recognised among the journalists was the behavioural reaction of exaggerated joking. Humour is a frequent coping strategy among responders,⁴⁵ but only a few examples of humour used for coping purposes was mentioned in the journalist interviews.

If the reactions are categorised according to Wallenius' principle of functional and dysfunctional reactions,⁴⁶ the journalists displayed some distinct categories. A functional reaction, or coping strategy, displayed was distraction from the event to increase powers of perception

and professional focus. A dysfunctional reaction was paralysis which led to inadequate professional performance or none at all. There were also examples of problem-solving and emotional coping. Some acted as "problem solvers" reacting – according to their own statements – with resourcefulness and creativity. They developed a "super memory" and complete purposefulness in the situation. Others mastered the situation more emotionally and let helping take precedence over the professional duty. Perhaps they let compassion and professional conscience govern their actions on the accident site and their accounts in the interviews.

There were no clear differences in reactions among women and men, or reporters and photographers. Possibly, women more than men applied "emotion-focused coping" and the men more "problem-focused coping", which is in line with previous studies.⁴⁷ The corresponding weak tendency was also present in the comparison between reporters and photographers with the reporters tending to apply a more emotion-based coping, while the photographers seemed more problem-oriented. There were exceptions, however, in all groups, also among the journalists. The latter tendency can, however, also be explained by the fact that all photographers in the study were men and the majority of the reporters were women.

The spectrum of reactions also included delayed reactions. Many reporters and photographers testified that their feelings appeared after the first 24 hours and for some after some days. Several reported sleeping problems and persistent and long-term memories. A few reported having a personal link to the event and the affected young people. A reporter described how the memories from a previous building fire resurfaced at Backaplan and wondered how the experience had affected the later reactions. A photographer described how the memories of his child's death some years earlier were triggered and relived while on duty at Backaplan.

Generally, most of the interviewees emphasised that they were more ready to help victims and survivors than to take photos and write. Many would have preferred to exercise humanity while others found it easier to focus on their professional role.

Footnotes

- 1 Lamark & Morlandstø (2002)
- 2 Reporter DN
- 3 Reporter DN
- 4 Tommy Wiberg, film photographer, Swedish Television, SVT Göteborg, in a SVT documentary "After the fire" ("Efter branden"), SVT2 (991025)
- 5 Photographer DN
- 6 Reporter DN
- 7 Reporter GP
- 8 Reporter GP
- 9 Reporter AB
- 10 Reporter AB
- 11 Reporter AB
- 12 Reporter AB
- 13 Reporter DN
- 14 Reporter AB
- 15 Reporter GT/Ex
- 16 Freelance photographer/AB
- 17 Freelance photographer/AB
- 18 Reporter AB
- 19 Dyregrov (1992) p. 179
- 20 Reporter GP
- 21 Photographer 1 GP
- 22 Freelance photographer/AB
- 23 Reporter DN
- 24 Reporter AB
- 25 Photographer 1 GP
- 26 Also see Lundin (1992)
- 27 Freelance photographer/AB
- 28 Photographer 1 GP
- 29 Photographer DN
- 30 Editor in chief AB
- 31 Freelance photographer/AB
- 32 Photographer DN
- 33 Freelance photographer/AB
- 34 Reporter AB
- 35 Reporter AB
- 36 Reporter AB
- 37 Photographer 1 GP
- 38 Photographer DN
- 39 Photographer DN
- 40 Photographer DN
- 41 Reporter AB
- 42 Photographer 1 GP
- 43 Photographer 1 GP
- 44 ICD-10 (WHO: <http://www.who.int/classifications/icd/en/>) ; Dyregrov (1992); Wallenius (2001); Enander et al (1995); Lindström & Lundin (1982); Folkesson (2003).
- 45 Dyregrov (1992); Folkesson (2003); Granér (2000)
- 46 Wallenius (2001)
- 47 See f. eks. Michel et al (2001) p. 70

11. REFLECTION: RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Coping with the time after a traumatic experience is as important as coping with the job in an extreme situation. The processing and recovery phase is worth studying to better understand how journalists feel, think and function in a real-life situation, both in terms of the completed mission and future unexpected call-outs. The time of reflection is somewhat curtailed in the media world, as is the time of recovery. Nevertheless, the care of this indirectly affected professional group is a factor to consider at the collective as well as the individual level.

Psychological relief

While accident responders, still in their uniforms, directly move on to manage their stress within the organisation, primarily through good leadership, and peer support, the journalists might be sent to another job. The police, rescue services and emergency care units have standard routines for providing support and checking mental states subsequent to the assignment. In the media world, such initiatives were in principle non-existent until the Gothenburg fire in 1998.

Previous studies, among others Simpson and Bogg's, show that many journalists comply with an unwritten professional code, meaning that regardless of the brutality or trauma of an assignment, journalists should continue taking photos, collecting facts and telling their stories. This unwritten code also includes disregarding individual needs of support measures.¹

Social support and trauma relief

In 1998, the year of the fire disaster in Gothenburg, the international psychological expertise on war more or less agreed that regular defusing, or psychological debriefing, was necessary for human recovery after potentially traumatic experiences. Nowadays, this wind has turned somewhat, to which we will return. But it is to be noted that the ques-

tions in the interviews for this study were asked on the basis of the prevailing knowledge at the time. The purpose of defusing and debriefing was – and still is for many – to speed up the recovery process of staff who had experienced and worked with a traumatic event. Abnormal situations lead to normal and painful reactions. A second purpose was to reduce physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural stress reactions. The sessions have also been used to identify the persons who are in further need of help.² Advocates of this model also think that such sessions are perfect opportunities to share facts and information equally and give all the affected parties information about normal stress reactions and how these can be prevented.

The difference between defusing and debriefing is that the former is applied immediately, is shorter and somewhat superficial. If a need of debriefing is revealed, it is provided. Big debriefing groups sometimes have two leaders. Defusing normally involves one session, while debriefing can have three sessions. A further difference is that in relief practice priority is given to speedy intervention after the incident rather than to a quiet and secluded place, while the undisturbed place is a debriefing requirement.³ The person who conducts the talks varies between organisations, but generally the first session is lead by the head of operations if he/she has the confidence of the co-workers.

The leading literature in the field is produced by the American researcher Mitchell and Everly, but good descriptions are available in Swedish, provided by Dyregrov and Andersson et al.⁴ Recent research has, however, as implied above, questioned the benefits of the individual sessions in particular. Many even suggest that the method can do more harm than good regarding the potential of debriefing to prevent posttraumatic stress syndrome.⁵ In the preceding year, 2005, the British National Institute for Clinical Excellence NICE – published an evidence-based research survey of the field, which summarised the forms of intervention that they thought could help victims and indirectly affected persons such as responders directly after an incident – for instance, a disaster.

- Those directly (and indirectly) involved should be provided empathetic support
- Support can be practical, emotional and social
- Those directly (and indirectly) involved should be informed about common reactions and advised on how to cope with them, preferably in writing

- For individuals with mild reactions lasting less than four weeks, watchful waiting is sufficient
- Psychological debriefing provided on one occasion for individuals is not recommendable
- Screening of high risk individuals should be performed with a simple instrument (e.g. check list), one month after the trauma
- Individuals with pronounced PTSD symptoms should be offered cognitive behavioural therapy within a month.

Broadly speaking, this involves calming those who have pronounced reactions, sustain fellowship, and if possible involve those affected partly in rescue operations (as part of the processing). Too emotional issues are avoided, but committed and empathetic listening is crucial. Individuals who show resistance (see Chapter 4) may not need professional evaluation or treatment. In worst cases, a normal recovery can be disrupted by intrusive interventions (e.g. one-time debriefing) prematurely, which may disturb normal recuperation.⁶

In the following, however, interviews and conclusions are presented in relation to the knowledge prevalent at the time of the fire, which meant psychological debriefing or relief as the norm or expected norm.

Employee stress: a management issue

Attending to employees suffering acute stress reactions is a management duty. The primary care giving should involve emotional help, for instance, according to the list above. Routines for this are most often established in the rescue services and the police force but considerably less employed in the media world.

In June 2000, the Swedish Work Environment Agency issued rules for workplace crisis management, which make concrete demands on managers:

Every workplace should have the preparedness and routines required to provide first help and crisis support in relation to the nature, scope and risks of the workplace.⁷

Good leadership and established peer support are needed to prevent stress in co-workers, as Michel and others suggest.⁸

Swedish media companies have not so far paid much attention to giving psychological and social support to journalists covering traumatic events. Lack of knowledge and routines in such issues has prevented good care provision in the workplace. The interviews in this study clearly displayed a need of support.

Defusing after the fire

”Like inspecting the car”

The Gothenburg fire was a turning-point regarding media companies’ insights into the importance of psychological and social support to journalists covering a trauma. And yet it is the employer’s responsibility by law. The reporters and photographers were offered support in varying degrees. On the other hand, the informal collegial support may have been significant and underrated. The need was probably greatest among those who witnessed the fire and saw how young people struggled to survive and in some cases lost. At *Göteborgs-Posten* the management is reported to have offered relief quickly, even if there was little understanding of the degree of trauma afflicting their employees, as a reporter told.

When I arrived at the office on Friday, I was first told that we were to talk to someone after the weekend. As the conversation continued, and we talked about what we had seen, one of the bosses reacted. Not until then did they seem to realise what we had experienced. Shortly after, we were told that a therapist would see us in the afternoon for a short session. Yes, there was a need of inspection. Am I in shock? Can I trust that my thoughts are on the right track? Will there be terrible reactions?⁹

In the *GP* case, the two reporter colleagues at the site found comfort in each other. They spoke continuously about their experiences. At this newspaper, collegial support was of great importance because the relief sessions were initially effective. The newspaper’s occupational health care services did step in, but the sessions did not satisfy the reporters:

There were only two [sessions]. The therapist didn’t click with us. We were not seen by her /.../When I started talking to the others I realised how unprofessional it was.¹⁰

On the Monday three days after the disaster a group briefing was arranged which also was heavily criticised by the *GP* staff. In a conver-

sation with an administrative head some days later, the reporter realised that she in practice had not had a debriefing at all since her experience of the outcome of the session was negative.

*And then I was really scared. Help! Because I wanted someone to look at me and listen to me and say: 'You need help' or 'You are standing, this will be tough, but you know what has happened and you are not in shock'. Like inspecting the car.*¹¹

The editorial management made sure that the "final inspection" of the two reporters was carried out by two therapists that were not connected to the occupational health care services. This time the sessions were rewarding and then the reporter did not feel a need of further relief.

At *GP* the chief editor could resort to a folder with instructions on measures to take for psychological support of staff after a disaster. In this sense there was preparedness. Then, however, "*the debriefing went well in some cases and not so well in others,*" as an editor put it. Debriefing often involves personal chemistry, and "*the right sort of meeting between the right sort of people*". One interview question concerned whether the journalists thought that debriefing should be voluntary or mandatory. The degree of voluntariness appeared to be handled differently. "*It's important that it is voluntary,*" said an editor in chief. This view diverged from the position taken by many psychologists in the 1990s, when relief and debriefing should be mandatory to attend but without an obligation to speak.¹² *GP's* photo editor thought that the need to follow up was pretty obvious, sometimes only to him as the boss but often by others too: "In some cases I saw it, and in some cases everybody saw it. Also the people concerned".¹³

As a complement to the relief initiated by the employers, both reporters and photographers arranged for their own therapy and "*psychological follow-up chats*". Colleagues from other media who had also witnessed the disaster met and shared experiences: "Immediately after the fire I went to a photo agency to talk to people who had been there".¹⁴

The day after the fire, the *GP* photo editor visited the photographer who were the first to arrive at Backaplan and offered to have lunch with him so he could talk about it. But the information from the employer about the opportunity to get relief and debriefing did not function so well, the photographer thought.

Some day afterwards I heard the chief editor say on the radio that 'our staff are talking to psychologists now.' /.../ I thought that was

*fun. But it was only a mistake. He thought we were talking to psychologists. It wasn't a PR-thing.*¹⁵

After a further few days the photographer was offered group debriefing. He agreed and also agreed to revisit the psychologist: *"But it was only 'Hello, I don't want to talk about this any more'".*¹⁶

GT's employees were offered psychologist-conducted sessions in groups and in some cases individual therapy starting on the Monday three days after the fire. According to the chief editor, everyone who wanted to attend were welcome even if the offer was primarily intended for the persons working on the site. Some ten persons at the newspaper attended two psychologist conducted sessions: *"Everybody thought it was very valuable,"* according to the chief editor. Also staff in Stockholm (primarily stationed at the affiliated paper *Expressen*) were offered debriefing.

A DN reporter said that the management offered and provided debriefing sessions two weeks after their return from Gothenburg.

*But then I didn't feel a great need for it. But I think that had something to do with us being so many there. We had crisis conversations every evening when we went out for dinner. So I think I talked through most of it with my friends and it was more meaningful to talk with someone who had been there.*¹⁷

A photographer at Aftonbladet went to see his family priest for counselling after having slept some hours.

I hadn't thought so much about it, I had just woken up, but it was NN [the reporter] who contacted me and she had talked to the office, I think. And got the go-ahead. So we contacted this priest.

The two went there together. *"For a quick visit,"* as the reporter put it, and also gave the opinion that the newspaper's crisis management was inadequate. She got a telephone number to call, but *"couldn't get passed the first short talk"*, so it took some days before a professional session took place. More sessions followed. The reporter thought that too great a responsibility was placed on the employees to acknowledge their own needs and seek counselling: *"... but you don't have the strength to do that when you feel rotten."*

The reporter suggested that there was something to be learnt from other professional categories: *"Firemen have a system where they are debriefed immediately without changing clothes, which is better I think."* A complicating circumstance in the case of journalists is that their work is not done when they leave the accident site; it has just begun. Writing, editing, etc. start.

The photographer also thought that the employees living in Gothenburg might have been supported in their recovery process through the opportunity to follow the de-escalation of coverage at close hand. This can have been an advantage compared to leaving after a day, he thought. The reporters and photographers who did not witness the fire but started covering it at a later stage did not seem to need debriefing to the same extent.

Aftonbladet made the decision on the day after the fire that all employees who in any way were involved in the fire – especially during the acute phase – would be offered defusing and debriefing.¹⁸ But the freelance photographer working for *Aftonbladet* never attended any professional session but settled for the conversation with the family priest the day after the fire. He did, however, appreciate the support offered – if not taken – by the *Aftonbladet*.

*In this case Aftonbladet was pretty damned fair. They gave me the same perks as their employees /.../ and I could have got help at their expense.*¹⁹

In these later phases of the newspaper coverage, the experience of the incident assumed new forms. The *GP* photographer who attended the first funeral, declined a collective debriefing afterwards:

*Then I felt that there was no reason and no need either. I was debriefed much later but that was for being in Macedonia... and above all Albania. There was a real need then. At that point the fire disaster seemed petty in comparison with what I seen down there.*²⁰

Another newspaper photographer's response to the question if he had been offered debriefing was that this "was still a bone of contention" between him, his editor and the management. He described how an unknown person out of the blue rang a colleague at *GP* the day after the fire, and he continued: "And she said: 'Good morning, we hear that you are feeling bad and need psychological support.' Really...it was handled very badly by our bosses."²¹ He further described how his colleague was in the middle of an article and somewhat distractedly answered: "'Not really, it's not too bad.' 'OK. Thanks and good-bye.'"²²

Later the photographer learned that it was the occupational health care services that had called, on behalf of the Stockholm management, who, however, failed to inform their employees in Gothenburg. Two days later after the phone call the employees got e-mails from the Stockholm management informing them that they would be offered debriefing. This never happened, since the employees – via the reporter who had answered the call – were considered to have declined the offer.

I think that the proper procedure should be via my boss in Stockholm who should have called me to say 'I understand that it was a tough job down there. But now we have arranged for you to see someone'.²³

The occupational health care services did not contact the photographer and his colleague again. The description again poses the question of who should take the initiative regarding debriefing. How often can an afflicted person decide the need for psychological support when asked?

The local editor in Gothenburg, who was in charge of the coverage for three-four days, did not participate in the debriefing as he *"had not been on the accident site."* He was offered debriefing within an hour after returning to the Stockholm office, but declined.

At this distance it's not so disturbing. I had more trouble some years earlier when I was an investigative reporter at "DN Special" for one year. I covered the Estonia ferry disaster from its sinking and a year on. I met survivors and one witness account after the other about how the corridors turned around and how they fell down. And it was absolutely horrible. Eventually I had problems doing this job because I dreamt at night. I was really affected by it. At the time, four years ago, there was no crisis therapy. Otherwise I would have liked that then.

This supports the claim that the impact of witnessing is strong and that it matters if the journalist has seen the event or met the survivors. A disaster like the Gothenburg fire, however, left an imprint on more members of the media than on the witnesses or those who met other people affected by the disaster afterwards. One of the interviewed chief editors said that there *"were even those who felt bad just sitting in the office working on it."* In several cases, this category also sought psychological help.

The interviewed *GT/ Expressen* reporter from Stockholm did not participate in the group relief session at the Stockholm office. He was then in Gothenburg working on the paper's special issue together with his wife, also a colleague. He did not feel that either of them were in need of organised psychological help: *"We were sharing a room at the hotel, and we were working on the same story. We did nothing but talk, technically speaking."²⁴* He did think, however, that it would have been different if he had been working alone in Gothenburg at the time.

Even the reporters and photographers who were covering survivors and the bereaved in hospital, churches and at funerals were offered relief by several of the papers. These journalists were not at the accident site but came into close contact with the disaster and persons concerned. In many cases they too said that they were strongly affected, and a photographer said that the group session provided good relief: *"One one hand I didn't feel affected, really, but on the other hand: I was"*.²⁵ Talking with family and friends served a function but in the group session *"the real feelings emerged in a good way,"* the photographer said.

After the fire, several newspapers had established routines for defusing, not only regarding disasters but also war coverage and other troubled spots in the world. Photographers working in the Balkan area in the turbulent years were offered relief immediately on their return.

The importance of social support

"I think around 80 people rang on the the first day"

Social support has shown to be important for recuperation in individuals who have experienced potentially traumatic events. Formal therapy means a great deal, but fellowship with and the empathy of people in the surrounding are as important.²⁶ A photographer described the involvement of others as positive, but also as a bit overwhelming:

*I think about 80 people rang on the first day and asked how I was doing. So I got tired of it...telling the same story. Relatives and friends and acquaintances and colleagues and everyone you know /.../colleagues at the paper gave support and came to visit.*²⁷

The scope of the event was difficult to explain and hard to understand for others.

*You nearly had to exaggerate to make people understand the enormity of it.*²⁸

Because only a few witnesses could be interviewed after the fire due to distress, injury or other ethical considerations, several journalists at the site were interviewed by their colleagues. This meant that reporters and photographers were contacted by many and what might have been social support and empathy was an encumbrance.

People heard that we had been there and then it was easier to ask us. No one wanted to ask the next of kin then because they had other

*things to think about. But we [journalists] were some sort of messengers that it was OK to ask. I also think that there is an obligation to talk about it. But it's hard anyway.*²⁹

A photographer thought that the processing of the event was facilitated by being at home, sleeping in his own bed, talking to the loved ones compared to going through it all in a different location.

*There is a difference being at home covering a terrible event than going off to live an awful hotel somewhere and sit in the room at night gulping down three large glasses of whiskey perhaps.*³⁰

The photographer was alone in his home during the first 24 hours when his wife was away: *"But I have two big dogs here and three cats and hens and everything."*³¹

Those who had a family said that it had been an important support factor.

*I have fairly good support from my family. Mostly because we both have experience of what we have been through [death of family member]. And nothing gets better from being dwelled on. You can't get stuck, but have to move on.*³²

"Police patrol ... my support group"

When the inter-collegial debriefing was unsatisfactory several media members (mostly photographers) turned to the responders in the police and rescue services who worked that night.

*The people I talked to, who helped me, were the police. I met them three or four times afterwards. Then they phoned and asked how I was because they had a hard time too. /.../ So they were my crisis group. We were there and knew what we were talking about. /.../ It was pure healing, as it were.*³³

Journalist after the fire:

"Everything I did afterwards felt utterly meaningless"

Some photographers and journalists who had been heavily involved in the fire were offered adjustment of duties. The photo editor at *GP* decided to give his young photographer a ten-day leave and sent him on a mission to a remote snowy place: *"I was sent to Rovaniemi in Finland to take a picture of Santa Claus, so it was the other extreme... it was good to get away actually"*.³⁴

On the other hand, it was not easy to completely stop reporting on the fire either, the photographer thought: *"It was weird not continuing on what I had started on. But... it was really for the best"*.³⁵ A reporter thought that not even so called easy jobs were that easy either:

*You can't sort of go off to a happy press conference at Liseberg [amusement park]. That's not easy either./.../ But I didn't put the police radio on for one or perhaps two months, before I felt I could stand the sirens.*³⁶

This reporter went to Copenhagen for some days to change environments. Back in Gothenburg there were constant reminders of the fire, on the radio, TV, in newspapers and in conversations. A photographer felt that *"there was no news to beat this, and no one was interested in anything else except the fire because it was so big"*. Interviewing soccer players, for instance, did not feel right, he thought: *"Everything I did afterwards felt utterly meaningless. Nothing was worse, or bigger news. I turned off the police and alert radio for several weeks"*.³⁷

The professional roles of reporters and photographers involve extreme variation in jobs. Both emotional and professional adjustments can be difficult. A photographer described how he, one week before the fire, had been in the US for ten days and then at the Alpine skiing premiere with the downhill World Champion Pernilla Wiberg and the rest of the national team in South Europe. The fire was a heavy assignment on top of that, and he requested a few days leave afterwards: *"I suppose I couldn't stand more. I took some days off"*.³⁸

There were also reporters who thought that the character of the assignment did not affect the time after the fire. Primarily, this seemed to apply to journalists and photographers who arrived in Gothenburg when the acute phase was over.

INT: How do you feel about this today?

*(coughing, thinking...) I don't honestly know. It's like a job for me, so things go on. I never really ponder on past jobs.*³⁹

All the newspapers made similar follow-ups after the fire. There were documentary articles or special issues or supplements weeks or months after the fire. The photographer thought that this work was hard to do: *"Everyone was tired after the fire disaster. It took a great deal of energy."* At the same time he thought that there was a desire to take advantage of what he wanted to describe as the power of the newspaper photo, that is, *"to give a deeper picture, to get close to people."*⁴⁰

Processing and recovery: conclusions

Journalists' need of psychological relief after a job varies. In this study the whole spectrum from actively seeking contact and help to a straightforward "No, thank you" was represented. The need was most pronounced among reporters and photographers who had witnessed the fire. Colleagues in the office were also offered relief and many were grateful for the support.

The newspaper managements' ways of handling the journalists' need of support varied considerably. One editor appreciated the guidance available in an office crisis folder.

Several employees, however, thought that the crisis management left a great deal to be desired. Quite a few – primarily freelancers and local editors – were not offered either debriefing or relief sessions. But in some cases it worked well for these groups too.

An important conclusion was that the management should preempt the person offering support, that is, the chief editor should contact the employee first to say that the health care services "would call on our request and I think that you should accept their offer."

Instead, a situation arose in which a reporter was given a number to call, but "did not have the strength to get past the first short call".

In other cases, journalists took the initiative themselves to get help, among others, a photographer who went to see his family priest for counselling.

The varied pattern also applied to organised relief sessions ranging from taking place the day after the fire to not taking place at all. In some cases, the sessions started after two weeks.

The degree of voluntariness was discussed. One editor thought that relief and debriefing sessions should be voluntary while another thought they should be mandatory. According to the norms for psychological relief sessions in the 1990s, these should have been mandatory to attend in this case but without an obligation to speak during the sessions. Listening also serves a function. This approach was based on the theory that persons who objectively speaking could benefit from psychological relief may not recognise their need or have the energy to take the initiative under the circumstances.

The formats of the relief and debriefing sessions taking place after the fire varied. There were group as well as one-on-one sessions. The primary target group was the journalists on site, but also other members of the editorial staff were included.

A comment many made related to the importance of professionally conducted sessions and that the personal chemistry was right: "the right sort of meeting with the right sort of people".

The journalists' perceived value of the sessions differed. In some cases, they seemed to have been successful, and less so in other cases. One newspaper's occupational therapist was not doing a good job, which increased employee anxiety. Shortly after, a new attempt was made with external therapists, which was successful. An editor had initiated the group debriefing and said that "everyone thought that it was valuable" and had worked well.

Informal chats between journalist colleagues and between journalists and responders also seemed to have made a difference. The Stockholm journalists staying at hotels in Gothenburg for several days found support in one another. They had dinner together in the evenings and talked a great deal.

A photographer took comfort in colleagues and the police that were on duty in the night of the fire. The policemen also phoned several times to ask how he was doing: "They were my crisis group", he said.

Relatives and friends were unanimously regarded as the most important conversation partners after the disaster. If the comfort of family was appreciated by some, the lack of such comfort was hard for the single journalists. But many received a stream of phone calls from friends who wanted to hear about the fire (for reasons of curiosity perhaps rather than providing support). A photographer said that it was very difficult to talk about it with others. The whole thing was so unimaginable that "you nearly had to exaggerate a bit to make them understand."

Many journalists were interviewed by colleagues at their own newspaper and in other media in their capacity as eye witnesses. The interviews were seen as an obligation and also as stressful.

In the time after the Gothenburg fire, there were few jobs that seemed worthwhile and bearable to the journalists. A photographer took "snap shots of Santa" in Finland, after some days of leave. A reporter thought that not even the most trivial "easy jobs" were easy to do. For someone it was business as usual, taking on new assignments without discernment. A few, but not all, editors paid attention to "the indirectly affected" journalists and their needs after the traumatic coverage of the Gothenburg fire.

Footnotes

- 1 Simpson & Boggs (1999), also in Dvorznik (2006)
- 2 Andersson, Tedfeldt & Larsson (2000)
- 3 Andersson et al (2000) p. 34
- 4 Mitchell & Everly (1990); (1995); Dyregrov (1992); Dyregrov & Mitchell (1992); Andersson et al (2000)
- 5 Sijbrandij, Marit; Olf, Miranda et al (2006) studied 236 surviving adults from different kind of traumatic events.
- 6 *The management of post-traumatic stress disorder in adults in primary, secondary and community care. Clinical guideline 26* (2005). Also see *Psykologisk första hjälp. Användarinstruktion: Swedish translation of Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide* (2005)
- 7 Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetskyddsstyrelsen – senare Arbetsmiljöverket): AFS 1999:71 5§, also cited in Michel et al (2001) p. 210
- 8 Michel et al (2001)
- 9 Reporter GP
- 10 Reporter GP
- 11 Reporter GP
- 12 Andersson, Tedfeldt & Larsson (2000)
- 13 Photo editor in chief GP
- 14 Photographer 1 GP
- 15 Photographer 1 GP
- 16 Photographer 1 GP
- 17 Reporter DN
- 18 Freelance photographer/AB
- 19 Freelance photographer/AB
- 20 Photographer 2 GP
- 21 Photographer DN
- 22 Photographer DN
- 23 Photographer DN
- 24 Reporter GT/Ex
- 25 Freelance photographer/GT
- 26 Andersson & Tedfeldt & Larsson (2000)
- 27 Photographer 1 GP
- 28 Photographer 1 GP
- 29 Photographer 1 GP
- 30 Photographer DN
- 31 Photographer DN
- 32 Freelance photographer/AB
- 33 Photographer 1 GP
- 34 Photographer 1 GP
- 35 Photographer 1 GP
- 36 Reporter AB
- 37 Photographer 1 GP
- 38 Photographer DN
- 39 Freelance photographer/AB
- 40 Photographer 2 GP

12. REFLECTION: SELF-EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Publications

"I wouldn't have done it any better"

A problem shared by many interviewed journalists and photographers at the accident scene during the acute phase was the conflict between the professional and personal roles: being on the site with the journalistic assignment to write, report or taking photos, and having a moral obligation, on the personal level, to help and save lives.

The journalists and photographers on duty in the night of the blazing fire perceived the situation and their own efforts very differently: from *"I've never been so focussed in all my life"* and *"I was buzzing from top to toe"* to *"I felt completely useless"* and *"I was one of those who should have gone home really."*¹

A striking number of reporters and photographers in Gothenburg were very pleased with the result of their reports from the accident site, considering the circumstances.

*It was pretty hard to be personal but /.../ I've had reactions afterwards such as 'your article made me cry' and then I'm pleased because I feel that I've filled a function /.../ but I'm not completely satisfied stylistically, as it were.*²

*I wouldn't have done it any better. It is of good technical quality and not too intrusive.*³

*What I'm good at is what we call 'the magical moment'.*⁴

*I'm extremely pleased that I refrained from taking a lot of pictures.*⁵

Well, it's hard to review one's own work. I can say that I take a certain professional pride in the supplement that my wife and I produced. I do.

The latter – a reporter – especially mentioned a job that felt particularly good:

*I'm proud that we requested the truth about what really happened with Mona (the girl missing) – Mona's body.*⁶

A reporter felt dissatisfied but couldn't remember why and the same applied to a photographer: *"Difficult to say... in terms of results I did my job... I did"*.⁷

For many, it was easier to criticise colleagues: *"I think there were some blunders made... but I must say that I did pretty well"*.⁸

One reporter thought that witnessing the event increased journalists' sensitivity.

*I think that everything is better the closer one has been to a serious accident. I think so. It becomes more processed, more respected, more filled with knowledge. /.../ you really have to take the bull by the horns to be able to write about it. And be as close as you can. Precisely to try to understand.*⁹

Us and them

"I think my newspaper did the best job"

The loyalty to their own paper's way of reporting the fire was striking among all participants in the study. This was true of both the morning and evening papers.

*Organisationally I thought it worked tremendously well. I thought Aftonbladet did the best job. And not only because I work there but because I really thought so.*¹⁰

Another evening paper reporter resolutely stated without any doubts that there is a difference in "the editorial machinery" between the morning and evening papers:

*We [the evening press] are more professional. There's no morning paper in Sweden that could have delivered the paper we produce on the second day.*¹¹

Pure pride in their own paper emerged in many interviews.

*When I opened the extra edition, I felt so proud of my colleagues. I was deeply touched. /.../ I thought everything was done respectfully and still we did what we had to do in our role as reporters.*¹²

GP's photographer said that he had read everything in his own paper during the first days *"because he couldn't sleep"*. He said, laughing, that he was *"surprised to see that GP managed to deliver so well, actually"*.¹³ The photographer also thought that his colleagues behaved well on the scene.

*It sounds as if I'm bragging about GP, but it's all about making as little noise as possible – then it turns out fine in print.*¹⁴

The journalists found it very difficult to specify critical views of their own paper. *Aftonbladet*'s reporter mentioned that too much space was perhaps given to the ethnic aspect that the victims were "immigrant children" despite the fact that most of them were born in Sweden and "felt" Swedish. The *GT* reporter thought that their paper was good but there were still in-house complaints after the coverage. Primarily, the critique was voiced informally in "corridors." Some described how the paper's regular evaluation meetings were also occasions for evaluating the fire coverage. As the local *DN* head editor commented:

*DN commissioned a 'professional evaluation', which showed that the paper had been 'very successful.' And we were happy with our coverage.*¹⁵

He also happened to be one of the few to express a self-critical opinion:

*We were slightly dissatisfied with our national edition on the first day. Although we'd had one and a half day to work on it, it was pretty unfinished and badly structured. And we felt that in relation to our readers in the afflicted West Sweden we were professionally a bit dissatisfied.*¹⁶

However, the editor was more satisfied with the later editions, for which they had the time to make certain improvements. A situation like this, when an accident happens beyond Stockholm but is covered by the Stockholm press, constitutes an editorial problem. Since the editions to the most distant regions go to print first, there is a greater risk of errors and shortcomings in these early editions. The result is that the afflicted parties may get a flawed product and may, due to lack of time, also have to encounter unethical pictures. There were, for instance, non-blurred pictures of identifiable victims in some of the evening papers' early editions, while the same pictures were blurred in the later editions. In Gothenburg, this slip had consequences because family members and survivors read the first Gothenburg edition.

GP's photo editor was very pleased when the evaluation question was reached in the interview and he referred it primarily to the extra edition issued on Saturday, day 2 [the fire took place on Friday night]:

*The most fantastic thing about this edition was that everything worked so smoothly. /.../ I think the whole edition is imbued with humanity and consideration but also with clear information.*¹⁷

A photographer at the same paper thought that *GP* was "*unexpectedly restrained*," in a positive sense, and also wished to give highest marks to the overall coverage during a long period.

A *DN* photographer was proud that the paper in his opinion displayed fewer pictures of crying persons than the competitors. Generally speaking, he was also satisfied with the coverage.

*It was very good. Very good. /.../ they had the right mix of journalist who came down from Stockholm... and Malmö. /.../ If DN excels at something, it's when major things happen.*¹⁸

The freelance photographer at *GT* remarked that, considering the gravity of the tragic disaster, public reactions to the reports were very positive. He regarded this as a good evaluation of the newspaper's coverage of the fire.

A more general issue was raised by a photographer and addressed to the newspaper's management. It concerned the handling of the multiethnic aspect and the issue of the colleagues' qualifications in this regard.

*I think it's embarrassing that the editors lack immigrant backgrounds. It's quite a problem for the paper really.*¹⁹

This lack of immigrant backgrounds or other multicultural expertise among staff applied to all the papers included in the study.

Criticism of rival papers

"We would never do that"

It is easy to attack the rivals and difficult to praise them. A reporter did both. He thought that both his own evening paper and the rival covered the disaster well, and observed that the evening press is often criticised after accident and disaster reports. In his view, it is often the TV channels that revel in unethical pictures: "*Yes, it would be a riot if we published the pictures they roll on TV*".²⁰

DN's local editor referred to how the talk could sound at the office:

*The next day we could watch and say: 'Goodness and boo for the pictures that the evening papers are running. We would never do that'.*²¹

He gave an example:

We were pretty shocked by one of the evening papers /.../ which one day visited a whole family at their home. There were five to six people seated on a sofa in the picture, as they were told that a family

member, a daughter and sister, had died in the fire. It's a tremendously moving picture but we felt strangely uncomfortable about it and agreed that if we'd had the chance we would not have done in that way.²²

A GP photographer said that he was surprised to see that "TV reported so intrusively". He further said that "TV committed the gravest violations and I know that the cameramen regretted this too."²³

Paying for others' mistakes

"We are judged collectively"

In the case of the Gothenburg fire, there were neither frequent internal professional criticism, nor external criticism of photographers at work. Generally, the photographers were judged to have "acquitted themselves well" on the site and in what ensued.²⁴ There were, however, some exceptions. The youth aggression at Backaplan has already been mentioned and can also be explained as natural reactions. Some internal professional criticism was launched, for instance, from a photographer who observed the site and the bereaved:

I saw many people who stepped straight into flowers and photos and other stuff. It seemed...

INT: People, were they photographers?

Yes, colleagues who just stepped over... I felt uncomfortable... although I can say on the other hand that I think there was extra caution. At least among Gothenburg colleagues because I think the proximity was an added strain. /.../ At the funeral I said to a colleague... eh, I told him off rather... and asked him why he was so intrusive. He shot photos with flashlight straight into faces and moved flowers on the graveyard /.../ And he said that he knew most of them /.../. Well, it was despicable, I think. In the situation. He arranged the pictures and that is not news coverage. It goes without saying. But that I bawled him out in this situation... I suppose it was because I was sensitive and it would reflect badly on us. We [photographers] are judged collectively, of course, in the aftermath of a disaster. People phone three months later and ask what really happened.²⁵

There was no extensive debate on the fire coverage in the national photographers' membership magazine, *The Viewfinder (Sökaren)*. However, an op-ed piece, written by a DN photographer was published, which displayed anger with the profession in regard to photographers'

behaviour as well as with journalists' attitude to their photographer colleagues, arguing that the profession contributed to increasing the public's contempt for journalists and photographers. The piece is quoted here in its entirety:

Concerning the disaster fire in Gothenburg

The general opinion on the newspaper photos has been that they were balanced. Certainly, and possibly because the most indiscreet pictures were not published. At the risk of alienating many of my old friends, I must say: WHAT PAINED ME THE MOST WAS SEEING HOW SOME COLLEAGUES BEHAVED.

Is it necessary to elbow your way to the edge of the grave to take close-up photos of people who are about to lower their son into the grave, to force your way before the bereaved, and when asked to leave, return after two minutes? This kind of behaviour gives press photographers such a friggling bad reputation that we are reluctant to say that we are press photographers.

Commenting on the King's arrival at the accident site in GP, Frida Boisen writes, 'There is a rustle in the riot fencing when a group of photographers fight for the best angle. One of them treads on a drawing, kicks an outdoor torch.' Yes, this is how people see us, as an uncontrollable mob. DAMMIT.

I call for a debate on this issue since progress has been made and we are no longer required to deliver "shots of the corpse" to earn the epithet of good photographer. We owe this to many young, and not least female, photographers.²⁶

The op-ed in *The Viewfinder (Sökaren)* remained unanswered except for one post. Under the vignette "Message from the Chair" in the same magazine, the opinion is presented that the professional photographing at the Gothenburg fire site was, on the whole, performed well, although some reported violations are noted in connection with the funerals:

At the fire site the press photographers showed the appropriate concern. People can, of course, rightly demand that we should "save lives first and then shoot", but this is easier said than done. Few press photographers have such skills. At one of the funerals there were clear violations by some photographers. It is not necessary to use extreme wide angles and practically follow the coffin into the grave! It is a very delicate situation, and it is instead immensely discrediting for those photographers in particular and the profession in general.

Mistakes were made. BL has recounted how he sent out pictures he regretted, TW also described humbly and graphically in Studio 1 (*national radio news magazine*) that he failed to block a 'clip' so it was unfortunately broadcast once. Once is too many! /.../ Remember to check properly with victims and family members before you submit to Picture of the Year!

(Chair of the Press Photographers' Club, in *The Viewfinder/Sökaren* 4/98)

The last line about the Picture of the Year is highly relevant. A review of the winning photos in the competition (arranged by Press Photographers' Club), shows that a striking number of winning photos over the years are of disasters and wars. The dramatic autumn of 1994, when the passenger ferry Estonia went down, generated extensive photo archives at the Swedish newspapers. The 1994 News Picture of the Year, features a woman salvaged from one of the life floats. She was dead. This was known at the time of the award. But when the photo was published in Expressen on the day after the disaster, the headline read, "The Sea of Death and the Lifeline", which suggested survival. The caption read, "A woman is winched to the rescue helicopter after several hours in a water-filled raft, while the helicopter's rescue swimmers try to save more survivors."²⁷ The photo covers the centrefold. Considering that it contained erroneous and offending information for next-of-kin and survivors, it should have been judged as a severe violation of publicity rule no 7 in the press ethical code.²⁸ This was also emphasised in the official government inquiry, which formed the final report of the analysis group for investigating the Estonia ferry disaster and its consequences.²⁹ The survivors in the same raft as the woman "recognise her, know that she is dead, remember when she died."³⁰ The report also notes that photographers were allowed on board the helicopters to form an opinion of what had happened and what the rescue services did.

Another occasion on which the news picture of the year involved a disaster was in 1998, that is, the Gothenburg fire. The winning picture was taken during the fire and rescue efforts. The caption reads: "Tares Alyasiri fell on the stairs and injured his elbow. Yet, he assisted in pulling 17 injured and dead young people out of the raging fire at Backaplan on 29 October." The jury's citation ran as follows: "The picture captures the fire disaster at Hisingen in an attentive combination of tragedy, drama and heroism. The young man at the centre of the picture, Tares Alyasiri, has just saved 17 friends."³¹ The text begs the question how the hero's own statement can be verified.

Returning to the journalists' views on their colleagues' performance, there are examples of how violations affected colleagues. Such an incident took place at Hammarkullen's church, according to an editor, who claimed that photographers and reporters present all thought that it turned into an unpleasant situation:

Apparently there were some evening paper members who gate-crashed the worship intended for the bereaved /.../ and after that the

*attitude to all journalists turned aggressive, regardless of their being present on this occasion or not.*³²

Media coverage of minor accidents and crimes often results in similar reactions to professional photographers, who are seen to have violated the principles of good press ethics and morality and may lead to a general reluctance to allow journalists access to an accident area. In connection with the fatal shooting of a school boy at Bromma high school in Stockholm in January 2001, journalists claimed that they were hindered in their professional performance. This led to a debate in the magazine *The Journalist*:

I get furious reading that school management and the police threw out members of the media from the school. /.../ It cannot be tolerated that members of the public, public officials in municipalities and the police force, etc. can attack and turn away press photographers and reporters who are on duty in the service of the public.³³

The situation is paradoxical. While the journalists testify that colleagues from time to time commit different forms of violations in their professional practice, they are also appalled by not having access to accident sites. One regards himself as being "in the service of the public" but hindered in his duties because others (colleagues) have sometimes misbehaved and given the profession an undeservedly bad reputation. Or can school managements have other good reasons sometimes to reject the media turnout? This is not discussed in the text above. Media's lack of consideration must also be taken into account.

Being rewarded for tragedy

Several examples of how journalists' efforts have been rewarded in connection with war, disasters and accidents are available in media "experience banks" as well as in research literature. Both the awards Picture of the Year and the Swedish Grand Prize for Journalism are often journalistic products related to calamities. On receiving the grand journalism award in 1995, Staffan Heimersson said in a radio interview, "*The worst disasters and accidents often lead to the greatest journalistic triumphs.*"³⁴

After the Gothenburg fire the GP photographer said that it was difficult to be congratulated on being the recipient of the Picture of the Year award:

*It was really weird... I would gladly have taken someone else's picture... about something else... which I wouldn't have got a prize for.*³⁵

The fact that a photo is a document with long survival in archives is often forgotten.

*Also after previous disasters and accidents, it turned out that the documentation of an event can have unexpected consequences. Unpublished pictures become important documents for other purposes, and the unethical aspect of photographing an identifiable dead person can impact considerably on next-of-kin and their grief process, as well as on police investigations. That certain pictures are not published in the media is one thing but they can assume other roles.*³⁶

This photographer would consider taking pictures intended for long-term documentation even if they should be unsuitable for publication in direct connection to the event, for example, showing them in 20-30 years.

*Yes, I'm a type of history portrayer. Such a picture can be evidence in a situation... Even if it is uncomfortable to take, it's got to be taken.*³⁷

Who then is responsible for taking possible consequences of archiving into account – particularly the consequences of publishing old "disaster pictures" in the future, at least in a legal sense? At the same time the photographer felt responsible on another level:

*So it's the moral sense then. Obviously you'll have to shoulder that too. You carry that with you for the rest of your life! /.../ You can't become a cynical photographer who doesn't see... no, then you have to stop.*³⁸

Preparedness and learning

"You can't prepare"

After major media events a certain collegial learning takes place, as shown by previous disaster experiences. A tentative review of articles and public debates in the Swedish journalist union magazine *The Journalist (Journalisten)* shows that interest in professional collective learning seemed to be greater after the Gothenburg fire than after the Estonia ferry tragedy. The same tendency is reflected in the increased number of public debates and discussions on disaster journalism after

the Gothenburg fire. There may be several explanations. One suggestion is that the media were present on the scene in Gothenburg but not on the Estonia ferry.

The emotional affects on the journalists appear to have been greater after the Gothenburg coverage. This can have affected the aftermath of attention and self-evaluation that occurred in several issues of *The Journalist* and at the Swedish Publicist Club and journalist union's seminars. The idea of introducing crisis psychology in journalism studies was proposed on several occasions but was always rejected. An op-ed piece in *The Journalist* sarcastically suggested that the next time the alert was sounded the way to go was to "*Lock up the reporter and send in a psychologist.*"³⁹

What knowledge of previous events did the journalists sent to the Gothenburg fire have? And if they had learnt something from history, did this make them better equipped to deal with what happened in Gothenburg? And if it is at all possible to prepare for the reporting on disasters, to what extent was this done in this case? And will this experience predict how the reporter will react to a similar situation next time?

*How you'll act when you get to the next disaster is impossible to say. I have no idea about how I will act the next time. /.../ I've heard several examples of how experienced journalists have been assigned to a job but never returned, but were found at home. They couldn't stand it and simply went home.*⁴⁰

The difficulty of preparing for a disaster is linked to the unpredictability of major accidents. Every situation is unique and the job mostly must relies on improvisation. As a photographer put it:

*You can't prepare /.../ because, I mean, who knows what's gonna happen next time jag... a plane crashes... perhaps in a residential area. There's no way to prepare for that.*⁴¹

The same photographer also observed that there is a basic preparation that can be made regarding knowledge of information channels and organisational issues:

*What you can prepare is contact with the authorities, of course. And both parties learn from mistakes here. It is also important to quickly proceed to be the watchdog, and not be paralysed.*⁴²

The issue of investigation and verification versus information in covering accidents and disasters is especially significant in studies of disaster journalism. A common conclusion is that the media primarily

have an obligation to inform in the early phase. This issue was accentuated during the Gothenburg fire in connection with the rescue leader's statement on the cause of the fire. The news was cabled out in several media, in some cases with a hint of racist hate crime. Later media representatives wondered if the statement should have been questioned and verified by the media. But the opportunity to verify are difficult – sometimes non-existent – considering that the "machinery" starts and cannot be stopped.

The fire event and its consequences led to several important conclusions. *Göteborgs-Posten*, for instance, decided that the next time a major disaster happened a reporter should be immediately assigned to engage in investigative journalism on the fire and its causes parallel to the news coverage.

An area in which the journalist profession and the media experienced a lack of knowledge and expressed a will after the disaster to learn for the future concerned other cultures and religions. According to many, this was where the greatest mistakes were made along with ignorance about behavioural patterns and stress reactions. More knowledge of religious differences would have made the funeral reporting different, for instance. One photo editor claimed that this was definitely a lesson for the future:

*Yes, we have learnt that there are cultural clashes, that we see through the lens of our values and then there are other values based on other cultures.*⁴³

He also thought that more things remain to be learnt, such as photographers needing to show more consideration in vulnerable situations: "*Some really intruded brutishly at a funeral*".⁴⁴

A further area of desired future learning, and in which professional development was provided in the workplace, was psychological knowledge and crisis management. In this area there were mixed experiences, involving criticism of the managements in several cases. At *Aftonbladet* the mistake of not offering defusing at an early stage was taken seriously, according to a reporter, and a meeting was called a month after the fire to discuss how to rectify the mistake and how a structure for defusing could be designed. The reporter – local Gothenburg editor – thought the meeting was particularly important to the reporters stationed outside of Stockholm. The meeting served the function of support even though the aim was to learn and to evaluate:

*Everyone who was at the scene was present. So it was very rewarding. For the Stockholm people had already talked with one another. But the Gothenburg staff had not been able to speak to so many, like. That's why it was good.*⁴⁵

Aftonbladet's chief editor added that this was an area in which all media had learnt something and needed to learn more:

*I think so, yes... that when it comes to our own staff welfare efforts, we could improve crisis management more than we have done this time... follow-up after ... and during.*⁴⁶

In an acute situation there is seldom the opportunity to choose reporters and photographers to send on a job, even if this is possible later and above all for the coming days of reporting.

*At a morning meeting I wondered why so many young reporters were working. I think that in this situation experienced staff members should take their responsibility and at least notify the office that they are prepared to report on the event. /.../ I really wish that the management would learn to pick their senior reporters – it's a management issue.*⁴⁷

When a disaster happens in the night, as in the case of the Gothenburg fire, there are few or no opportunities to choose who to send on the job, unlike daytime. A news editor elaborated on how his awareness after the fire would affect his choice of journalists the next time.

*I think that I would first of all engage all reporters available. Then possibly making an assessment... not of reporters' skills... but of their psychological resilience in a stressful situation.*⁴⁸

Another editor shared the thoughts that experience of such an event must be valuable but that the individual must be considered: *"The question is how much a person can endure... there are persons I would not send next time"*.⁴⁹ Aftonbladet's chief editor said that *"obviously I choose people with experience of similar situations."* He also recounted that, before the reporting on the second day, consideration was given to determining which staff members had developed a good relationship with people in connection with the Estonia ferry disaster, and they were also chosen to cover the fire and its consequences.

But to what extent can learning take place in this area? Each situation is unique and circumstances are difficult. Individuals and organisations can learn but mistakes will always be made in extraordinary situations:

It's an extreme situation, reporters affected by events, a management working under extreme time pressure /.../ Decisions having to

*be made very quickly. You, know, we redid a whole paper in two hours. And a great number of people were involved. Of course some decisions will be wrong. That's a given. The thing is to minimise the erroneous decisions and trying to maintain a professional and humane principle in the work.*⁵⁰

Some of the internal professional learning – or feedback – is in the form of internal and external debate. This was the case after the Gothenburg fire. Three days after the fire a traffic researcher from the city of Umeå in northern Sweden wrote an op-ed in *DN* headed, "A low-water mark for the press. The media coverage of the Gothenburg disaster is unethical and intrusive".⁵¹ "Swedish media have learnt nothing from the Estonia ferry disaster. The reporting on the Gothenburg fire disaster shows that crisis journalism is still in a crisis," he wrote.⁵²

But no other Swedish research or media and communication studies have validated the Umeå researcher's claim that the coverage was inferior.⁵³ There was a hint of criticism from the government investigator in the national inquiry,⁵⁴ but this primarily pertained to the early TV media broadcasts. Several subsequent studies have later shown that media coverage of the Gothenburg fire was better in terms of press ethics compared to previous disasters.

*The debate, as it were, was rather skewed because of the Umeå researcher's op-ed in DN... and it didn't provoke a discussion... or there was no discussion... and he was the only one in all the media... and then there was no proper debate... And we didn't think at all that his criticism of the media was true of the situation.*⁵⁵

Aftonbladet's chief editor, in other words, did not share the researcher's claim and nor did the *GP's* photo editor.

Discussions on journalistic ethics are ongoing internally, according to a photographer. Such discussions do not arise in disasters only: "We discuss – sometimes loudly – about our views of colleagues' pictures".⁵⁶ Continuous discussions are an important part of long-term learning.

Learning from history

”A more low-profiled way than... before the Estonia ferry disaster”

Swedish journalists think that they have learnt a lot about accident and disaster journalism in the ten-year period from the Måbödal coach accident, 1988, via the Estonia ferry disaster, 1994, to the Gothenburg fire, 1998. This is clear from professional debates and publications in *The Journalist* as well as the interviews in this study.

I think that both newspaper editors and reporters have acquired more routines, in our case also more caution in handling these matters, probably because of Estonia. /.../ I think that most of them behaved in a more low-profiled way than what they would have done before Estonia (ferry disaster).⁵⁷

There were pictures in the first reports on Estonia that should not have been published, I think. /.../ I don't think they would have done it now.⁵⁸

10-15 years ago, the Gothenburg fire would have been mass media disaster. But we learnt from the coach accident in Norway.⁵⁹

A photographer remembered that “names were published quite quickly after the Estonia”⁶⁰, which was not repeated in the case of the Gothenburg fire.

Internationally, the situation is different. For example, the skii tunnel disaster in Kaprun, 2000, started a lasting press debate in Austria.⁶¹ Swedish Radio Vienna correspondent, Kjell Albin Abrahamsson, wrote about the debate in the media paper *Pressens Tidning*.

‘Sensation-driven journalists wanted to film charred bodies,’ was the headline of an article in the Austrian *Der Standard*.⁶² It is interesting that the press ethical debate started early, actually parallel to the news reporting. /.../ The coverage of the Kaprun disaster has triggered a press ethical debate carried out in all the papers and does not seem to abate. The tone is thoughtful and balanced, there are no attacks or executions; rather pensive ponderings on how death is handled and coped with. /.../ Perhaps there will never be a really good disaster journalism. But when there are thousands of victim relatives it is imperative to critically discuss the journalistic tools and analyse what is a violation of the private sphere.⁶³

There is a great deal more to learn, Abrahamsson thought, even if the wind has turned slightly regarding press ethics in recent years. Or is it our collective oblivion that presently earns disaster journalism

higher marks? Or an increased immunisation of media coverages of disasters?

In many cases, the journalists in this study indicated that many positive changes have been made in the disaster genre. A negative change that a photographer mentioned was TV's practice of broadcasting from accident sites. Broadcasts include, he thought, more and worse accident pictures today than some years ago.

*The annoying thing is that we still image photographers are such hooligans at times, or perceived as such. That we take pictures we shouldn't. That people have opinions on it when they see a picture. And at the same time they watch TV. Not just one picture but a rolling.*⁶⁴

The photographer exemplified this with references to how TV in a flow of images portrayed the circumstances of Princess Diana's death in UK: *"Then it's suddenly acceptable to look at all these pictures. But if a still image photographer takes such a picture, then it's unacceptable."* Does he think that still image photographers have portrayed recent accidents and disasters in a better way?

*Yes, even photographers are more serious... there are always a number of misguided fools who are prepared to do anything for a good picture... but as a rule, it's very serious now. It really is. /.../ But I also think that TV is really chomping on the bones... /.../ People breaking down, parents of children burning to death. That's not enjoyable to be confronted with in a news programme when you've just learnt that your child has died in a fire.*⁶⁵

What is learnt after a completed mission is seldom simply constructive or destructive, but rather both and. One and the same reporter could say that *"I'm probably roughly the same journalist as I was before"*, only to quickly add that she has probably learnt some lessons from the event. And in the next breath she said that *"you recognise your limitations now."* The latter may be for better and worse. The risk, according to theory, is the so called "destructive learning" that the next time duty calls the reporter will start off with the feeling that "I won't manage this."

Life experience

”Even the news reporters are only human”

The cornerstones of each journalist’s individual competencies are based on education and life and professional experiences. Most of the interviewed journalists stated that “life experience” topped their lists on factors influencing their capacity to cope with the disaster, both in terms of the ability to do the job and the way in which it was performed, ethically and journalistically.

I think life experience has enormous importance... for the ability to take in difficult things, and see the consequences of the ongoing course of events you’re in the middle of /.../ If I have met people in difficult situations before, and have been in them myself, combined with the journalistic craft.⁶⁶

The reporter further said that what a journalist writes and does involves that person’s life experience. The angle of the report is imbued with the journalist’s own experience.

I work in a unit where I’m the only woman for the most part. There are seven men between 45 and 50 /.../ It goes without saying that we angle our jobs very differently. I’ve worked as an after-school teacher, worked in health care, I raise children and have been through a divorce. /.../ I’m not saying that anybody with some life experience could have done it. But we mustn’t forget how much it affects our work. Who we are.⁶⁷

Personal experiences of grief and loss of family members in various ways affect the photographer or reporter covering a disaster.

Sure, I’ve been bereaved too. Even news reporters are human. When we work, we are rooted in ourselves in some way. We are the person we are all the time based on our experiences.⁶⁸

As earlier described, these views were shared by a photographer who had lost his son in an accident some years before the Gothenburg fire and was overwhelmed by emotions standing at Backaplan:

One thing that was useful to me at the accident site and afterwards was that when this catches up with me – that something awful has happened – I can postpone this [in comparison with an episode happening some weeks after the son’s death]. When I lost my son and was hit by a ”downer” in a shop or something, I couldn’t sort of break down in the shop. I had to get a grip until I left it and was sitting in the car. That experience was really useful to have at the accident site. I could do the same: Postpone it somehow.⁶⁹

The photographer speculated whether this reaction was the explanation to why he took so many pictures of the accident, not least in comparison with his colleagues, although thinking that *"if you are a bloody good photographer, there should be no need to take 70 pictures... I don't know."* Above all, he thought that life experience and professional ethics were closely related.

A reporter⁷⁰ acknowledged the need of experience also on the part of the afflicted, thinking that it was better for afflicted young people to meet older – adults – journalist and photographers, as this was seen to facilitate contact.

Several of the interviewees stated that life experience in different forms was an important basis for ethical conduct. The angles of the reports were marked by the reporters' own experience. There is a significant difference between being *"new as a journalist but having a background of nursing and blood, misery and death [compared to thirty years of] talking to CEOs and never having seen a dead person,"* as a news editor said. A colleague suggested that it is about having *"a deep resonating experience"*, or as a colleague put it: *"If you can tell the dead from the living on the job, it helps"*.

Professional experience

"A professional maturity"

Several of the photographers covering the Gothenburg fire disaster were experienced accident and crime photographers. One photographer felt confident despite working alone because he personally knew policemen working on the scene: *"I've been in some gruesome situations with them earlier, which they have handled well /.../. So I didn't feel all alone, as it were".*⁷¹

Also many journalists covering the fire had experience of accident reporting. This was partly due to coincidence but when possible, experienced staffs were hand-picked. Most interviewees considered professional experience to be very important in this situation.

*It's very, very important, because personal and professional maturity is required to handle this in the right way.*⁷²

This was expressed by an editor, who also emphasised that younger less experienced reporters can certainly be put to work successfully but that the assignments need to be adapted.

Some journalists, but not all, though that previous professional experience of meeting people in a crisis situation can be of importance to reporters and photographer covering an accident like the fire.

*It's crucial, I think. I mean, professional experience tells you how to act when you meet these people [the afflicted]. Even if you get pretty far with common sense and politeness (laughs).*⁷³

A photographer thought that professional experience is essential when it comes to refraining from taking certain pictures: *"Then experience matters. I can afford not taking these pictures..."*⁷⁴ The photographer worked for the morning paper *DN*. He also brought up the issue of, to what extent, the nature of the paper affected views on freedom and responsibility and if managing editors had pressured their photographers in different degrees to move closer and portray intrusively: *"If I had been at an evening paper, it might have been different. I don't know"*⁷⁵

The *DN* photographer's suggestion was supported by the study. The evening papers' demands for single-copy sales and quantity in reporting certainly put pressure on staff to produce a great deal of person-centred material quickly.

Another photographer remarked that the degree of professional experience greatly affects the degree of professional ethics.

*I don't need to play it safe by taking many pictures. I know when: 'I nailed it, now I don't need to be here anymore and be in the way.' If I was uncertain I would have shot more.*⁷⁶

The value of the journalistic experience is hard to appreciate. So many other things play a role, making it difficult to predict which part of the competence that an individual has access to at the time of the accident. A reporter wondered about the value of having professional ethics and experience-based routines in the bones for managing the situation. It is an advantage but not a requirement for managing the job successfully.

The gist of many statements on life and professional experiences was that both can be a strength and a liability in one and the same person, at the same time, which may have contributed to making the reactions seem difficult to interpret and some times incomprehensible.

*I've been in similar horrid situations and of course experience is good to have. But it didn't help me now. I don't think I was a better journalist for the experience.*⁷⁷

A photographer thought that previous professional experiences are of marginal importance:

*I don't think it is of any great importance... It depends on your luggage. You may be a super photographer and still don't cope mentally with the pressure.*⁷⁸

With "baggage" the photographer meant life experience. A colleague agreed: *"At the accident site being a professional made no difference. There was such panic"*.⁷⁹

All competence and experience can evaporate in the face of an ongoing disaster. In this situation, experience and formal qualifications are not as important as expected.

*I mean, you can have professional experience, have worked as a photographer for 25 years but never been close to such stressful situations. /.../ I think it's an advantage if you have been in situations of stress earlier.*⁸⁰

A photographer claimed that professional experience is very important, even if the gain is more obvious the later the reporting is made in the course of the tragedy.

*Some colleagues questioned their professional role very early. Then I felt that it could be important to have experienced similar situations before and processed the questions of 'what am I doing here', so to speak.*⁸¹

A reporter thought that his five years as local paper journalist had been useful:

*Then you have seen quite a few more car accidents than you care for. /.../ So there is always a creeping sense of discomfort at something really, really horrible when you arrive. /.../ And this feeling is coupled with the deadline in 45 minutes and two persons to interview and two texts to write before the minutes are up. So the focus is on the job in spite of all.*⁸²

Professional experience affects professional ethics in a favourable direction, a photographer thought, and said that less experience may mean that ethics are superseded by news euphoria: *"A new photographer is always alert. Then you might do more than you need"*.⁸³

Having professional experience from one of the areas involved in rescue operations would perhaps strengthen the journalistic competence, as a photographer suggested: *"If you used to be a fireman and knew how to handle such a situation."*⁸⁴

The perceptions were thus ambivalent regarding deciding what types of experiences that were seen as most valuable in managing a difficult journalistic assignment such as reporting on the Gothenburg fire. The same applied to the interviewees' long-term attitudes to the fire.

The importance of formal qualifications

Certain formal qualifications are required for doing a good job at an accident site as most reporters and photographers agreed on. But how this expertise is acquired varies. Until quite recently, Sweden did not offer academic studies for journalists. So formal higher education qualifications cannot be a requirement in Sweden. For journalists it is more, but not only, a question of learning the basic professional skills and press ethics. But the value of such knowledge in relation to practice is difficult to assess. An editor in the study did not think that there was any difference in the importance of education in accident reporting and other journalistic work.

*No more in this context than in any other. Generally, I think that it's important that journalists have a good education because journalism is not really about writing, but... about a method for adopting an approach. The method and approach can be acquired... of course through a long time in the profession – I know many self-taught journalists who are fantastic. But generally speaking I think /.../ you can develop the skills on the basis of a good education.*⁸⁵

Having learnt journalism properly as a method was regarded as important. When the journalism programme was highly praised, some did so because of certain components, while others attributed the praise to the whole degree programme.

*I can't say that I think I would have managed better on the fire site or other accidents sites if I had some more credits in sociology.*⁸⁶

Predictably, the answer was a combination of theory and practice: *"Sometimes we lack education. But we wouldn't want to be without practice either."*⁸⁷

Education is not sufficient in a situation like the fire, said a photographer. Despite the interviewees' requests for more training in crisis psychology and crisis management, many thought that formal qualifications were not crucial at the traumatically unexpected event of the Gothenburg fire. One photographer remarked that many older writing and photographing journalists have made a career after elementary school via a local paper and have become very good journalists.

The School of Journalism was virtually an unknown concept for me when I started at a small local paper in Karlshamn (city in the south east part of Sweden). I don't even think that Jolo or Bang [influential former journalists] ever went to a journalism college. But they were upper secondary school graduates, I suppose /.../ But many

*great journalists have zero training in journalism. So it's not only the photographers. But nowadays most photographers-to-be go to a photography school.*⁸⁸

Professional development needs

"A life-saving course up the sleeve"

The educational competence that many of the journalists had felt that they lacked was surprisingly often in a very different area from journalism. Many mentioned psychological reactions and medical first aid. *"I wish I had a life-saving course up my sleeve"*.⁸⁹ Several also expressed a need for psychology with a focus on crisis journalism: *"We probably had a two-week course in crisis journalism [higher education journalism]"*.⁹⁰

All photographers in the study lacked academic training in press photography. In a questionnaire aimed at some Swedish press photographers in the magazine *The Viewfinder (Sökaren)*,⁹¹ requests were made for Swedish higher education studies in press photography with the same basic subject knowledge as for the writing journalists. There were also requests for further training in photo journalism, press ethics and law. Partly, these requests are met today through the national courses offered to journalists.

Present press photographers have had Folk High School as a gateway, but one photographer still insisted, *"without any doubts"*, on the need of higher education for Swedish photographers.

*Yes, I think it goes without saying that if you are entering the press photography profession these days, you need a journalist education too. They go hand in hand. Denmark has the combination, for instance. Norway also, I think. Only Sweden lacks the combination in higher education.*⁹²

Since the interviews took place, Sweden now has a university journalist programme for press photographers/photo journalists,⁹³ as the result of the national evaluation of journalism in higher education (*Högskoleverkets rapportserie 2000*), for instance. The photographer above was supported by the paper's chief photo editor, who said that reporter and photographer were basically the same profession: *"It's all about writing journalists or photographing journalists. Only the work tool differs."*⁹⁴

Bonding with survivors

”It took me two months to find her”

Brief encounters at an accident site can sometimes lead to life-long relationships. Quite often journalists and survivors, or only one of them, try to get in touch after the disaster. When a journalist tries to make contact, this can be complicated: Is confidence shared with the journalist in his/her capacity as a private person or a professional?

A photographer recounted how a photo he took at the accident led him to a girl who survived the fire – she was the last one to be saved.

It’s her, NN [names the girl], who I took a good close-up of when they carry her out of the building... And it took me two months to find her. I was told that she was alive and I went to see her. And we were introduced.

INT: So, she got to see the photo then?

Yeah. And she wanted to find the coloured man that carried her out. It took another month to find him. And then I was strangely proud. I found him in Malmö [the coloured man was one of the party-goers. The photographer brought the girl and her ‘saviour’ together].⁹⁵

The photographer further described the meetings he arranged or ‘exposed’ the girl to, although with good intentions. The meetings with the man who saved her were, according to the photographer, “calm, relaxed, happy and despondent, you could say.” But her seeing the photo of herself was very difficult:

Yes, what can I say? Break-down. She had a break-down, quite simply.

INT: Was it right or wrong to show her the picture?

Maybe too early. But she insisted that she wanted to see it. I had said that I had a picture. I had said that it was bloody terrible and everything like that. But she insisted. [The girl’s mother was present when the photo was shown and had consented]. It was shown at the fire station in Gothenburg with emergency care staff present. It was the staff that had carried her out and they had seen the photo on a previous occasion].⁹⁶

Another photographer described how a picture he had taken in the night came to assume great significance to the deceased girl’s family. Although he tried to take photos in which the persons could not be identified, this turned out to be impossible.

Later a family phoned, recognising their daughter in a picture [in the newspaper]. I thought they were going to kill me but they were eternally grateful that there were pictures... from the scene. I've even heard from friends who've met the family that they call me 'best friend' or something like that, and that they are very grateful.⁹⁷

The photographer also described how the girl's family – or rather relatives – contacted him through the office to see more pictures she might be in.

In the picture, their daughter is lying to the left of a boy they were trying to resuscitate. I had two frames where she is on the side. She wasn't the main object, as it were. Her arm covers her face. You could only see her feet then /.../ And they wanted to know when the photo was taken to establish the time of death. Because they didn't know if she died on the 29th or the 30th. The photo was taken after midnight and it helped them a great deal to know when she died and so on.⁹⁸

Aftonbladet's reporter said that he had been in contact with some of the next-of-kin after the fire. And in everyday situations she met other afflicted persons again and again in the street or in the corner shop. She also described an example from another accident in Gothenburg, namely a severe tram accident in 1992. A colleague of hers travelled from Stockholm to Gothenburg to cover the accident. The colleague made an interview that came to mean a great deal for the afflicted family.

He had talked to a woman whose son died there, and it was such a terrible tragedy. He was given permission to write it because he had spoken with her. Then he kept in touch with her so much and so long that he was especially mentioned in the obituary. In my view, this is a good journalist who was willing to be involved so that people instead of being exploited were happy that he was there and wrote articles.⁹⁹

The *Aftonbladet* reporter thought that it was important to keep in touch with people after a situation like this: "you can't just abandon people, can you?" She also told the story to exemplify how a journalist's proximity to the event and the accident site affects the reporting. The personal involvement – and sensitivity – increases if the reporter or photographer is present in a place, she thought.

Self-evaluation and learning: conclusions

The degree of professional focus on the accident scene varied from an experience of total clarity to inability to act. However, most of the reporters and photographers were satisfied with their journalistic work performance. "Couldn't have done it any better", "excellent technical quality" were some self-evaluative comments. A photographer was happy that that he had refrained from taking too many pictures. The sense of professional pride was shared by many, as well as the relief of having avoided ethical violations.

A few self-critical negative comments were made, for example, by a reporter who thought that the text was less stylistically satisfactory, even though the content was acceptable.

Concerning the evaluation of the newspaper's reporting, all interviewees displayed a high degree of loyalty to their own paper. One reporter was touched by the papers' extra edition, and found it respectful and informative. Another person said that "everything ran smoothly" and that "our paper is the best when something big happens".

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of a well-oiled machinery and a good organisation. Many also emphasised the need of a generous attitude in conversations and internal critical discussions.

Most interviewees made comparisons with their rival newspaper and rated their own paper relatively speaking a bit higher: "We had fewer photos of people crying than our rivals," as someone put it. Criticism was also launched against colleagues for overstepping the mark, which was seen to reflect badly on the whole profession, whereas several thought that the ultimate mark of a good job is the readers' reactions to the reporting.

There were some cases of criticism of their own paper. Flawed regional edition and too much focus on the children's "status as immigrants" were two objections. A general flaw of all the papers studied was the lack of reporters and photographers with immigrant backgrounds or foreign roots. This type of multi-ethnic event requires newspapers to have a wider cultural and ethnic competence.

The journalists' self-evaluation can be linked to their views on the journalistic mission. Disaster reporting often involves doing good – ethics of action. Balanced and accurate reporting was the goal for many. The guiding principle seemed to be that the afflicted should suffer no further harm from the reporting. A paradox in this context was the fact that photographers as well as reporters often received awards

for disaster reporting. There are mixed feelings in receiving an award for disaster pictures.

When journalists reviewed their own professional efforts in connection with the fire, a prominent theme was the conflict between the professional and private roles. Many were torn between the demands for journalistic performance and their human desire to help.

It is noteworthy that some accounts reveal how strong bonds and relationships could be built between journalists and survivors. Such bonding often occurs after traumatic events covered by the media. This is a very complicated and vulnerable relationship that must be handled with care, not least because the journalist is both a private and a professional person, that is, having two roles that can be difficult for the afflicted person to distinguish between. The journalists must be very clear about in which role they are maintaining contact and if information disclosed in conversations can be used for professional purposes.

What did the journalists learn from covering the Gothenburg fire? Among other things they learnt that knowledge and experience are essential parameters for performing well on the job, but also that it is very difficult to prepare for and feeling prepared for a disaster assignment irrespective of the level of knowledge and experience. Every situation is unique and decisions must be made under great time pressure in an extremely exposed and vulnerable situation. Certain errors and mistakes will inevitably be made in such circumstances, regardless of knowledge and experiences. Preparation partly involves minimising the erroneous decisions, and this can sometimes be achieved through the learning processes subsequent to different assignments.

Generally, most journalists agreed that they personally and collectively had learnt a great deal from previous disasters. The coach accident in Måbödalen, Norway, in 1988 was mentioned, as well as the Estonia ferry disaster in 1994. In the ten years between 1988 and 1998 the internal professional debate on press ethics increased, and several seminars were arranged on media coverage of accidents and disasters.

Individual learning of reporting on a disaster can have both constructive and destructive effects. Some felt that it was an advantage to have had similar experiences; others were overwhelmed by old memories, which might have contributed to a feeling of powerlessness.

It is in principle impossible to predict how a particular individual will react to a certain traumatic event, such as the Gothenburg fire,

which makes it difficult to pick staff for the job, if it is at all practically possible to do so.

Learning also includes experiences of the type of competencies that seemed to be of most importance for the ability to perform well. On the whole, the journalists rated life experience higher than both professional experience and formal education. Professional experience was also highly valued, but not necessarily of similar events, but rather when based on professional confidence and automatic ethical (re-)action. The need of education to manage was rated the lowest. However, many comments on the need for academic programmes in photo journalism and short courses in disaster journalism and first aid were made, along with the view that young and inexperienced staff should not be sent on disaster reporting assignments.

As mentioned, life experience was rated higher than education and professional experience. The importance of professional experience to the ability to manage a disaster assignment was, according to many, marginal. The journalists generally thought that life experience was more important. In terms of formal education, they would have liked to have had courses in disaster journalism, crisis psychology and medical first aid. Most of the interviewees doubted that long professional experience guaranteed the ability to manage a disaster situation but someone suggested that previous experience as a nurse or fireman might be useful. Those who emphasised the value of professional experience for the ability to manage a disaster assignment were thinking in terms of similar accidents rather than general professional experience. Journalistic professionalism, however, was deemed to be of great importance.

Personally knowing the rescue and emergency personnel working on the scene was comforting, according to a photographer. Personal knowledge is commonly developed between reporters and photographers that often cover accidents and local rescue staff members.

Several interviewees thought that professional experience – particularly assignments in connection with accidents and disasters – lead to professional maturity and experience of dealing with people in a crisis. It may also mean courage to refrain from photos and interviews that in all probability and experience will not be published.

Someone suggested that professional experience from a human-centred area other than journalism would be an asset in the context, and reporters and photographers alike did not think that long professional experience guaranteed ability to act and perform professionally

at an accident site. The lack of crisis experience might play a role here, or the opposite, i.e. that a lived trauma might be "triggered" on the scene causing an inability to act professionally.

Life experience was considered to be the most important form of competence for disaster reporting and many thought that a combination of difficult life experience and professional practice was a good foundation for disaster reporters and photographers.

Having suffered loss and grief can improve the ability to see connections and consequences more clearly. A reporter suggested that reporting angles to a great extent were marked by lived experiences. On the other hand, such factors could increase individual vulnerability and impede the work performance. Another view was that journalists' life experiences and their interpretations of professional ethics are intimately connected.

Formal qualifications were seen as the least valued competence factor. It was suggested that journalism studies have importance because "journalism is not really about writing," but is "an approach". Others thought that many self-taught journalists without formal qualifications demonstrate that professional excellence does not rely on formal education. This also applies to photographers, who until recently have lacked higher education opportunities in their field, but now it is offered as requested by several of the interviewed photographing journalists in this study.

Footnotes

- 1 Photographer 1 GP, Reporter GP, Reporter AB
- 2 Reporter, GP about the article "Words just can tell" ("Orden förmår bara att berätta"), GP 981031
- 3 Photographer 1 GP
- 4 Photographer DN
- 5 Photographer DN
- 6 Reporter GT/Expressen. Mona was a girl missing after the discotheque event. Her body was found several days after the fire – in the burned out building. The body was still there when media got access to the building.
- 7 Freelance photographer/AB
- 8 Photographer DN
- 9 Reporter AB
- 10 Reporter AB
- 11 Reporter GT/Ex
- 12 Reporter GP
- 13 Photographer 1 GP
- 14 Photographer 1 GP
- 15 Local editor DN
- 16 Local editor DN
- 17 Photo editor in chief GP
- 18 Photographer DN
- 19 Photographer 2 GP
- 20 Reporter GT/Ex
- 21 Local editor DN
- 22 Local editor DN
- 23 Photographer 2 GP
- 24 See f. eks. SOU 1999:68 and research report by Larrson & Nohrstedt et al. (2000)
- 25 Photographer 2 GP
- 26 *The Viewfinder (Sökaren)* 4/98
- 27 *Expressen* 1994-09-29, "The sea of death and life line" ("Dödens hav och livlinan").
- 28 Publicity rule no 7 in the Swedish code of ethics for press, radio and television". See Appendix 2.
- 29 SOU 1994:48, p. 82
- 30 Ibid SOU 1999:48
- 31 www.aretsbild.se
- 32 Local editor DN
- 33 Lars-G. Dicander, press photographer (debate article in the paper "The Journalist")
Journalisten, nr 5/2001)
- 34 Radio Channel P6/Z radio, the program "Five to three" ("Fem i tre"), 951107 at 15:35.
- 35 Photographer 1 GP
- 36 Freelance photographer/GT
- 37 Freelance photographer/GT
- 38 Photographer 2 GP
- 39 Debate article in *The journalist (Journalisten)* no 31, 1998
- 40 Reporter GP
- 41 Photographer 2 GP
- 42 Photographer 2 GP
- 43 Photo editor in chief GP
- 44 Freelance photographer AB
- 45 Reporter AB
- 46 Editor in chief AB
- 47 Photographer 2 GP
- 48 News editor in chief GP
- 49 Editor in chief GT
- 50 Editor in chief AB
- 51 *Dagens Nyheter/DN Debate/DN Debatt* 199811-03. Also in Lundälv (1999) p. 30
- 52 Jörgen Lundälv in *DN Debate* 3/11 1998
- 53 Larsson & Nohrstedt (2000)
- 54 SOU 1999:68
- 55 Editor in chief AB
- 56 Photographer 2 GP

57 Local editor DN
58 Reporter AB
59 Memory notes from seminar at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm 990204: "News images, ethics and impact" (Nyhetsbilder, etik, påverkan). Speech by GP:s Photo editor in chief: "Image and impact. The fire at Hisingen. Did we right?" ("Bild och påverkan. Branden på Hisingen. Gjorde vi rätt?").
60 Photographer 2 GP
61 *Pressens Tidning* 19/2000, by columnist Kjell Albin Abrahamsson, (Swedish Radio correspondent i Vienna) debating a disaster in Austrian ski resort Kaprun where 155 people lost their lives in a tunnel fire disaster.
62 *Der Standard* 14/11-00.
63 *Pressens Tidning* 19/2000, p. 33
64 Freelance photographer/GT
65 Photographer DN
66 Reporter GP
67 Reporter GP
68 Reporter GT/Ex
69 Freelance photographer/AB
70 Reporter AB
71 Photographer 1 GP
72 Local editor DN
73 Reporter GT/Ex
74 Photographer DN
75 Photographer DN
76 Photographer 1 GP
77 Reporter AB
78 Freelance photographer/AB
79 Freelance photographer GT, citing a colleague.
80 Photo editor in chief GP
81 Photographer 2 GP
82 Reporter GT/Ex
83 Freelance photographer/GT
84 Photographer 1 GP
85 Lokal arbetsledare DN
86 Reporter GT/Ex
87 Frilansfotograf/GT
88 Photographer DN
89 Freelance photographer/AB
90 Reporter GP
91 *The Viewfinder (Sökaren)* no 2/99
92 Photographer 2 GP. Also mentioned by the GP:s Photo editor in chief, in 2002: <http://www.update.dk/cfje/VidBase.nsf/>
93 <http://www.miun.se>
94 Photo editor in chief GP
95 Freelance photographer/AB
96 Freelance photographer/AB
97 Photographer 1 GP
98 Photographer 1 GP
99 Reporter AB

13. THE JOURNALIST AS EYEWITNESS

In this study, journalists' experiences of covering a disaster (for instance, regarding *reaction* and *performance*) have been related to three factors: the private *person* – the journalist as an individual, the *profession* – the journalistic mission and role, and the *situation* – the traumatic event. In addition, a further dimension of the mission, namely *reflection* has also been discussed. In the following, a summary of the main conclusions in relation to the theoretical analysis model is presented.

Situation

The nature of the event is of the greatest importance for how reporters and photographers react to a traumatic assignment. The challenges involve degree of controllability, stressors on the site, and conflicts with other actors. How did the journalists handle these challenges and how did they perceive the accident site as a workplace?

Witnessing

The fact that several reporters and photographers were present on the scene and witnessed the disaster meant that the situation had great effects on many of them, personally, professionally and in terms of potentially traumatic reactions. Unbearable scenes were played out before their eyes. Many aggravating factors were reported: the fire seemed impossible to extinguish, an unknown number of people were victims, the fire raged in a building with apparent evacuation obstacles, the victims were children and young adults, it happened in the middle of the night, the whole situation was confused and uncertain, and in retrospect, it turned out to involve a great number of fatal and injured victims. A large area was filled with crying and screaming youngsters, some jumping out of windows, or trying to save one another, or in some tragic cases returning into the smoke. The journalists, who had come to the site with another mission than saving lives, saw all of this. The

thesis title, "The Eye of the Disaster," grew out of the fact that the journalists were the professional eyewitnesses of the disaster, in the midst of disaster. In a traumatic field of chaos, life can come to a standstill, as in the eye of a storm, and when everything for a moment seems as unreal and fictitious as in a film, powerless inactivity as well as hyperactivity can affect the journalists.

Unpreparedness

The first journalists to arrive were totally unprepared. No one knew anything about the extent of the event. Many had simply responded to a fire alert. Perhaps one of the many fires without any harm to any persons? Or maybe something bigger? Children or adults? Many or few? No one knew. The state of unpreparedness among the journalists also included the fact that the accident occurred in the night, which restricted the chance to choose to go or choose to abstain. In addition, few editors were on duty, which meant an absence of job instructions. In most cases it was the reporters and photographers who phoned to inform their bosses.

Uncontrollability

As the picture of the event became clearer, the journalists' frustration that no one, let alone they, could control events also increased. The chance to rescue people seemed slim, and the consequences unforeseeable. Witnessing such a course of events aroused strong feelings among the journalists. When feelings of uncontrollability are combined with individual vulnerability, hunger and lack of sleep, ill health etc., the situation can logically get increasingly harder to cope with.

Stressors

The stressors that the journalists' mentioned are on most counts identical with the stressors that earlier have been identified in responders.¹ These included uncertainty on their way to the accident site and on arriving, the strong sensual impressions, the sight of and contacts with the deceased and the injured, the development of the disaster, the continuance and intensity of the fire, the experience of danger and the role conflicts between the personal and the professional – fellow human being and journalist identities. Other stressors that were highlighted in this

case were experiences of guilt and shame. These stressors can be described as both functional and dysfunctional during the reporting. It was functional by making both reporters and photographers take a step back and exercise restraint in a way that surprised themselves, and dysfunctional because guilt and shame tended to increase their stress reactions and to aggravate their handling of the situation. In addition, the feelings of guilt and shame resulted in possibly exaggerated restraint and inactivity, which could be excused morally but not professionally.

Interaction and confrontations

For most of them, the journalistic task at the site was a very lonely business. Few but respectful contacts were made with members of the rescue staff and a few verbal contacts with journalists from other media. But many experienced a kind of silent collegial support in the presence of colleagues, which was comforting in the situation. Relatively few contacts were made with the afflicted. If this happened, it was in the form of brief exchanges rather than interviews. Still, there were some confrontations between young people and journalists because the former failed to understand how someone could write and photograph while their friends were dying. The journalists found the confrontations hard to handle at the time, although they noted in retrospect that the young people's reactions were completely understandable and normal. Both reporters and photographers realised that their presence on the scene was provocative. Photographers, who could not easily hide their cameras, in particular were pained by the confrontations and reactions.

Profession

Reporters and photographers may in different degrees be psychologically affected by witnessing a continuous traumatic situation and reporting directly from an accident site or a disaster area. At the same time, they have to manage their journalistic task, their professional role and ethical rules. How did the journalists in Gothenburg experience that their work situation and their professional task were affected by their own reactions? How did the journalists describe the conflicting roles of the private and professional person?

Duty to public interest

The fact that a disaster theoretically is a textbook example of "good news" obviously affects the journalists' incentive to report. The criteria of both a disaster and an event with high news value involve a sudden and unexpected event of public interest, affecting many people with a high degree of identification and uncertain outcome. Ironically, this makes a disaster ideal news. Naturally, the journalists' professional motivation was triggered and the adrenaline rose when the alert was given about a fire at Backaplan. There would be a public wish to read about the event the next morning. Media are obligated to report on the unbearable, and this sets the editorial machinery in motion and fills individuals with an impulse to report. A photographer phoned the office saying, "send all the reporters you have." A manifestation of both news valuation and the duty to inform was the *GP*'s historic decision to quickly issue an edition on a normally non-edition day (All Saint's Day).

Journalist role

The professional role was, beyond doubt, tested on the journalists' arrival at Backaplan. "I was a bad journalist then", said a reporter, who thought that the reflex professionalism vanished at the time. Others experienced an increased professional focus and could see the "poster headline in their minds" immediately on arrival. Some were surprised at their presence of mind, but this is one of many coping strategies in very stressful situations, and it was applied by the majority of the reporters and photographers. An editor also said that he had a vision of the edited paper early in his mind. While many spoke in terms of "professional filter", "reflex ethics" and "editorial machinery", there were also suggestions that the journalist role in extreme situations is not clear-cut. A basic explanation can be that journalists' qualifications generally vary a great deal as do the attitudes to the professional codes in the press corps and media companies. Possible causes are unclear professional ideals and norms, along with different financial conditions for the morning and evening press, for instance, which can easily 'rock the professional boat' in a critical situation such as the Gothenburg fire.

Approaches

Most of the journalists worked alone without colleagues from the same paper at the accident site during the first hours of the tragedy. There were, however, two reporters from the same paper who quickly decided on a distribution of roles, "a straight news reporter and an observer". Because of the time pressure, a form of reporting, reminiscent of radio journalism, was adopted by one evening paper especially. Reports were delivered by phone and mixed with interviews from the office and facts gathering from other media. The result was multipage articles with a byline of many names.

Job instructions were seldom possible to give in connection with the call out since most reporters and photographers went to the site on their own initiative in the night. Instruction-giving was reversed to start with: from the field to the management. Somewhat later, when the editorial managements were formed to organise the reporting, there were, according to statements, orders issued to the concerned not to go too near the afflicted. A commended model was a newspaper's decision to send a local editor from Stockholm to Gothenburg to lead the work. This was highly appreciated by the newspaper staff who felt comfortable in the local leadership. The interaction between editors and field workers was not conflict free. It showed how difficult it can be for an editor in Stockholm to understand what their colleagues at Backaplan, Gothenburg, were exposed to and their reactions. Most, however, perceived the editors to be sensitive as well as determined.

Press ethics

Concerning professional and press ethical codes, two codes were predominant in thoughts, considerations and discussions, namely: "Always show the victims of crime and accidents as much consideration as possible" and "be careful with photos." The journalists at Backaplan felt that they were as considerate as possible. A news editor in chief, however, wondered whether too much consideration might be given in these situations, thus affecting the communication of information. If this happens, he thought, "the history of Sweden will never be written." Adequate consideration in terms of photos involves capturing the right moment in as few attempts as possible. A photographer remarked that he could not take pictures on a chance, thus risking disturbing and provoking the young people. Instead he tested different camera settings

discretely to reduce the number of shots. One of the most difficult considerations was judging the condition of the young people. Were they injured or dead? The risk of sending a photo to the paper with the caption that an injured girl was being carried out when she was in fact dead was apparent. And such mistakes were made. Severe stress, time pressure and a certain degree of ignorance are possible explanations. Taking photos without revealing identities was also a very difficult task, bordering on impossible. But several photographers succeeded in doing that. When they failed to get photos with faces turned away and so on the photos were pixelated or masked (in some cases only in the later issues).

One photographer thought that a good news picture was a press ethical borderline case. Another suggested that, considering the conditions for work on the accident site, it is a miracle that it went so well.

A clear change in the press ethical approach was noticeable in regard to the coverage of manifestations of grief and commemorative events. Less time pressure, less stress and journalistic conditions less deviant from the normal as the work situation on the accident site was are possible reasons. At this point the "ethics turned" and became less intrusive, more respectful and, in the terms of the Swedish visual art professor Gert Z Nordström, more lyrical.²

Judgement and decision

Reporters and photographers on the scene were faced with several difficult choices. The situation was not only difficult to assess but required professional decisions. Hiding or revealing the professional role? Interviewing or witnessing? Approaching or staying away? Helping or reporting? The role conflict between being a fellow human and a journalist was difficult to handle and is further discussed in later sections.

Among the editors, the conflict centred on how cautious the photo journalism should be, to what extent the multi-ethnic character of the event should be highlighted, diction be weighed and speculations made, etc. The important decisions also included what was *not* done, in the sense of refraining from mentioning or from photographing. One photographer felt like saying "sorry" every time he took a photo.

The private person

Reporters and photographers are people of flesh and blood, individuals with personality traits, vulnerability, life experience, stress susceptibility, resilience and coping capacity. How do personal qualities affect the way journalists perform and react as private persons in a professional role when covering a disaster? How did the journalists react on the site in terms of cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions and coping strategies.

Personality and vulnerability

There is a collegial view of journalists as "supermen" with an armour of steel against all kinds of strain, an unreasonable view built on myths and stereotypes. But if superman/woman refers to the ability to cope with stress, fend off crisis reactions and focus on the mission, then there were many 'superpeople' at Backaplan. On the other hand, few are supermen in the sense of going through the experience unscathed. This is where the greatest misconstruction occurs – that the protective mechanisms or professional filter on the job turns journalists into invulnerable people. Several journalists gave examples of vulnerability factors of importance at Backaplan, for instance, the previous loss of a child or other family member and previous encounters with sudden death or fire.

Life experience and identification

There is no guarantee that long journalistic experience is a safeguard against a situation such as Gothenburg fire. A reporter said that many years of experience as a nurse would have been a greater support in coping with the situation than long journalistic experience. Having encountered sudden death, severe injuries and human suffering before may have helped in the situation. Also other traumatic experiences involving being in contact with emotions and reaction patterns can have been useful for some, but for others the effect was the opposite: Backaplan opened old wounds and resurrected old memories. For a photographer the job meant reliving memories of the death of a son in a traffic accident. Relating to an accident in this way can be very painful. The daughter of a photographer had wanted to go to the fateful party but he had stopped his daughter's attendance and he was relieved. But at the

same time the knowledge of her friends' fate was extremely strainful mentally.

Reaction

Journalists who witness a disaster are indirectly affected by the event. This is how rescue personnel, saving, evacuating and taking care of victims, has been viewed for a long time. Journalists who have witnessed and covered a disaster should also fall into this category. Journalists working during the night at Backaplan in principle displayed the whole spectrum of stress and crisis reactions that disaster psychology studies of responders have shown.³ In addition to the many reactions displayed, the journalists experienced strong feelings of guilt and shame. Compared to the responders, journalists are generally less prepared to encounter a disaster. They lack knowledge about what they lack – more than training opportunities. They lack clear job descriptions for disaster assignments and besides, reporters and photographers, as mentioned, have the more emotionally challenging and provocative task of "only" witnessing and portraying the event, not to save lives, put out fires or help people in need. Such variables are important to understand why journalists display the same crisis reactions as rescue personnel and other responders.

Coping strategies

If the journalists covering the Gothenburg fire were placed in Yerke's and Dobson's stress reaction curve,⁴ this would add insights into the descriptions they provided about their reactions at different points in time. On their way to the accident site, their adrenaline rose and the professional instinct tuned in to reporting. The performance potential is probably at its best when journalists are still "protected" by their coping strategies, when they have their professional filter intact and are extremely focussed. Stress reactions can increase to a certain point and then "tip over" when stress reactions become too intense, and maybe keep intensifying while performance is deteriorating. This can, for example, be induced by a trigger that eliminates the professional filter and releases reactions. The reactions can lead to incapacity, or possibly hyperactivity that does not lead to good professional performance. This was perhaps the point at which a reporter was when she said "I was a bad journalist then and should have gone home really". Perhaps it was

the reporter who went shaky and "started to pump blood" or someone else who "broke down". Who "tips over" is most often hard to predict. It could involve anything from individual vulnerability to "having a bad day", because of lack of food or sleep. Also the sense of coherence is an important factor,⁵ but obviously difficult to access in a time of chaotic and unimaginable event as the Gothenburg fire.

In Gothenburg there were examples of both problem focused and emotion focused coping strategies among the journalists. There are descriptions of a number of coping strategies in rescue workers and it is striking how many of these apply to journalists.⁶

Mental preparation: Their thoughts on their way to the accident site.

Derealisation: Was described by all journalist in principle.

Suppression of emotions: The attitude that "you mustn't break down".

Distancing and dehumanisation: Choosing to think of headlines instead of what was happening.

Humour: Some attempts at humour were tried but were perceived to be less successful.

Regulation of exposure: Many tried to hide themselves and their attributes for reasons of both consideration and self-preservation.

Activity to restrict reflexion: Only one photographer mentioned hyperactivity as a coping mechanism but many kept busy helping out and talking to the survivors.

Sense of purpose: They tried to find meaning but found none...

Self-reassuring comments: "I have to fix this"

Contact with others and social support: Stated to be very important.

For most of the photographers and reporters the coping strategies were functional, that is, they helped them to complete their assignment.

Reflection

On completion of an assignment a phase of reflection, recovery and self-evaluation ensues. How did the reporters and photographers describe their need of defusing sessions and debriefing and how was this provided and handled? An important part of individual processing and

collegial learning is performance appraisal. How did the journalists assess their own and their colleagues' performance in covering the fire and how did they describe the internal and external learning generated by the process and feedback? Did they have any thoughts on how the media coverage would affect future reporting?

Processing and recuperation

The Gothenburg fire marked the starting-point for many media companies to provide debriefing or other organised crisis management in the workplace, although to varied extent and success. Generally, the preparedness for providing help to employees was low. Several mistakes were made, according to the interviewees, and the freelancers were forgotten, but there were also good examples. The informal chats afterwards were said to give the greatest benefits. On their own initiatives, both reporters and photographers engaged in such interaction, for instance, with the family priest, or with members of the police and rescue services on duty at the site. A photographer said, "the police were my crisis group." Family and friends were also indispensable conversation partners. In some cases, other people's approaches and inquisitive questions were experienced as a strain. Their experiences of the importance of informal social support have been verified by recent research on psychological first aid.⁷

Self-evaluations

Generally, the journalists thought that they had done their job surprisingly well, considering the circumstances, thanks to functional reactions to the event, a professional approach to the situation, and a certain instinctive ethical compass. They were pleased with their own performance ("I couldn't have done any better") as well as proud of their paper. Most of them seemed to have a realistic and rational view of how well the job could be done under the circumstances, but they also had objections to transgressions made by colleagues from rival media ("we would never have done that"). In the ensuing debate it was clear that they resented the fact that a whole profession had to "pay" for individual colleagues' press ethical mistakes.

Learning

Even if many concluded that it is impossible to prepare for a disaster such as the Gothenburg fire, most of the journalists agreed that there is every reason to learn from the disaster, for example, better employer preparedness for crisis management after traumatic assignments. A photographer thought that too many inexperienced reporters had been involved, the wisdom of which needed to be considered next time. An editor learnt to take psychological vulnerability into account when sending journalists to cover a disaster and not only professional skills. Lessons learnt also indicated the need of further training in disaster journalism with training in stress and stress management as well as medical first aid provision.

Issues generated by the study

The result poses three more general issues related to the press coverage of major accidents and disasters.

1. What role conflicts arise on the accident/disaster site?
2. What different journalistic roles emerge?
3. What qualifications are required for reporters and photographers?

Role conflicts

The conflict between the professional and the private person (journalist vs fellow human being) was a pervading theme in the interviews as many felt torn between the roles.

Roles are an expression of norms. A professional role is often governed by multiple norm requirements and different relationships. Ekman's study of community policemen, for instance, shows how one norm must be given priority over others in a given situation.⁸ Role conflicts and dilemmas must be weighed against one another by the individual policeman, who can choose to focus on one task or a norm at a time.

The conflict between the professional and the private person was accentuated at Backaplan because the situation was unique and extreme and therefore deviated from the norm. In his memoirs, the former journalist and editor in chief Carl-Adam Nycop is torn between

”the journalistic ambitions of the ego and the professionalised journalism’s ego-liberating logic.”⁹ The journalist and author Göran Rosenberg interprets Nycop’s battle between the profession and the ego as follows:

In detail he describes all the mechanisms and intermediaries contributing to the displacement of the ego and the foregrounding of the anonymous editorial collective. It is a chain of management that he often sees can change the approach, the tone, the meaning and significance of the original material. The higher up the chain, the less contact with the original event and the greater the scope for simplifications and pointedness.¹⁰

An example of other types of conflicts and paradoxes on the site was, for example, the clash between theory and practice. Compared with the physician’s profession, the medical oath requires a practice based on science and proven experience, theory and practice in balanced harmony. This aim may seem simple, but harbours many difficult decisions in the course of work.¹¹ In contrast, most journalists have the opportunity to shape news and reports themselves in their professional practice. But theory and practice differ. Ekström and Nohrstedt have noted that journalists above all give weight to productivity, that is, the ability to accomplish punchy news.¹² In Gothenburg, practice came before theory as the journalists adjusted to a situation that they had no previous experience of.

The conflict between norm and deviation is another obstacle. Accident and disaster journalism is a clear example of a deviation from a norm. This means that a job must be done in accordance with journalistic principles but under abnormal circumstances. Many principles and rules are inapplicable and superseded by new ones adapted to the situation, often through informal communication between the journalist and the office and many times because the reporters and photographers make their own decisions. The journalists reporting on the Gothenburg fire were forced to find new and unusual approaches on the site.

The contradictory demands of a normal and an abnormal situation in journalism can be summed up in a conflict between ”may do” and ”should not do”. In short, a journalist may interview a consenting person but should not perhaps do it because of the person’s state. In the case of the Gothenburg fire, there were severely injured and people in distress who consented to being interviewed or photographed against their better judgement. Finally, the conflict between freedom and responsibility was a difficult role conflict. Journalists can neither give the

appearance of responsibility they do not have, nor argue their way out of a responsibility they have.¹³ The liberty to expose the life of an injured person can have life changing consequences as well as affect the reciprocity between the parties. It is difficult but no less important to separate the professional and private roles. At Backaplan there were few or no opportunities to get "informed consent" and decision rested on the respective journalist and photographer.

Fellow human being or professional journalist

A moral role conflict in journalism is the tension between the role as a fellow human being and that of the professional journalist. The Norwegian media researchers Lamark and Morlandstø have described how the tension arises.¹⁴ They use the term "decent human being [Norwegian 'hederlig menneske']" instead of the term 'fellow human being' that I use here. With 'decent' ['hederlig'] they refer to the estimation individuals' make of themselves and their reputation. The decency is intimately linked to their own actions and whether or not what they do deviate from their own opinions on right and wrong. The second role that the authors describe is the "good journalist ['god journalist']", which I have translated into 'professional journalist'. A professional journalist is an accomplished professional who competently perform the duties required. Professionalism is developed through journalistic practice. Ekström and Nohrstedt think that a good journalist has to undergo two parallel learning processes, learning the professional ideals and the professional codes.¹⁵

Lamark and Morlandstø also present an alternative approach to the connection between the human being and the professional person, based on the assumption that a decent person acquire the knowledge and journalistic ideals and the rules and routines that make up the professional identity as a good journalist.

This poses the interesting question if a thoroughly decent human being can become a professional journalist, or if decency is a fundamental requirement for good and professional journalism. But how much decency can the professional practice embrace? ¹⁶

It is clear that professional practice – in the case of covering an accident – is affected by the situation in which the practice is taking place, that is, the event, time, place, how, the people involved and consequences. The accident place as a workplace deviates greatly from the journalistic norm and a number of role conflicts and dilemmas have to

be solved. The reporters and photographers at Backaplan wanted both to write and save lives, take photos and give First Aid.

Journalist roles

Categorising the journalists' coping strategies at the accident site in Gothenburg, I discerned four journalist roles. They deviate in various ways from previous studies of journalist roles by, for example, Melin-Higgins and Ekström och Nohrstedt,¹⁷ possibly because the roles were induced by the individual ways of reacting to the crisis situation the coping strategies that came to characterise the different persons. The roles are also affected by how the conflict between the roles of good fellow human being and good professional journalist is managed, in terms of the balance between the roles and the dominance of one or the other.

The Eyewitness

The Eyewitness role is characterised by both problem-solving and emotional coping: affected by emotional reactions but solving the problem. The journalistic duty has to be professionally performed, but neither at the expense of the intrusion of the victim's privacy, nor of being exposed to distressing scenes. The professional eyewitness keeps a proper distance to the epicentre of the disaster, but is very observant, taking down notes to report. The eyewitness photographer uses the telephoto lens rather than going too close, selects photos on site rather than "vacuuming the field", suffers from derealisation but seeks a purpose, and also manages to combine the private and professional roles, which leads to a good journalistic result through the professional eyewitness method. The photographer eyewitness may think "sorry" when the photos are taken, but does not forget the duty to report.

The Weasel

The Weasel role, in contrast, involves repressing reactions and primarily solving problems and regulating exposure to the trauma. This is achieved through their own mental regulation of exposure to the unbearable and through concealing their professional role to the survivors. The weasel creeps around, camera behind back and notepad and

pen in pocket, hunting for cover photos, and would accept the Photo of the Year Award, but does not want to intrude unnecessarily and certainly not to provoke anyone by his/her presence. The weasel would gladly move aside to check the camera lens aperture, and takes no more pictures than necessary. The weasel reporter may appear as any fellow human being – hugging, chatting, comforting and lending his mobile. At the same time, the weasel works professionally, memorising quotations and other notes to write down interviews that no one knew were made later.

The Hack

The Hack is the most problem-solving role, but also completely dominated by the wish to be a good journalist, repressing the instinct to be a good fellow human being at this point in time. The hack keeps active – sometimes hyper active – to prevent reflecting on events. The principal hack coping strategy is distancing and dehumanisation. The hack may appear cold and cynical but only wants to do a good job. However, the hyperactivity can manifest itself in unnecessarily frequent and indiscriminate photographing. The hack can also persuade him/herself that this is not really happening but is only an unusually horrible film or nightmare that will soon pass when the job is done. The hack is often praised by the editorial staff – sometimes rightly so – for the fantastic ability to capture the headline picture or for a particularly apt interview with a self-appointed hero or a talkative eyewitness. But the hack's activity is sometimes deceptive, as the extreme problem-solving attitude may lead to missing out on important nuances such as the difference between injured and dead persons, or between a person in shock and a calm person.

The Guardian Angel

The Guardian Angel reacts to and manages situations mainly emotionally, seeks contact with others, is in need of social support and soon forgets all about the professional role. The Angel reduces the importance of the professional task and emphasises the value of being a fellow human being, and is torn between the wish to help and to go home, feeling the duty to write, but lacks the energy to do it. The Angel feels that no colleague understands, and that he/she is a bad journalist, while suggesting that it does not really matter there and then since an

article or a picture is a trivial thing in comparison with the present disaster. The Guardian Angel benefits more from serving as a good human being, but is then tormented by professional anguish. The Guardian Angel may have problems gaining the employer's understanding.

Among the interviewed reporters and photographers in the Gothenburg study, all four roles were represented. It is important to be aware of the fact that one and the same interviewee can assume different roles in different types of situations. It is also possible that the interviewee who initially starts as the Hack in the reporting, suddenly turns into (or experiences him/herself as) a Guardian Angel, which represents a gradual slippage from being a good journalist to being a good fellow human being, or vice versa. The starting-point is that the journalist, in normal circumstances, is both a good fellow human being and a good journalist, but under the influence of acute stress, there is a slippage between the two roles. In extreme cases, an individual can drop the journalist role completely to simply act as a fellow human being and assume the role of Guardian Angel, which very seldom happens. These roles do not suggest that journalists always react in one way or the other. Rather, it can illustrate that the role conflict is more than merely a tension between a good human being and a professional journalist. The journalist in the human being can furthermore react in some or all the four respects above during one and the same report assignment.

It needs to be stressed that the journalistic mission is the reason why the role of the "professional journalist" should take priority. It would be disastrous for media reporting if all journalists should react and act as fellow human beings during a traumatic assignment. The different characteristics, or roles, are also crudely categorised. All roles, however, have a place and can be assumed by one and the same person or different persons depending on the colleagues' way of reacting and choosing approaches. Considered as different coping strategies for acute mental stress, all four roles can be explained. From a professional perspective, all but the Guardian Angel can be justified, but also the Guardian Angels should be respected for their attempts to handle the situation professionally even if they failed. All roles are probably in need of stress management on mission completed. The Hack and Guardian Angel may be more at risk. Both can be afflicted with guilt feelings: the Hack for having done too much and gone too close and perhaps even arguing with angry and shocked survivors, or not having helped at all, although the editors probably praised the material. The Guardian Angel has guilt for the opposite reasons; having broken down

as a journalist and done a bad professional job, or in worst case nothing at all. The Guardian Angel's professional guilt feelings are alleviated, however, by having been a good fellow human being at the accident site.

These are four stereotypes with fuzzy contours but still clear characteristics. They form an image of how different journalists can react to the same event. Hopefully, the image can serve to increase understanding of how journalists witnessing an ongoing trauma are affected by their coping strategies, approaches and performances on site and through published material.

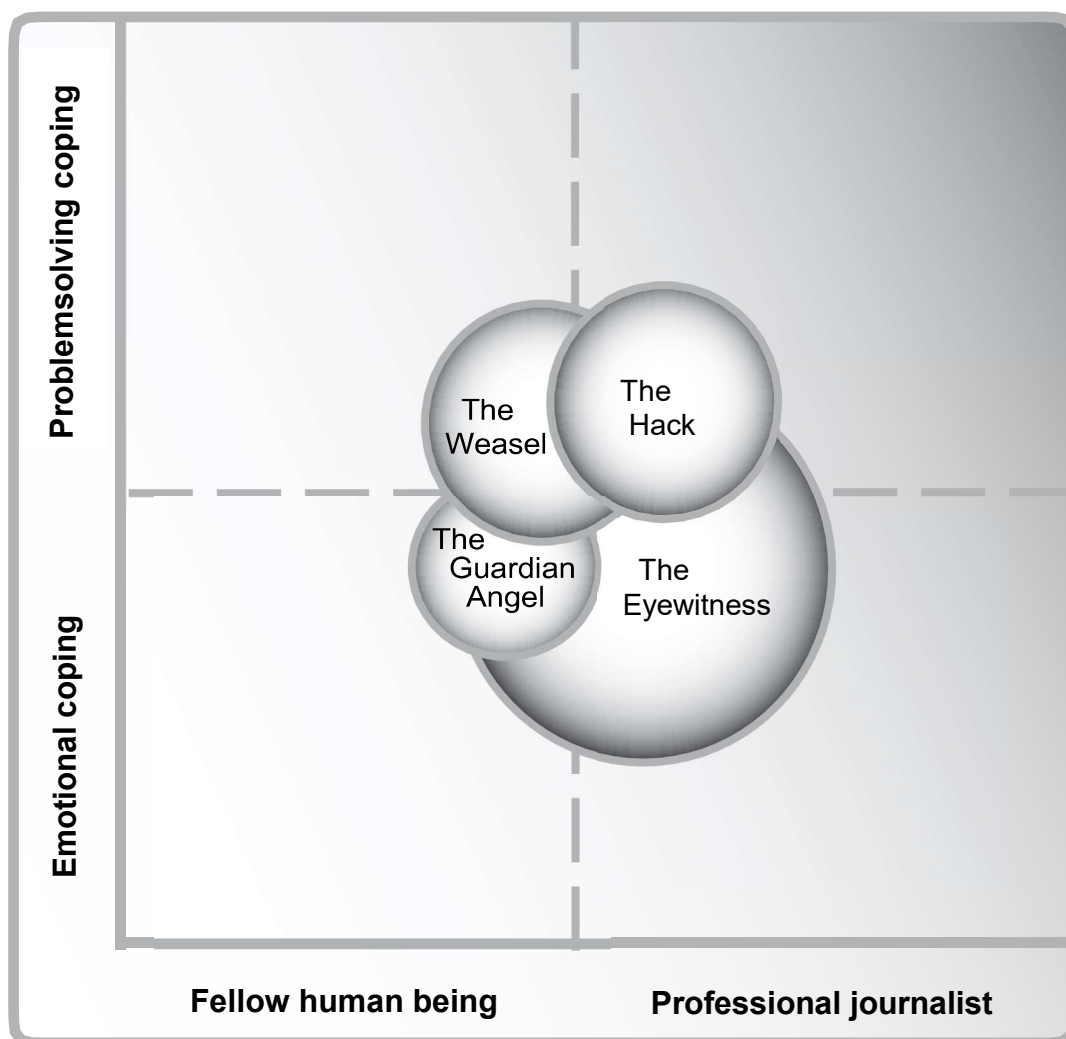


Figure 4. Journalist roles at the disaster site.

Competence to report on a disaster

Can theories of professional knowledge and skills explain journalists' different ways of handling specific work situations? The journalists who worked at Backaplan during the first chaotic hours in Gothenburg 1998 had to deal with a great deal more than interviewing and photographing. They were faced with unspeakable challenges, decision anxiety, mental pressure and their own crisis reactions. Skills and routine were required but also the absence of too much personal vulnerability. But is it possible to know in advance who has the competence necessary to handle a disaster and what competence is required to complete the task as successfully as possible?

Sufficiently good ability

Competence can be defined as sufficiently good ability to do something.¹⁸ A sufficiently good ability should be a reasonable goal for media reporting from an accident site, as maximum performance is not to be expected from anyone under such circumstances. Competence cannot be formally learnt or predicted. It is acquired in many ways. Ellström¹⁹ has developed a model that can describe this dynamic view of the function of learning in competence building.

Briefly, formal competence can be described as the competence acquired through formal education which can be documented in grades, certificates, diplomas etc. Actual competence is an individual's accumulated competence, which could be used to solve a task. The competence required for a certain task is described as formally stipulated competence. In journalism, we can regard the press ethical rules as examples of stipulated competence as well as laws and agreements regulating freedom of speech, of the press etc. To handle the situation successfully the competence that the task/situation requires is needed. Finally, the competence actually used in a situation can be called the utilised competence. It involves what the individual actually does. Individual ability and the task come together in the act. The utilised competence does not necessarily equal the actual competence. Sometimes the task does not require full competence and in other situations, actual competence does not suffice. If the individual interprets the situation in an erroneous way, for example as impossible to influence, the competence that could have been used will remain unutilised.²⁰

In the action situation, the individual's interpretation process is of greatest importance. If the situation is not interpreted correctly, the person cannot utilise all the competence that would be of value in the situation.²¹ For example, stress reactions have a great impact on people's interpretation process.

Although the journalistic task is not to influence course of events, the human being can experience great powerlessness in not being able to do anything to influence events or intervene in any way. The work situation and the work environment are difficult to influence during an ongoing disaster.

One of Ellström's conclusions is that an analysis of an individual's professional know-how, that is, competence for a certain task, should include the practical situation in which the competence is applied as a parameter.²²

The competence to perform a certain task has two components, according to Ellström. One is related to the stipulated demands pertaining to a profession and the task concerned. The second is the competence required by the situation. The stipulated competence requirements are the sum of professional training content, the orders of the supervisors or editors, and criteria of what a good performance is in the context. It is not only about written rules but also the norms and rules framing the professional practice.²³ This is a view that is applicable to the media reporting from an accident site.

Competence perspective on the journalist profession

The analytical model of this thesis can be placed in a learning context with the help of theories on professional know-how and competence. Such a perspective on covering traumatic events can hypothetically facilitate for journalists to prepare and understand their own reactions in extreme situations. It is also conceivable that editors may find support in this perspective in their efforts to choose suitable candidates for the job. The competence model for disaster journalism, in my view, could also serve to increase management's insights into employee needs after covering a disaster. Competence involves handling a task sufficiently. It is a reasonable requirement that employees assigned the task of covering a traumatic disaster have sufficiently good ability to do so.

A situation-adapted competence may mean that parts of journalistic competence that have no bearing on daily news reporting can be crucial

to the ability to be a reporting eye witness at an accident site. This involves the abilities to identify the situation quickly, to focus despite chaotic circumstances, and to make decisions adapted to the situation. Perhaps a newly graduate journalist with nursing background in emergency care is better equipped (in terms of ‘situational competence’) than an experienced journalist who has never encountered brutal death of the Gothenburg fire kind. On the other hand, personal experience of similar events may trigger memories and emotions that aggravate the situation also for experienced persons. The difference is subtle.



Figure 5. Competence model for disaster journalism.

The private person – actual competence

Life and professional experiences are the sum of life lived. What the journalists in the study ranked highest in terms of previous experience and competencies was life experience. Professional experience was deemed important but less so in relation to the situation. Life experience determines individual personality and vulnerability in a high degree. The fact that the human psyche is developed through efforts and challenges can mean both strength and increased vulnerability. It can both reinforce and break you. Vulnerability can be affected by factors such as personality, previous life crises, stress resilience, unprocessed trauma, previous mental problems and present physical status such as hunger and lack of sleep. Different individuals have also different resilience to meet and handle potential traumatic events.²⁴ The effect of vulnerability on work performance is related to the current situation and not least training and experiences.²⁵ The latter begs the question: do journalists practise enough for disasters or other assignments under the influence of acute stress?

The private person – formal competence

Life and professional experiences were the factors most valued by the journalist covering the Gothenburg fire. Formal education was rated lower. However, there were some knowledge areas in which the journalists would have liked to have formal training: medical first aid, disaster journalism and stress and stress management.

The profession – formally stipulated competence

Different types of journalistic assignments require different types of stipulated competence. There are, for examples, different demands placed on a sport reporter and an economics reporter. The professional codes for press, radio and the TV apply to all journalist categories but the rules are only adjusted to situation specific journalism to a very little extent. This should be done to a greater extent. There are both written and unwritten rules for news coverage. Many journalists referred to "the editorial machinery" starting and how ingrained reflexes worked, which is good but is it enough? Job descriptions were understandably scant during the first hours since reporters informed their bosses rather than the other way round. But a checklist or a trauma specific

framework would have served a function at the kind of eyewitness reporting that was operative in Gothenburg.

Reaction – coping competence

A factor not previously included in, for instance, Ellström's studies of competence²⁶ is what I would like to call coping competence, which can be considered as a combination of the actual individual competence (related to vulnerability and life experience) and the situational competence, which determines how a person handles the extreme situation. A person with access to a great deal of actual competence under more normal circumstances, may, for different reasons, prove not to have good coping competence in an extreme traumatic situation. This is an unpredictable form of competence, which not even the individual can assess. Since different types of traumatic events in different situations trigger different memories and reactions in different situations, this is like a lottery. But you can still be more or less equipped. Increased knowledge of how, for instance, coping strategies work and what works for individuals might increase coping competence. Knowing normal reactions should be beneficial to normal reactions to abnormal situations since the overwhelming effect is less powerful. Daniel Goleman's²⁷ concept "emotional competence" entails an ability to recognise one's own and others' competences. Such a competence is probably beneficial to performance in such a situation.

Performance – the utilised competence

A sufficiently good journalistic performance can, in traumatic situations, also refer to the competence to dare to refrain from doing something or doing something as correctly and as well as possible. A way of protecting individuals afflicted by a disaster – or undergoing one – is that the journalist takes a step back and assumes the role of the eyewitness instead of the interviewer or photographer. In the acute phase of a disaster, this may be necessary to protect all parties. Asking the right questions or taking the most press ethically correct photos in the context are impossible. If the event is filtered through the journalist's own emotional filter, it can have two positive side effects: the journalist does not expose him/herself to guilt and shame for refraining from engaging in the chaos of rescue efforts, resuscitation attempts, grief and wrath

played out at the site. The reporter becomes an eyewitness and the photographer takes a step back. Both strategies were applied successfully (on some rare occasions) in connection with the Gothenburg fire. Personal eyewitness accounts and chronicles belonged to the most readable texts, and photos taken from a distance to the most successful ones. This practice does not mean compromising on the quality of journalism. On the contrary, the result can be perceived as more informative and ethically correct. Since journalists' presence on the scene seems provocative to others and themselves, this practice is also a chance to alleviate the acute and long-term stress reactions that also reporters and photographers are afflicted with. For how well does a journalist work in distress?

Reflection – learning and feedback

An important part of individual and collective competence is continuous learning. Without evaluation and reflection, without self-criticism and professional debate, learning stagnates, and with it journalism. A part of the learning process can also be informal and formal conversations or evaluations, for instance, a prolonged Monday meeting where everyone has a chance to unburden themselves or individual therapy sessions with psychologists. In 1998, the year of the fire, confidence in defusing and debriefing was not high. Presently, more and more researchers share the view that that the human being possesses a resistance that can be mobilised through social support rather than routine debriefing.²⁸ More, informal meetings for evaluation and learning, used routinely can, however, serve as professional development and collective learning. Feedback should also take place repeatedly even when experiences have sunk in and merged with other experiences.

Professional norms for trauma journalism

According to the result of this thesis, the press ethical rules should, in connection with journalists witnessing traumatic event, be supplemented with the following recommendations:

1. Remember that interviewed persons in distress or or with more severe stress reactions can not only cause publicity damage because of the media exposure in a vulnerable situation, but also prove to be an unreliable witness, i.e. an unreliable source.

2. If possible, avoid interviews with individuals in distress or with more severe stress reactions and rely on your own eye witness account.

3. In choosing photos of identifiable persons, consider especially the choices made for issues and broadcasts in the area closest to the accident site, or a place directly affected (in particular an international disaster involving Swedish citizens from one or a few geographical places).

4. If possible, avoid photographing identifiable persons whose faces must be masked/pixelated before publication. Try to select on site.

5. Avoid providing captions to your photos or comments that can mislead or be obsolete in damaging way on publication. Avoid referring to persons as "saved" or "injured" if their medical condition is uncertain or fatal before or immediately after the publication.

6. Work together in pairs when reporting as eyewitnesses from an accident site. The social support of a colleague is indispensable in the psychological and professional coping of a potentially traumatic experience on site and long-term.

7. Make clear to colleagues and others that the journalist's job at an accident site differs from the duty of other professional groups in a crucial way: journalists have no duty to help and save lives, but are only obligated to be professional eyewitnesses. Increased understanding of this may hopefully counteract the strong feelings of guilt and shame that afflict journalists reporting on an ongoing trauma.

8. Be aware that seemingly absurd behaviour (such as aggression, humour and distancing) can be normal reactions to abnormal events. This applies to the afflicted (injured and survivors at the accident site) and indirectly afflicted (eyewitness journalists). Make sure that you have basic knowledge of common crisis reactions and coping strategies. The situation will then be less difficult to comprehend.

9. Stress management for media personnel should (as for anyone else) be based on individual needs. The media company employer should draw up a crisis organisation for providing social and psychological support and any treatment warranted by potentially traumatic experiences. Social support from family and friends should not be underestimated.

10. Systematic organisational learning should be implemented after traumatic coverage, be it accidents, disasters, crime, terror attacks or war. Employees reporting on such events have invaluable experiences to convey to their own company and to colleagues.

The purpose of the extended framework is to achieve a "sufficiently good trauma journalism."

Learning for better or worse

Learning and competence are ongoing processes. Competence cannot be restricted to special challenges. "Learning refers to relatively permanent changes in individuals as a result of individual interplay with the surroundings", writes Ellström.²⁹ In the pedagogical debate, experience-based learning from everyday practice has been emphasised.³⁰ This is to be considered as an opposite to "learning" in the sense of learning in formal educational situations. Competence is not available "in a jar" as a static and isolated phenomena, but is built.

Learning is automatically regarded as positive and beneficial to the individual. But is all learning really beneficial? Ellström, for instance, calls individual repetitive experience of negative situations destructive learning. In the long run this is equivalent to acquired helplessness. The effect of this situation is passivation, reduced problem-solving ability and lowered self-esteem, which in turn leads to a kind of dismantling of professional development.³¹

In this light, the above reasoning regarding the risks of destructive learning and acquired learning seems obvious for all professional groups involved in uncontrollable events. Rescuers as well as media representatives are in great need of sensitive organisations with constructive learning and professional development. "We have to keep it up all life", said former arch bishop KG Hammar, once about our need for life-long learning.³² He referred to how a monastery in Denmark adopted the idea of "life-long learning as just as unavoidable as the calendar." Is this happening in journalism?

Footnotes

- 1 Dyregrov (1992) p. 173.
- 2 Nordström (1996); (2002)
- 3 Dyregrov (1992) et al.
- 4 Yerkes and Dobson (1908) in Larsson, Kallenberg et al. (2003)
- 5 Anthonovsky (1987)
- 6 Dyregrov & Mitchell (1992), also in Dyregrov (1992)
- 7 "Crisis support at traumatic events" (Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse) *The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (2008)
- 8 Ekman (1999) p. 36f
- 9 Nycop (1971), also in Rosenberg (2000) p. 109.
- 10 Rosenberg (2000) p. 109
- 11 Josefsson (1998) p. 9 ff
- 12 Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 304f
- 13 Rosenberg (2000) p. 126
- 14 Lamark & Morlandstø (2002)
- 15 Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 43
- 16 Lamark & Morlandstø (2002) p. 56
- 17 Melin-Higgins (1996); Ekström & Nohrstedt (1996) p. 291
- 18 www.ne.se kompetens: lat. Compete'ntia
- 19 Ellström (1992)
- 20 Shalit (1983)
- 21 Shalit (1983), also in *Pedagogiska grunder* (1998) p. 296
- 22 *ibid.* p. 40
- 23 *Pedagogiska grunder* (1998) p. 294f
- 24 "Crisis support at traumatic events" (Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse) *The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (2008)
- 25 Dyregrov (1992), p. 22
- 26 Ellström (1992)
- 27 Goleman (1995)
- 28 "Crisis support at traumatic events" (Krisstöd vid allvarlig händelse) *The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)* (2008)
- 29 Ellström (1992)
- 30 Moxnes (1981); Ellström (1992); *Pedagogiska grunder* (1998).
- 31 Gestrelus (1991)
- 32 Former Swedish archbishop KG Hammar in the magazine (Swedish) *Tro och Tanke*, no 2000:4. The Church of Sweden Research Department (Svenska Kyrkans forskningsråd).



” Herre Jesus Kristus, du som är uppståndelsen och livet, se till oss som i dag ber för alla de människor som drabbats av brandolyckan i Göteborg. Vi ber för dem som omkommit – slut dem i din kärleks famn för dem som sörjer och lider – stå vid deras sida och ge dem kraft att orka vidare för de överlevande – hjälp dem att se det Livets ljus som lyser i mörkret för alla oss som förtröstar på dig – Herre du är vår tillflykt, vi skall inget frukta. Herre, Du som omsluter oss med din kärlek, var oss nära. Amen. ”

- Årkebiskop K G Hammars förbön för katastrofens offer

POSTSCRIPT: ON SILENCE

The type of media coverage treated here would sometimes benefit from seeking moments of silence as a balance to the pervading cascades of words and images – giving readers, listeners, viewers a chance to reflect and understand. In the TV medium, the absence of words could be accompanied by image and music (music or environment sounds). Rather than forcing viewers to turn off the set when they can take no more, and rather than simply "churning out" more and more misery, viewers could be offered a pause of rest with sound and collage designed to be filled with their thoughts. Properly done, it would not be experienced as uninteresting or as losing momentum, but as a chance to "breathe". On the radio, breathing space can be music or environment sounds. Such "soundscapes" – listening landscapes – should be offered more often as a break from the word-stream in the . The silence of the press could be implemented through pages with comforting images and brief headlines, for example, a poem or, as in the case of the Gothenburg fire, when Aftonbladet published a prayer by the former Archbishop K.G. Hammar, placed next to a picture of young people embracing. It is comforting to rest one's eyes on a page like that after all the dramatic pictures of sudden, tragic death and unbearable suffering. What is the point of "churning out" words when they cannot capture the indescribable?

This 'wordy' book on the media coverage of the Gothenburg fire, a book characterised by volubility as well as "lack of words" and a multitude of pictures of that which is "undisplayable," is concluded with a line written by Caroline Krook, bishop of the Stockholm Diocese, in *Svenska Dagbladet* 2003:

*For the strongest feelings
there are no common words.
Only poetry, at best.
Or silence.*

(The daily paper *Svenska Dagbladet*, 2003-01-26, and quoted in The Swedish Church magazine *Kyrkans Tidning* no 5/03.)

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Web source

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APPENDIX 1: EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE: Gothenburg fire, 1998, for reporters

Personal details

Name:

Newspaper:

Number of years in the profession:

Education:

Age:

Date of interview:

Main task in connection with the event (several checks possible):

() accident site; arrived at:

() hospital

() home

() commemorative/public grief site

() funeral

() follow up, e.g. documentary, thematic supplement etc., some months after the event

() other

Questions

Alert phase:

How were you informed about the Backaplan fire? What was your first thought/reflection on the event?

How was the assignment defined (instructions / directives)?

Were there different opinions on how the coverage should be handled?

Did the assignment give rise to any thoughts for you?

Did you ever have a wish to decline / to be able to say no?

Was the task redefined while you were at the site?

The course of events: some time specifications:

After your time at the site; when were you back on duty?

At the site:

Can you describe the scene when you arrived?

What were your immediate thoughts?

Did you make any decision that was later to define your action on site?

If yes, can you describe the decision, its meaning and consequences?

Do you think you made the right decisions?

How did you experience your own role as a professional person (journalist) at the site?

In retrospect, can you assess and describe how you felt during the assignment?

How did you reason before approaching/interviewing the afflicted? Could you assess their condition? How did you relate to this?

To what extent was it possible to take notes on site? Did you take notes?

Did your presence at the site provoke any reactions?

Did you refrain from doing anything that you normally would have done as part of a journalistic task?

Did you feel a need to spare yourself from the experiences at the site?
In what way were you and the editorial office in contact during the coverage?
How were decisions made on interviews, photos etc.?
To what extent did you work in a team on site? With another journalist? With a photographer? If yes, what was the significance of the collaboration to the outcome (= result in the newspaper)?
To what extent did you cooperate/interact with journalists from other media on site?
Did the editors stop anything you produced from being published? If yes, what, and for what reason/s?
How did the cooperation with other professional groups work on site (e.g. rescue services, ambulance crew, police)?

Back at the office:

Was there occasion to consider any special ethical issues in connection with publishing?
For example, editorial approach to
a) publishing interviews with people in shock
b) publishing photos of traumatised/afflicted survivors.

When was it clear to you that many nationalities were involved? What aspects of ethnicity were discussed?
Do you think that your description (coverage task) was affected by the fact that many people with immigrant background were involved in the accident?
If yes, how?
Was there a discussion on whether the ethnicity aspects of the event should be emphasised or downplayed?
If yes, why?
Was choice of words discussed?
In what degree (if any) did you feel prepared to tackle this assignment?
Was there, to your knowledge, any reporter or photographer who could not carry out his/her duties?
Have you been offered/participated in crisis management/debriefing in connection with the assignment organised by
a) the employer
b) yourself
c) anyone else? needs/forms/problems
Were you on leave of absence during any period after the assignment?
If yes, did you request it or did the office suggest that you needed leave?

In the longer term:

Were the assignments given to you afterwards different in character?

Self-evaluation:

How would you assess and describe your own contribution in connection with the assignment?
How important is knowledge, education and experience to this type of assignment?
- how important is professional experience?
- how important is life experience/age?
- how important is formal training?
How do you think that your editorial office/newspaper covered the event
- at the site?

- in the hospitals?
In portraying people in grief?
The ethnical aspects: the fact that so many nationalities were involved?
What did you (the paper) do best?
Where did you (your paper) fail?
Could you have approached it differently?
Is there an alternative to eyewitness accounts, for example?
Do you have other experiences of covering disasters apart from the Gothenburg fire?
To what extent has there been a process of learning in the professional corps regarding media coverage of disasters?
What did the media learn from the Estonia disaster?
Have you/the editorial office learnt anything from disasters happening before the Gothenburg fire? If yes, how was the fire coverage influenced by previous disasters?
What have you/the editorial office learnt from the Gothenburg fire?
Is there anything you will do differently next time?
What do you think that the press corps / organisation has learnt from the Gothenburg fire? What effects can this have on future disaster coverage?

APPENDIX 2: CODE OF ETHICS FOR PRESS, RADIO AND TELEVISION IN SWEDEN

The press, radio and television shall have the greatest possible degree of freedom, within the framework of the Freedom of the Press Act and the constitutional right of freedom of speech, in order to be able to serve as disseminators of news and as scrutinizers of public affairs. In this connection, however, it is important that the individual is protected from unwarranted suffering as a result of publicity.

Ethics does not consist primarily of the application of a formal set of rules but in the maintenance of a responsible attitude in the exercise of journalistic duties. The code of ethics for press, radio and television is intended to provide support for this attitude.

WHAT CAN THE PRESS OMBUDSMAN REVIEW?

The Press Ombudsman, PO, can review printed newspapers and magazines as well as some online publications, i.e. online publications that are members of The Swedish Media Publishers' Association (*TU – Medier i Sverige*) or The Magazine Publishers' Association (*Sveriges Tidskrifter*), alternatively having filed for membership of the Ethical Press System. The Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority handles complaints regarding radio and television.

RULES ON PUBLICITY

Provide accurate news

1. The role played by the mass media in society and the trust of the public of these media call for accurate and objective news reporting.
2. Be critical of news sources. Check facts as carefully as possible in the light of the circumstances even if they have been published earlier. Allow the reader/listener/viewer the possibility of distinguishing between statements of fact and comments.
3. News bills, headlines and introductory sections must be supported by the text.
4. Check the authenticity of pictures. See to it that pictures and graphical illustrations are correct and are not used in a misleading way.

Treat rebuttals generously

5. Factual errors should be corrected when called for. Anyone wishing to rebut a statement shall, if this is legitimate, be given the opportunity to do so. Corrections and rebuttals shall be published promptly in appropriate form, in such a way that they will come to the attention of those who received the original information. It should be noted that a rebuttal does not always call for an editorial comment.
6. Publish without delay critical rulings issued by the Swedish Press Council in cases concerning your own newspaper.

Respect individual integrity

7. Consider carefully any publicity which could violate the privacy and integrity of individuals. Refrain from such publicity unless the public interest obviously demands

public scrutiny.

8. Exercise great caution in publishing information about suicide and attempted suicide, particularly with regard to the feelings of relatives and in view of what has been said above concerning the privacy and integrity of individuals.
9. Always show the greatest possible consideration for victims of crime and accidents. Consider carefully whether to publish names and pictures out of respect for the victims and their relatives.
10. Do not emphasize ethnic origin, sex, nationality, occupation, political affiliation, religious persuasion or sexual disposition in the case of the persons concerned if this is not important in the specific context or is demeaning.

Exercise care in the use of pictures

11. Whenever appropriate, these rules also apply to pictures.
12. Montage, electronic retouch and captions should be handled in such a way as not to mislead or deceive the reader. Whenever a picture has been altered through montage or retouch this should be stated. This also applies to such material when it is filed in picture libraries.

Listen to each side

13. Offer persons, who are criticized in a factual report, the opportunity to reply instantly to the criticism. Aim at presenting the views of all parties involved. Bear in mind that the sole objective of filing complaints of various kinds with various bodies may be to cause harm to an individual.
14. Remember that, in the eyes of the law, a person suspected of an offence is always presumed innocent until proven guilty. The outcome of a legal case should be published if it has been previously reported on.

Be careful with naming

15. Show careful consideration to the harmful consequences that might ensue for persons if their names are published. Refrain from publishing names if it might cause harm unless it is obviously in the public interest.
16. In case a person's name is not published, also refrain from publishing a picture of that person or details on occupation, title, age, nationality, sex, etc, which could enable identification.
17. Bear in mind that the entire responsibility for publishing names and pictures rests with the publisher.

More on Press Ethics

The code of ethics consists of a set of rules for members of the press regarding publicist decisions, it is not legislation. The rules serve as protection of the individual against publicity damages, beyond what the legal system can offer. PO and PON adhere to the press ethic rules in their assessments.

The legal framework concerning publications in newspapers and magazines are part of the Freedom of the Press Act (*Tryckfrihetsförordningen, TF*). TF gives each citizen the right to express her/himself in writing. The law also offers protection for the individual against defamation in newspapers. Online newspapers adhere to the corresponding rules in the Freedom of Expression Act (*Yttrandefrihetsgrundlagen, YGL*). If an individual considers her/himself to be subject of slander in a newspaper, there is the possibility of arbitrary prosecution. The Chancellor of Justice can also prosecute.

RULES OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCTS

Strong journalistic integrity is crucial for maintaining credibility. Those who scrutinize society must also be able to withstand scrutiny. It is important that journalists show due respect when working in the field and that journalists while on duty strive to report correctly, in order to retain the confidence of the general public. Trust in the media and its employees is built upon following the rules of professional conduct.

The journalist's integrity

1. Do not take on journalistic commissions in your professional capacity from people outside an editorial management group.
2. Do not accept commissions, invitations, gifts, free trips or other benefits – and do not enter into any agreements or other undertakings – that may cast suspicion upon your position as a free and independent journalist.
3. Do not succumb to pressure from outside parties that aims to hinder or restrict legitimate publicity or to create publicity when it is not journalistically motivated.
4. Do not use your position as a journalist, or your press pass, to apply pressure for your own or someone else's gain or to obtain private benefits.
5. Do not use unpublished news regarding financial circumstances or measures taken by the state, local government, organizations, companies or individuals for your own gain or that of others.
6. Observe the regulations of the collective agreements for journalists, which state that employees may not be ordered to carry out degrading tasks or tasks that are contrary to their beliefs.

Acquisition of material

7. Show particular consideration to inexperienced interviewees. Inform the interviewee whether the conversation and other material is intended for publication. Be careful to reproduce statements and other material that non-public figures publish in social media.
8. Accommodate reasonable requests from interviewees who want to know in advance how and where their statements will be used.
9. Do not falsify interviews or images.
10. Show due respect when on photographic assignments and when obtaining pictures, especially in connection with accidents and crimes.
11. Hidden camera and other hidden recording equipment, when used for the purpose of publishing, should be used only in exceptional cases, after careful consideration and when a journalistic evaluation has stated that the information is not available in any other way. Concerned parties should be informed that the recording took place and why it was carried out, before publishing the information.
12. Respect copyright rules regarding text, images and sound.
13. State the source when an account is based largely on someone else's information.

(<https://po.se/about-the-press-ombudsman-and-press-council/code-of-ethics-for-press-radio-and-television-in-sweden/>, 2018)

