Fallen Bridge, Moral Duties

A Study on the Ethical Principles of Disaster Journalism

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Honors Thesis
Introduction

It was 6:05 p.m. on a typical Wednesday in 2007 when disaster struck Minneapolis. Drivers spanning the I-35W Bridge over the Mississippi river felt a tremendous vibration, then dropped. "I was driving the car and I screamed when I heard it crack," said Janet Stately. "It's like it went in slow motion. I heard the crack and I saw the cars going straight in."¹ The unpredictable event caught Minneapolis off guard. The scene’s first responders were rescue personnel. Behind them, to spread the word of the shocking occurrence, came journalists.

News coverage of a disaster is essential to the community. Reporters in the field must work to actively gather the story in an environment devoid of comfort or safety. Instead, destruction and tragedy are the standard fare. Journalists must interview sources who are so immersed in grief they can barely tell their story, and sometimes simply cannot from the shock. Authorities are weary and tense from the constant pressure to pull the scene into order and help the victims out of the mess. Injuries plague many of the victims not claimed by death. And through it all, journalists must determine what happened, portray it humanely and inform the masses.

Yet the journalist’s role is more complicated than simply to report, write and photograph. The scene of a disaster is a fragile environment, where careless media personnel could do more harm than good. Journalists may interfere with rescue operations, intrude on emotional moments between those on the scene and further

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aggravate those already suffering from trauma. After the incident, their stories and reports can mislead, shock or simply disturb readers of all demographics with grotesquely graphic descriptions of gore, false information and exaggerated language. An untrained, or uncaring, journalist could be a hazard to society rather than a boon.

Few beats in journalism place as much necessity in a sound sense of journalistic ethics as that of disaster coverage. The subject has always been relevant for newsrooms; playing a major role in coverage of 2005’s damage from Hurricane Katrina, 2010’s earthquake in Haiti and countless other disasters. Just as police and paramedics must be trained to handle even the most unpredictable events, so must journalists learn how to cover disasters with ethics intact. Such an understanding is a responsibility of their job.

This study focuses on five key processes of the journalist’s work. It discusses ethical ways to gain access to the scene, to use authorities as sources, to treat witnesses and victims, to maintain accuracy and make omissions, and to communicate ethics in the newsroom. It compares these findings to the ethical principles presented in previous literature. Ultimately, it will examine how journalists can ethically yet effectively gather and present the news during the event of a disaster.
Review of Previous Disaster Ethics Literature

Gaining Access to the Scene of a Disaster

Ethical concerns over how to gain access to the scene of a disaster despite repelling forces like authorities or dangerous conditions came up in several articles. In one documented case, the Waco Tribune-Herald planned to investigate a local group of Branch Davidians’ religious leader over child sex abuse allegations in 1993\(^2\). The Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms warned the paper in advance that they planned to arrest the leader. The media were too close to the scene when it happened, despite fair warning from the authorities, and may have tipped off the Branch Davidians. Gunfire broke out, and a 51-day standoff ensued that resulted in injuries and deaths. Some thought the media were partially to blame for the religious group’s violent reaction. Their attempts to gain access to the story they wanted to cover may have interfered with authorities’ operations, and created a more dangerous situation for all involved.

The media must abide by the standards everyone else is held to, even if it makes newsgathering more difficult\(^3\). This includes interference with law enforcement, arrests and search warrants. Despite their motives, journalists are no more free to cause harm than any other citizen, and must shoulder the responsibility of doing so when their involvement exacerbates conditions. Because the ultimate result of some actions is difficult to predict, the media must explore the balance between risk and utility. Was


\(^3\) Hindman, 5
harm or detriment of any sort was foreseeable, and, if so, did the potential utility outweigh the risk? Did the journalist give sufficient consideration to the matter before he or she took action? These are the first thoughts a journalist should have when approaching a story where his or her influence could be a factor. Further, *prima facie* judgments, which make ethical calls based on what the situation initially looks like, can conflict with one another in some situations, leaving the media unsure of which action to take.

Another study, this one on the “Black Saturday” bushfires in Victoria, Australia, found that many media felt circumventing road blocks was “fair game,” and only requires a little ingenuity. Disputes came up, however, in the methodology of getting past the road block, with deception being a key point of interest. News media that did not have access to a helicopter believed that deception was necessary to employ. Without it, they would lose their competitive edge on news organizations that had the unfair advantage of sky access. Other surveyed media said deception is an impossible technique to justify, and should be avoided. In many cases, journalists established a significant difference between fortuitous and deliberate deception. They gave the fortuitous variety some lenience because the act was not premeditated. The article summarized by stating, “media people tended to place a higher value on successfully meeting the competitive pressures under which they work, and on carrying out what they saw as their duty to inform the public, than on the countervailing ethical duty to respect the law.”

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4 Hindman, 7  
6 Muller, 5
The question of access to private property can be a peculiar one since trespassing rules are in place even when no emergency is going on. Disputes arose with each property surrounding whether it is acceptable to go just inside the boundaries, around to the back or up against the building. While many media personnel indicated they generally consider going on property until the occupant there tells them to leave, the method has flaws. Disasters like wildfires or floods sometimes drive residents from their homes, leaving no one present to keep an eye on what the media are doing and whether their privacy is respected.

The general perception was that roadblocks were managed inconsistently and arbitrarily during the bushfires. Some media questioned whether authorities had ulterior motives for keeping the media out. They regarded roadblocks as a way to control the flow of information and “protect” survivors of the blaze from media inquiries. At the time, the media tended to disbelieve authorities’ assessments on safety; they saw emergency services personnel and others going in and out of the disaster zone, and wondered why they were not allowed in. Celebrities and politicians were sometimes among those permitted, which further aggravated the press. A differing viewpoint suggested some hesitation with road blocks is warranted, since the integrity of a crime scene is ruined when everyone is let in.

7 Muller, 5
Using Authorities as Sources

Little has been written about the ethical considerations the media must face when using authorities as sources in a story. It is, however, important to note that authorities and officials are likely to fall behind at releasing accurate information during lasting disasters\(^8\). Their primary duties during the overwhelming events of a disaster can leave them insufficient time to stay abreast of informing the media with the latest figures. Accordingly, journalists should not rely heavily on officials, despite the draw of a credible source.

Treatment of Witnesses and Victims

One of the most pivotal areas of ethics to consider is the treatment of survivors and victims. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is a regularly updated ethics-based resource for journalists concerned with the impact they make on victims, witnesses and readers. Its mission statement describes that it “advocates ethical and thorough reporting of trauma; compassionate, professional treatment of victims and survivors by journalists; and greater awareness by media organizations of the impact of trauma coverage on both news professionals and news consumers.”\(^9\) The website provides relevant articles, interviews with experts, advice from other journalists and other resources.

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\(^8\) Muller, 9

Most journalists covering the Australian bushfires incident reported that they received no guidance from their new organizations as to how to behave or what to do while gathering information for a story\textsuperscript{10}. The media met trouble just approaching their sources. Authorities sometimes made up the survivors’ minds for them, and would try to prevent the media from reaching those involved before the citizens had a chance to react. The article asserts it was not their place to do so, as most survivors and victims can accept or decline media approaches even when in shock.

Once media got a hold of individuals for interviews, the article placed a large stress on not being intrusive. It suggested prior consent be required for images and interviews with identifiable individuals, and that journalists should ask only once for permission. Pushing victims to talk more than that would be badgering, and a mistreatment of sources. The article says the nature of the work and of disasters like the bushfires makes intrusion inevitable to some degree, but a conscious effort to minimize it is critical. Moments of grief or intimacy are a personal matter that does not necessarily fall under the scope of what should be reported. When possible, intruding on these moments can and should be avoided. When a reporter witnesses something unexpectedly personal and difficult, such as people overcome by grief, the article deliberates between two opposing actions. One involves the reporter remaining at a distance and publishing what he or she saw without permission, but unobtrusively. The other consists of intruding on the moment in order to ask for permission and thereby ascertain the safety and humaneness of publishing details about it. No conclusive answer is given.

\textsuperscript{10} Muller, 6
Especially with interviews that leave some questions unanswered, following up at a later date is critical, and may reveal additional information that was not previously expected. In general, victims have no experience with the media and are vulnerable to exploitation. Keeping this in mind can help the media act ethically toward those involved.

The matter of how involved a journalist should be in recovery efforts leads to further questions. When a victim needs immediate aid, should journalists put down their notebooks and cameras to go and help, even if it means missing reporting the story? Or should they stick to the news at all costs, and stay removed from the events taking place in from of them? Some media found at the bushfires that victims would confuse them for authorities and demand advice or aid. They were expect to help victims through their struggles, even though the media had neither the resources nor the position to afford them the assistance.

**Accuracy and Deciding What to Publish**

A major concern of news organizations has always been ensuring news is accurate and true. The suddenness of a disaster mixed with journalists’ desire to inform the public as soon as possible makes the window for fact checking briefer than it would otherwise be. An article that surveyed a large number of editors from a variety of publications served as both a prevention piece as well as guidance for problems that have already come up. It stresses having good communication between staff members, since keeping

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11 Muller, 7
12 Muller, 8
stories in the dark before they are published increases the likelihood that misinformation makes it out to the public\textsuperscript{13}. Effective communication between coworkers also helps protect against issues concerning legality and public relations. Cases of libel, for example, are less likely to get past several proofreaders. The more people see a given story, the greater chance the organization will catch any problems with it before publication.

The article also shows the ramifications of printing false information, and how to address the issue and rebuild the news organization’s credibility. It asserts that news organizations are obligated to admit and correct all errors to their readership, no matter whether the mistake was substantial or trivial\textsuperscript{14}. Bringing up the matter promptly can be a beneficial way to clear the paper’s name as well as get the staff thinking about accuracy. When the paper answers for their errors, it should expect some of the public to react harshly. Sometimes, organizations or interest groups will take advantage of the moment to try to influence the paper unduly for their own agenda\textsuperscript{15}. The paper should give this a fair and open hearing, but turn away the group if the behavior continues for too long. Editors must also keep in mind that the public gets over the paper’s flaws faster than the paper’s staff, who will take responsibility for the errors without being told to. The staff may take a long time to completely get past it, so it is important not to overemphasize errors when they cause little actual harm. After sufficient discussion, staff should let the matter rest rather than repeatedly bring it up.

\textsuperscript{13} Campbell, Don. "When Disaster Strikes." \textit{American Journalism Review}. Dec (1999): 24
\textsuperscript{14} Campbell, 25
\textsuperscript{15} Campbell, 26
For serious mistakes, the article urges editors to keep the offending reporter’s material out of the paper until they resolve any accompanying issues. Allowing a journalist’s stories to run when the readership is questioning his or her credibility can further damage the paper’s reputation\textsuperscript{16}. In some cases, threatening to fire the reporter responsible for the mistake could be appropriate. The action will demonstrate to all journalists in the newsroom how critical accuracy is to their line of work.

The Australian bushfires case covers concerns regarding what the media should publish and what they should exclude. The issues that arise involve taste and decency, verification of facts, information overload and the effects of the disaster being in the Australians’ “back yard.”\textsuperscript{17} Grisly details and images relating to how people died in the fires and the conditions of their bodies afterward often distressed not only the surviving family members, but the general public. Along similar lines, disasters close to an audience’s home, such as the bushfires were for the Australians, are likely to cause a greater impact on the audience. The standards of public taste are accordingly easier to violate, because those interviewed or pictured during the course of coverage could be part of the audience. The media runs the risk of informing friends and relatives of the dead about their demise before authorities have the chance. The article urges media to take into account the circumstances in which they receive information. Sometimes just considering the context would show whether a confidentiality of some sort was expected.

A second large concern of in this category of ethics is that speed is becoming increasingly more the impetus for inaccuracy. As authorities and officials fell behind during the bushfires disaster at releasing information, phones calls, texts and Twitter

\textsuperscript{16} Campbell, 24
\textsuperscript{17} Muller, 8
posts influenced took their place influencing the media\textsuperscript{18}. Social networking sites like Facebook made it difficult to verify the identities of the dead before they became known. Journalists had no method of checking the validity of these sources or knowing which to believe other than to check the information with official sources, which often proved fruitless. The article reveals that, “it was obvious from many respondents that getting material up online first was a far stronger imperative than making sure it was right.”

When a journalist is aware distorted information is present, he or she must ensure it does not reach publication\textsuperscript{19}.

The final concern in this area of ethics takes into account how the audience reacts to what gets published. Even disturbing or shocking elements of a disaster must be published sometimes to accurately represent the magnitude of the human experience\textsuperscript{20}. A fact sheet from the Dart Center summarizes current research on how news coverage of traumatic events can affect the public and which factors are likely to further cause them distress. The compilation shows adults attend to the news during massive catastrophes early on and pay careful attention. In the week after the events of the terrorist attacks on 9/11, studies found 63 percent of American adults reported they “could not stop watching” news concerning the attacks\textsuperscript{21}. 81 percent reported keeping a television or radio tuned in for updates, and 46 percent said they started reading the newspaper more closely.

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\textsuperscript{18} Muller, 9 \\
\textsuperscript{20} SPJ Code of Ethics
\end{flushleft}
Additional research found a strong correlation between viewing news and experiencing distress. Distress was common and typically not intense for those keeping up with the news after a disaster. The sensation often manifested itself as sadness, fright or a general feeling of being “tired out” among those afflicted, though the emotional response tended to be stronger for those who had family members. Specific cases reported that those thought to be more vulnerable people were prone to negative emotional reactions. Several developed “severe psychotic reactions that remitted within a month,” but such cases were rare. In the research, certain specific images were found to particularly upset viewers, such as people falling or jumping from the towers of the World Trade Center and an airplane hitting the tower. Journalists, then, should take into account whether the images they pass on to their audience are too forceful for their purposes.

The research found that adults who were directly exposed to the event suffered most from the media coverage of it. A positive correlation showed they were susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. For those not directly exposed to it, the effects were far less afflicting. Viewing a tragedy on live television, it concluded, strengthens the relationship between media exposure and symptoms of PTSD. This places considerable responsibility in the hands of news gatherers. What the fact sheet is unable to address is whether people who are more distressed choose to seek out more disaster-related news, and what other causes might be that persuade people to continue to consume such news.

Another article from the Dart Center briefly touches on disaster reporting and how what is published can affect the public’s perception of a disaster. The information and
context of a news story play a role in shaping how the audience attributes the blame for the event and their judgment of whether the event was preventable\textsuperscript{22}. If a party involved could have done more to reduce the damage that took place during a disaster, it often received an unduly large amount of responsibility for the disaster. The example given says that if a theoretical earthquake were to occur under several buildings that were all built differently, the ones most ill-equipped to handle the violent tremors would draw the most attention. Although the damage could never have happened without the presence of the earthquake itself, those who read about the poorly-equipped buildings would blame their architects and builders for not only the lack of preventative action, but the majority of the damage itself. The forces of the earthquake would be given little weight in comparison to the culpability of the humans. Accordingly, media personnel must consider what persuasions their words and images may have on an impressionable public.

\textbf{Communicating Ethics in the Newsroom}

The final area to consider is what role ethics play in the newsroom. When journalists are well informed in the newsroom, it creates what one article refers to as a “culture of ethics”\textsuperscript{23}. Being proactive and open to discussion about ethics keeps it at the forefront of peoples’ minds. Eventually, ethical considerations become natural ideas to explore early on with each story.

\textsuperscript{22} "The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma: A Resource for Journalists Who Cover Violence." \textit{The Effect of News “Frames”}. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. Web. 6 Apr 2011. \textless http://dartcenter.org/content/effect-news-frames\textgreater .

\textsuperscript{23} Campbell, 24
Widespread disagreement between interviewed sources stemmed from whether the ethics needed to be fixed in writing. When it comes to monitoring the ethics in their newsrooms, some papers update their ethical codes annually. Others mandate that new hires read over their codes and have those already on staff sign a statement saying they have read the latest version. The Arizona Republic uses a “credibility committee,” where a team of journalists get together to evaluate the copyediting process and determine the ethical principles that should be followed. With each organization comes a slightly different approach to the ethics code. One editor believed having a code of ethics was only valuable if it became a “living document” in the newsroom, implying that the ethics code needs to be an active focus of the organization that everyone discusses and knows. Another editor agreed with this, saying the presence of an actual document is insignificant, but writing and talking about the principles is the most critical part.

**Ethical Principles Found in Previous Literature**

**Gaining Access to the Scene of the Disaster**

- The media must abide by the same legal standards as everyone else
- Journalists should never interfere with rescue operations
- Authorities are often overly restrictive when setting up a perimeter

**Using Authorities as Sources**

- Journalists should not rely heavily on authorities as sources

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24 Campbell, 27
Treatment of Witnesses and Victims

- Journalists should not be intrusive or badger reluctant sources
- Journalists should get contact information to follow up with sources later
- It is unclear whether journalists should help needy victims or remain uninvolved

Accuracy and Deciding What to Publish

- Good communication and editing help prevent errors from being published
- A news organization must take responsibility for and correct all published errors
- Use of graphic images and words is sometimes necessary, but should be controlled

Communicating Ethics in the Newsroom

- Journalists should discuss ethics regularly to create a “culture of ethics”
- It is unclear whether a written ethics code is necessary
Methodology

The first step of my study was to define how the term “disaster” would be used. For my purposes, it would represent a somewhat sudden event that caused physical and emotional damage to a large number of people but was not the result of a deliberate and malicious human action. Accordingly, all crimes were excluded from the definition. For example, the Virginia Tech shooting of 2007 would not qualify as a disaster under this interpretation, while the 2010’s magnitude 7.0 earthquake in Haiti would. The disaster did not need to be a natural one; it could represent an accident involving man-made elements. Additionally, for the purposes of this study I considered the term “catastrophe” to be equivalent and interchangeable with “disaster.”

I also assessed the possible connotation of the word “disaster” before beginning. The word is defined as “anything that befalls of ruinous or distressing nature; a sudden or great misfortune, mishap, or misadventure; a calamity.”25 While the word functionally appears to slant whatever it describes as an inherently negative occurrence, that fact resulted in no issues during the course of my work. The Interstate 35W bridge collapse case study was universally regarded by every source I interviewed and all other references I encountered as a wholly negative event. Further, because I was not addressing crimes, where human influencers work against one another, I ran no risk of favoritism or other bias in my study from labeling the bridge collapse a disaster.

The I-35W bridge collapse happened in the early evening on August 1, 2007 in Minneapolis. The bridge’s disjoined fall into the Mississippi river was not a foreseeable one. It took place without warning at 6:05 p.m., while rush hour traffic was moving slowly across. Roughly 100 vehicles were on the bridge at the time. This particular case study was appropriate for several reasons. First, the magnitude of the event drew enormous media coverage, creating ample interview sources for data collection, which in turn would lead to more meaningful and insightful results. Next, the victims and responders at the bridge collapse were a random selection of people. Their reactions and behaviors were more likely to represent the general public than would those in a disaster who were linked by common interests. For example, if a flood were to ruin crops and damage property on several different Minnesota farms, the responses of those involved would represent the regional agriculture industry, not the population of Minnesota as a whole. Finally, the bridge collapse fit my definition of “disaster,” which meant it would serve as a valid situation for discussing disaster ethics.

The news organizations I studied comprised two daily newspapers: the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer Press. Each of these Twin Cities news organizations sent a team of news reporters to cover the collapse as soon as possible when they learned of its occurrence. Both papers published reports of the event shortly thereafter. I chose to investigate two large daily newspapers to ensure responses would not be governed by the organization for which a given employee worked. The findings of

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this study would then be more representative of the print news media as a whole, rather than the staff at a single news source.

I began my research by collecting the published news articles from the day of and the days immediately following the bridge collapse. I examined these for several reasons. First, the articles provided me further background knowledge on the event, which would prove useful when talking to interview sources. Second, it allowed me to see what was published and get a sense for what ethical dilemmas those who were involved with writing and photographing for that article may have had to face. Finally, the articles’ bylines provided a starting point for contacting my interview sources, as the byline named one or more people who were directly involved in writing the story. A brief summary of the articles’ content follows this section.

From there, I was able to ask around for the names and contact information of other staff members involved. A larger number of journalists from the Star Tribune were willing and able to assist than from the Pioneer Press, which may relate proportionally to the number of reporters working at each paper. I assembled a list of contacts who were involved with covering the bridge collapse:

**Pioneer Press:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position title in August 2007</th>
<th>Involvement with I-35W</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Brewer</td>
<td>General assignment reporter</td>
<td>In-office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Hoppin</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>On-scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Nelson</td>
<td>Senior city hall reporter</td>
<td>On-scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Orrick</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>On-scene</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Star Tribune:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position title in August 2007</th>
<th>Involvement with I-35W</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Giles</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>On-scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Havens</td>
<td>Ramsey County reporter</td>
<td>On-scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Kennedy</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>On-scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina McCombs</td>
<td>Senior producer for multimedia</td>
<td>On-scene*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul McEnroe</td>
<td>Investigative reporter</td>
<td>On-scene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick Meryhew</td>
<td>Reporter on the state desk</td>
<td>In-office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenni Pinkley</td>
<td>Multimedia producer</td>
<td>On-scene*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhonda Prast</td>
<td>Projects editor for web</td>
<td>In-office*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Denotes the journalist was involved with the “13 Seconds in August” project in addition to news stories, a compilation assembled over the years following the bridge collapse that tells the stories of those involved and presents video interviews with survivors.

Next I moved on to data collection, which I performed over the phone, asking a list of eight prescribed questions which I supported with follow-up questions. Each of the eight questions was opened-ended, beckoning a thorough and thoughtful answer from sources. The questions covered the five main foci of my study: gaining access to the scene, using authorities as sources, treatment of witnesses and victims, accuracy and what to publish and communicating ethics in the newsroom. I was careful to instruct each source to speak about disaster coverage in general, but to supplement with specific anecdotes from the bridge collapse.

### The Questions:

1) How do you respond when authorities or conditions make it difficult to gain access to the scene of a disaster?
2) How adamantly do you pursue on-duty authorities as sources of information?

3) How do you react to victims and witnesses who exhibit reluctance or refusal to talk with you about the events of a disaster?

4) How does the amount of time that has elapsed since the disaster change sources’ desire to speak about it with the press?

5) To what extent do you verify the accuracy of breaking news gathered in the wake of a disaster before committing it to be published?

6) How do you decide which information or images should be withheld from a story in relation to graphicness and the audience reaction they may cause?

7) What policies and guidelines does your news organization have in place regarding the treatment and coverage of disasters?

8) Do you have any other comments to share regarding the subject of disaster coverage and the ethical behavior of the media?

After the interviews, which ran between 15 and 40 minutes in duration, I transcribed each subject’s answers on a computer document, separated into the five categories of interest.

When I had finished gathering all 12 responses, which comprised 250 minutes of interview, I set them side by side to look for repeated sentiments and trends in the answers. The most widely-occurring responses were all included in my findings. Points made by two or three sources were also included, but with efforts to preface them accordingly as the words of “several” or “a few.” When a source made a point that did
not corroborate with any of the other sources, the information was omitted from the results section.
Composition of News Articles

The nine articles collected were from the first and second of August, which were the day of the bridge collapse and the day after, respectively. Later articles were excluded because the focus of this study is to consider the ethics surrounding disaster coverage immediately after the disaster happens. After a significant amount of time passes, questions over concerns such as accuracy and access become less relevant, and many of the points at focus in this study are less applicable.

News articles from the evening of the collapse focused primarily on describing the scene and assessing how it physically affected people at the moment. The articles repeatedly employed imagery of cars in the river, fragmented pieces of the bridge and survivors being carried up the riverbank. A single statistic was given in the earliest of the stories, which approximated the number of cars in the river. Other important information, such as that people were injured and killed, did not have an accompanying estimate.

Later in the evening, a longer article came out that included input from several officials, including the police chief, fire chief, governor and a spokesman for the FBI. This article included information on when the bridge was built, the maintenance it was under at the time and the unlikelihood that the incident was a terrorist attack. It presented the first estimates of how many people were killed and how many injured, and had the first quotes from witnesses on the scene. Unlike the previous article, this one touched on the emotional impact for those involved. The 1600-word article also

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attempted to contact sources related to the known parties on the bridge, and extensively covered the situation at Minneapolis hospitals who were receiving the victims. The end of the article described how the Twins baseball team would be canceling its August 2\textsuperscript{nd} game.

News stories on the day following the event became more specialized in topic, generally choosing one aspect of the bridge collapse to base the story around. Possibly on account of the less restricted writing time, their paragraphs had changed from short and declarative to longer with more complex and descriptive sentences. Stories now involved more anecdotal input from those on the scene, and words like “horrific” and “disaster” received their first use outside of quotations. More descriptions came into play also, including assertions that the area looked like an “earthquake” had hit, or a “terrorist attack” had taken place. Another article was a play-by-play of the disaster, indicating in what order everything happened and, where possible, what time. This particular article stands out as the only one to have no direct attributions to outside sources and closely embodies a “hard news” story.

One article gave an update on the National Transportation Safety Board’s investigation into the cause of the collapse. It detailed how the investigators would go about their operation and when progress reports were expected. It also put a call out for those in the area with video or photographs of the disaster taking place. Another article was based solely around the building contractor, Progressive Contractors Inc., and their

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29 "NTSB: 'We are making progress today'." St. Paul Pioneer Press 02 Aug 2007, Print.
involvement with the bridge’s $9 million surface repair plan before its collapse that day\textsuperscript{30}. The article does not suggest any causation or relation on Progressive’s part as to why the bridge fell. Instead it profiles the company and discusses the changes that had been on the agenda.

A follow-up Twins article came out to detail how the Twins’ president had to decide whether or not to continue with the game that had been scheduled for that evening\textsuperscript{31}. It interviewed people to see what the impact the Twins’ choice to still play the game had on the situation, and how the bridge collapse affected Twins fans and players.

Two more articles from August 2\textsuperscript{nd} focused on the victims and the witnesses. One was the story of how those involved with the collapse had used the internet to relate their experiences to relatives and friends\textsuperscript{32}, while the other profiled those who were killed in the incident or were still missing\textsuperscript{33}. These articles involved few statistics, concerned instead with the emotional devastation people felt and speaking about who the people were that had been killed.

Overall, the articles that immediately followed the event poised this study to expect ample discussion in certain areas. The articles focused most strongly on the impact the disaster had on people who were involved and included death counts and emotional anecdotes. It was therefore clear that treatment of witnesses and victims would play a large part in the study. They cited a plethora of officials from countless organizations,

\textsuperscript{30} Kennedy, Tony, and Paul McEnroe. "Contractor working on bridge repair is a major player in state." \textit{Minneapolis Star Tribune} 02 Aug 2007: 14A.
\textsuperscript{31} Christensen, Joe. "Twins help by playing." \textit{Minneapolis Star Tribune} 02 Aug 2007: 1C.
\textsuperscript{32} Ojeda-Zapata, Julio. "Internet becomes lifeline, record: Bloggers log on to connect with loved ones, share details and photos." \textit{St. Paul Pioneer Press} 02 Aug 2007, Print.
meaning the topic of using authorities as sources would also be important to address.

While the violence that occurred that day was referenced on many occasions, nothing extremely graphic made the articles. This suggests that gruesome details may have been removed, meaning the theme of accuracy and what to publish would be a large factor in considering ethics. No part of the articles discussed whether access was an issue for reporters at the time they were gathering information, nor how ethics are communicated in the newsroom. These are uncommon and generally irrelevant items for a new story to include.
Results

Gaining Access to the Scene of a Disaster

Getting to the scene of a disaster is a critical part of covering the story. Journalists’ work relies on observation that can only be done in person. They share the scene with authorities, who arrive to establish order and begin recovery efforts. Across the board, interviewees indicated that showing respect for authorities was crucial for getting and staying on-scene. “We have to rely on good psychology and good communication skills with whatever law enforcement, firefighters, and ambulance officials are on the scene to get where we need to be,” one journalist said.

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, officials are still attempting to secure the area, and tend to be less concerned with where the media goes, journalists said. Since rescue operations are the first order of business when disaster strikes, authorities initially have to devote their attention to helping victims and are able to pay less attention to journalists. In the case of the bridge, which happened far more suddenly and unexpectedly than natural disasters do, emergency departments sent everyone they could spare to the scene and tried to get it organized. Some interviewees pointed out that media who ignore the warnings of authority personnel and get in the way, whether on foot or in car, could stunt rescue efforts and end up causing serious harm. Journalists have a responsibility not to exacerbate situations, and should never stand between people in need and efforts to help them, they said.
Journalists trying to cover a story must also realize they are not immune to perilous situations. Those approaching the bridge scene mentioned holding back from areas where they found “steel sticking out everywhere” that may have proved dangerous had someone tried to scale it and “a lot of white powder” that could have been a hazardous substance. At least one vehicle was still on fire when the media started to arrive. When it came to the orders first-responders gave while taking control of the bridge situation, interviewees said they always complied. “There was no reason for me not to honor what the officers were saying,” said a journalist.

An important fact cited by many interviewees is that journalists have no inherent right to pass police lines. One journalist stressed that the members of the media are just ordinary people that “don’t have any legal authority to walk up to a disaster scene.” That said, many interviewees said that authorities give them leeway at the scene of a disaster if they clearly indicate their role as a journalist and refrain from being intrusive. Asking for permission to enter the perimeter, carrying a notebook and wearing press credentials all help convince authorities to allow the media in. “Try not to look like a gawker,” an interviewee explained. “Look like you have a purpose for being here.” Those who frequently cover disasters said it helps to recognize police officers and rescue workers from previous incidents. These officials are more likely to trust familiar faces, and may grant them a break during a critical moment.

Police roadblocks also play a large part in the aftermath of most disaster scenarios. The general sentiment was the same across the board. “I haven’t ever been faced with a situation where I felt I needed to go around a roadblock or barrier,” said a journalist. Alternatives to cutting through obstacles like roadblocks, however, varied.
Largely, answers were split between those who stop attempting to gain further access once a police barrier gets in the way and those who look for a legal way around it. The latter method is sometimes as simple as searching for another route. “If there’s another access, then that’s ideal,” said an interviewee. Journalists who take this course of action see it as a non-intrusive means of adjusting their approach to covering the story. They probe the area to see if other entryways are still open, and go on foot instead of by vehicle if it allows them to get farther. “Often I’m doing it for the benefit of photographers,” a journalist said.

In the case of the bridge, those who arrived after authorities had set up a perimeter tried both banks of the river to see which provided more access. Sources agreed it was important to reach the scene itself or at least to find a vantage point where they could make observations and take long-range photographs or video. They indicated having an easy time getting close enough to the scene to see what was going on, since the bridge itself was blocked off but the shoreline was left open. Several mentioned that an area so large would have been difficult for authorities to completely seal off, even if they tried. Interviews went almost entirely without a source mentioning being physically removed or escorted off of the scene, both in relation to the bridge collapse and disasters in general. Interestingly, several noted that concern over access is not always relevant. Some disasters scenes have no limitations, and media personnel can come and go as they please.

Responses were split when interviewees considered whether public safety officials usually keep reporters away from the scene for a justifiable reason. Several expressed that police lines are kept needlessly far from the actual scene and stay as
impediments even after the commotion in the area is starting to settled down. “There are plenty of times when I’m at a crime scene a block away and I know that there’s no more threat,” a journalist said. Many interviewees noted that blocking off an area was more reasonable when there were still rescue attempts going on, or when conditions made it too dangerous for outsiders to enter. In the case of the bridge collapse, however, all agreed the space authorities allowed was reasonable, and many alluded to the magnitude of the event as the reason. Several of the interviewees arrived before authorities had time to establish any road blocks or other methods of obstructing access to the scene. Police began to take control of the situation while they were there, clearing people from the area.

Whether journalists believed authorities were handling the situation correctly or not, none indicated defying officials in any way. “If they say you’re not allowed in there, you’re not allowed in there,” said one interviewee, who echoed the feelings of the others. Even journalists who indicated feeling unfairly held back at some point in their careers expressed an unwavering compliance with following authorities’ orders. “You try to get as close as you can without violating the law,” a journalist said.

A critical element related to gaining access that had not been covered in any of the previous literature was that of not actually needing access. Establishing contact with victims and witnesses outside the disaster perimeter works for most media personnel. “I circled back to the hospital and waited outside the hospital doors. I asked everyone who was coming out if they had been on the bridge and got lucky,” said a journalist. Many interviewees readily stay behind police lines when instructed, and instead wait for civilians to leave it. Those caught in the grips of a disastrous situation will exit as soon as
possible if the route is clear and no other victims are relying on their help. Most journalists indicated waiting for their sources to come to them can be an effective method. “Getting right to the scene might not be as important as getting to the people who have been affected who might have been moved away from that,” a journalist said.

Compared to the principles found in previous literature, these findings are largely congruent. The interviewees are of a similar opinion in the belief that journalists should not interfere in any way with rescue operations, and that authorities can be overly restrictive when setting up a perimeter at the scene. Curiously, the one significant difference appeared with the subject of getting past roadblocks and police lines. The other literature showed journalists were split on the topic, and some thought it was justified to sneak across when possible. Interviewees for this study were never of this opinion.

**Using Authorities as Sources**

The easiest way for the media to get information about a disaster is from a designated spokesperson. “Often times, depending on the scope of the incident, they’ll have public information officers who are available for you,” an interviewee said. Selecting a single person to address the press frees up the attention of officials, who have larger concerns to deal with. Scenes of larger-scale disasters are often easier to get the facts on than smaller incidents because authorities make it a top priority to elect a spokesperson early on. The first press conference for the bridge collapse took place only a few hours after the incident itself. A day or two later, officials arranged a media event
with all of the first responders, one interviewee said. While this was not a typical action to take after a disaster, it may have been allowed because of the magnitude of the event.

Officials understand that journalists need a representative who can say what is known so far. “What happened to that bridge mattered to the rest of the country, and if those are the only guys that have the information, we’re going to keep going to them to get it,” explained one journalist. The majority of interviewees believed authorities are required to give journalists information regarding what happens at the scene of a disaster eventually. They work for the public; speaking about what happened is one way they help the public understand and come to terms with the disaster. In the same vein, journalists are responsible for making sure authorities release that information in a timely manner.

Though it sometimes yields no results, interviewees unanimously agreed that attempting to speak with other, non-spokesperson authorities is also essential. Curiously, responses from interviewees were evenly split between authorities usually not wanting to talk and mostly being willing to talk, a result which suggests each situation comes down to how the journalist approaches and who the authority happens to be. A consensus did come through, however, in recognizing that authorities who have had positive experiences with a member of the media before will be more likely to speak with him or her on the scene. Authorities are more willing to spend their time with journalists they believe they can trust. Interviewees also mentioned that waiting around until authorities become less busy makes it easier to get a few minutes of their time.

In some settings, authorities who are not high-ranking officials refuse to speak. “They’re not generally authorized to be quoted and don’t want to be,” one journalist said. This is more common in metro areas with large police forces than smaller suburbs.
Authorities who are permitted to comment but still decline could be too busy, too uninformed or simply unwilling to speak about the situation. Journalists must approach and ask, as there is no other reliable method for knowing whether an authority will be receptive. The necessity of getting the story outweighs the risk of a relatively inconsequential telling off.

When an authority refuses to help at all, the reason may have to do with the strenuousness of the work. “In something like a flood, where they get battle weary, they just don’t like seeing us around,” a journalist said. “Emotionally, they’re just whipped.” Fortunately, journalists do not always have to rely on instant consent. Often, there are other means of getting the information. “Some law enforcement will say, ‘Give me your card, we’ll talk later,’ because they don’t want to be caught talking to a reporter if their supervisor walks by,” a journalist said. These spoken agreements happen regularly.

While talking to authorities is critical, it still has potential pitfalls. Experienced journalists cautioned that authorities are not always the most reliable sources for a news story. “It can be perilous to grab whoever’s at the scene and try to get information from them because they may or may not know what the facts are,” an interviewee counseled. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the majority of on-duty authorities do not fully understand what happened, journalists said. They generally have basic information they were able to pick up through their police scanners, but nothing substantial enough to go in a news story. Reporters who use information from uninformed sources too regularly could increase the risk of inaccuracies in their publications. Another problem is that some authorities request to speak off the record, leaving the journalist with less printable,
credible information to work with. Thus, journalists should be wary of the impact certain sources could have on their story, even if those sources wear a uniform.

Compared to the somewhat scarce previous literature regarding authorities, the interviewees in this study responded very similarly. Authorities, while valuable sources, should not be relied on too much for breaking news. The consensus seemed to be that journalists should make every attempt to use them as sources, but understand that their other obligations during a disaster can limit their helpfulness.

**Treatment of Witnesses and Victims**

One of the most delicate and controversial aspects of ethical disaster coverage is not how to behave around rescue personnel, but rather how to treat those who were caught at the scene unwillingly. Witnesses and victims experience devastation they had never expected to see in their lives. Unlike a flood, which is capable of being forecast, the bridge collapse plunged victims into the chaos without any prior notice. Some of those who spoke about their experiences at the bridge reported a brief, intense vibration, and all of them described a sudden and unpredictable drop.

A journalist’s goal at a disaster scene is to talk about who was impacted and how it changed their lives, interviewees said. As victims often experiencing trauma or shock, however, the media’s approach can make or break the person as a potential source. “Never say something like, ‘Can I quote you?’ Almost always, they’ll say no,” one journalist warned. Interviewees’ responses varied in small details but used the same overarching idea when it came to introducing themselves to a victim. They start by
getting a read of a victim’s or witness’ face, trying to judge whether the person is in a
state where they might be willing to talk. Then they approach.

There is some discrepancy here on what to do next. Some said the most effective
method is simply to walk up to a person and ask what they saw. If the subject starts to
talk, the journalist will introduce him- or herself and what he or she is doing there. This
builds trust and familiarity with victims before requiring anything out of them. A
follower of this practice advised that the approach should mirror the type one would have
with strangers in a coffee shop. Other journalists said they politely introduce themselves
as media personnel right away. They explain why they would like to speak with the
person, and why coverage of the disaster is important.

One videographer cited the latter technique as a necessity, since video cameras
can be intimidating. “I automatically know that eliminates some of the people who would
talk to me if I had a pen and paper,” the journalist said. Those who carry cameras often
need to be extra tender toward victims and avoid making them feel like a video camera
has been intrusively shoved in their face. On the other hand, taking pictures from a
distance is almost always fine, and should not give the journalist pause unless the subject
matter itself is questionable.

An important thing for journalists to consider while in the field is that those
involved in a disaster will be affected in different ways and to different extents.
“Somebody who was just watching is a very different case than somebody in the water;
there’s a big spectrum of trauma,” an interviewee said in relation to the bridge collapse.
For that reason, eyewitness testimony is not necessarily reliable. Rescuing live victims
took about three hours in total after the bridge fell. “People were still coming out of the water and just looked totally out of it,” said a journalist who got to the scene early.

While some are stable and appear coherent, sudden and distressing events may place others in a state where they unintentionally give false information. Post-traumatic stress issues come into play, and victims may fail to remember events that they just witnessed. What they remember may be what they subconsciously choose to remember. “They may have seen a car go off the bridge, but whether or not they recall it is another thing,” a journalist explained. Conversely, victims could also remember events that never happened as their brains attempt to fill in gaps and explain the devastation. Those who tell their stories a few times may start to remember it differently.

Regardless of whether victims appear able to tell the story, interviewees recommended holding back when survivors were sharing an especially vulnerable or emotional moment with one another. “There’s a balance there,” said one journalist. “We’re in search of information, but we have to be compassionate.” Embraces between reunited families, grieving from parents of the dead and panting survivors who have just escaped the wreckage may make for good material, but the media should avoid intruding on such moments, interviewees said. Waiting until after the moment is over is respectful to those involved and usually leads to more willing sources. Unfortunately, not all journalists employ such discretion. One interviewee recalled a survivor who had climbed off the bridge and was trying to find his relatives to let them know he was alive. “A national broadcast crew happened to witness him have a very emotional reunion with his wife and other relatives. They came over and asked him to do it again.”
A journalist should never, under any circumstances, further aggravate those who have already experienced the disaster. This conviction extends beyond the level of emotional pain; disaster scenes are often riddled with the physically hurt. One journalist recalled speaking to four people at the scene, all of whom were stressed but uninjured. “I felt safe that they weren’t someone in deep shock who needed medical treatment at the moment,” the interviewee said. The consensus between all journalists who mentioned the subject of physical injury was that a quick and humane effort to help an injured person takes precedence over the role of the journalist as an observer. “I can’t imagine that if you were the only person there, you’d take pictures instead of help them,” one interviewee said.

Journalists should recognize that speaking to those involved in a disaster is, ethically as well as practically, a good thing to do, interviewees said. Besides the obvious benefit of the media having more information for their news stories, victims and witnesses also gain from it. The consensus among interviewees was that people generally are willing to talk about what they are going through, and appreciate the chance to speak about themselves. The process is therapeutic for them; to have someone listening and documenting the experience makes it more real. “We’re kind of nameless and faceless and we give them a vent,” a journalist said. Cousins, siblings and other relatives of a victim can be equally valuable for journalists to talk to for the same reason. These family members experience enormous concern for the victim, and can provide humanizing details for a news story.

One journalist noted that people who don’t work in the media would be “surprised how many people want to—and get catharsis from—talking about a person who’s died.”
While some do wish to be left entirely alone, the public maintains a misconception that those who have lost a loved one are unwilling to talk about him or her. The percentage of people who consent to interviews on disaster scene outweighs the percentage who will stop for “man-on-the-street” style interviews about less serious subjects. “I know that you’re curious about the people who were around you; we’re trying to answer those questions,” one journalist would tell sources. Once satisfied that the media was going to handle the subject matter and people’s emotions with respect, one source at the bridge collapse even went out of her way to help journalists get in contact with other sources. The benefits of contacts talking about their experiences also extend to people who had no involvement in the scene, but read the news stories later and are better able to relate to and sympathize with the disaster because of the survivors’ accounts of what it was like.

When those on the scene agree to speak, the most critical part is not asking them questions, but getting their contact information, journalists said. “Give them your card and get their phone number in case you’re interrupted in the middle of an interview,” one interviewee advised. With the magnitude of a disaster like the bridge collapse, follow-up interviews are crucial to writing further news stories. Keeping a source’s phone number gives journalists a quick and efficient way to check up on sources later and give them the opportunity to add to their account of the disaster or decide to speak for the first time. One interviewee said an editor started a spreadsheet to maintain all of the news organization’s contacts from the bridge. It helped keep straight the names, numbers and level of involvement of sources, and provided journalists a single, organized database to reference for follow-up stories.
Unfortunately, some victims and witnesses refuse to talk. Many are shell-shocked or simply numb as they try to process what happened immediately after their traumatic experience. Some see media personnel on the scene and try to leave unnoticed so as not to have to deal with reporters. The media should react to their situation with sympathy, even when it slows down the news gathering process. Above all else, journalists must be humane, and should never badger those at the scene. “If someone doesn’t want to talk to you right away because their husband just died, you’re not going to press too hard on them,” said a journalist.

Not only will pushing too hard negatively affect a potential source by compounding their trauma, but it can be counterproductive. Badgered victims are less likely to agree to talk later, and others on the scene who see the journalist’s aggression will likely also decline. A more appropriate response for journalists is to leave those victims and witnesses who choose not to speak their business card. If they change their mind later and wish to comment for the story, they will be able to. “If you don’t get them the first time, treat them with respect and maybe you’ll get them the second or third time,” said a journalist.

Sometimes the reason for a victim or witness not wanting to talk is difficult to understand. Many interviewees indicated they react by trying to keep them talking. They ask why the potential source is reluctant to share any information, and talk it over with them to see if they will reconsider. If not, they move on and find others, making sure to give a lot of space to decliners and not harbor any negative feelings toward them. “You try to respect their privacy and realize that they just went through a horrendous situation,” a journalist said. Regardless, the media should not get discouraged when potential
sources neglect to say anything. A widespread response from interviewees was to keep going and continue speaking to sources, even if earlier ones had reacted negatively or hostilely. “Sometimes, refusal to talk on a large scale is an interesting detail for a story,” one journalist added.

Curiously, the topic that received the largest variety in answers from interviewees concerned what percentage of those on the scene will consent to talking. The most conservative estimate was “they’re about half and half,” while the most generous estimate said, “over 90% of the time, people will eventually want to talk.” All other responses fell between those extremes. The spectrum of answers could result from different methods of approaching a source, or allude to the imprecision inherent in estimation.

A final element related to interacting with victims and witnesses during the coverage of disasters is that of time. Interviewees unanimously responded that journalists should speak with victims and witnesses as soon as possible, preferably before they have told their story to anyone else. The suddenness of what just happened makes people more eager to explain it to someone than they would be later, and the story is more likely to be accurate. “Nobody has their guard up at first; usually after they settle down at their home it gets tougher,” said a journalist. Immediate interviews with victims are especially useful for finding out what happened. The first question journalists asked those on-scene after the bridge collapsed was what caused it to fall. Along with how many people were injured and killed, the cause of a non-natural disaster is often one of the most important details.
A short while after the disaster, sources will be at their most resistant state toward interviews, journalists said. They have had the opportunity to tell those they know about what they experienced, and start to “lock up” because thinking about it brings up vivid memories of destruction and pain. As time goes on, some will slowly begin to open up, but it depends on the person. Survivors who suffered serious injuries with lasting effects are especially hesitant to recite their experiences from an incident.

With other subjects, such as the death of a family member, time can be a necessity. One source from the bridge collapse agreed to speak three months later about her deceased family member. “She teared up several times, but she was very willing to talk to me about what she was going through,” an interviewee said. Journalists should always check back with sources later, since some of them process the events over time and eventually become more comfortable with talking about them. Unfortunately, re-petitioning certain sources later on for further information may upset them. Those who are still sensitive from the occurrence might see it as a way to open up old emotional wounds. With the bridge collapse, a journalist with the Star Tribune mentioned the news organization asked people for “months, if not years” about the bridge collapse. According to the same journalist, at the time of this study, the last story in that paper on the subject had been written in December 2010.

The interviewees’ ideas on how to ethically treat witnesses and victims corroborated the previous literature in many ways. Both maintained that journalists should take care not to be intrusive or badger reluctant sources, and that contact information was critical for conducting follow-up interviews later. A striking difference did arise, however, over the subject of whether journalists should help needy victims or
remain uninvolved while on the scene of a disaster. Collectively, the previous literature did not come to a conclusion, while interviewees from this study affirmed that journalists are humans first, and should cease reporting and photographing to help any victims who are in desperate and immediate need of assistance.

Accuracy and Deciding What to Publish

When disaster strikes, it is the responsibility of the news media to inform the masses. With the allowance of time, distance and perspective, later news stories have high expectations of being extremely accurate, interviewees said. Earlier on, however, journalists are under pressure to get news stories out as soon as they can. Through the rush, it is their ethical obligation to also be as accurate as possible about what they tell the public.

The nature of disaster coverage does not allow journalists to sort through the rubble themselves and come to conclusions about what happened, one journalist pointed out. In order to avoid shouldering the blame for errors in more immediately-released stories, the media must diligently attribute information to the sources from which it came. “You’re not stating it as fact, you’re saying, ‘this is what I heard from someone,’” said a journalist. Presenting the information as straight from the source allows a thoughtful readership to draw their own conclusions from it.

Along the same lines, getting the source’s title helps the process by approximating whether the person has the authority to be speaking on the subject. Government officials, for example, can usually be taken at their word for statistics like death tolls, but a police
officer is an inappropriate source for advice on the stock market. Interviewees unanimously agreed that news organizations should run all of their information past official sources when possible. Accordingly, journalists should also be careful with random witnesses on the scene, they said. Such sources may claim, for example, to know the name of the person killed. Witnesses may be simply excitable or unbalanced in their evidence, and could identify the wrong person. As a safeguard against inaccuracies, a journalist should run any such important details by others before committing it to print.

In fact, it appears corroboration between sources is a critical cart of fact checking while at the scene of a disaster. “If I have an overall sequence of events I heard from the police, and a witness tells me something that goes along with it, I feel more comfortable publishing that,” a journalist said. Often, the news media can take the stories they gathered from all the sources at the scene and come up with a sort of “common truth.” Those testimonies from victims and witnesses that go against everything else they heard and observed should get cut from a story.

Some journalists deliberately ask a lot of questions to each source so that they have an elongated period of time to judge his or her demeanor. This makes it easier to determine whether the source is telling the truth, they said. Observed cues provide further verification. “If I saw someone whose legs were soaked past his knees and he said he just helped carry a dead woman out and there was a body bag not too far, I might take him for his word,” a journalist explained. Victims and witnesses whose stories seem riddled with holes or illogic should be cut from the story.

In a breaking news situation, finding reliable experts can prove difficult. As a safeguard against errors or deliberate manipulation from an outside party, a journalist
should always ascertain where exactly the information came from, and what bias the source may have. Some details do not need to come from a source if the journalist is capable of personally observing them. “Get the smell, the sight, the sound, the craziness, the feeling using your own powers of observation,” one journalist said. “You can say ‘mass chaos’ when people were running around and you can say ‘people were in shock’ when you see people stumbling around.” Such details add some imagery and description to a story that help balance the supply of statistics and quotes.

There are several extra safeguards that can be taken against unintentional errors. Interviewees said they round any statistics that have not been finalized and approximate numbers that may not be exact. Since precise counts on subjects like death toll and recovery costs may not be available right away, this method takes the culpability off the shoulders of the journalists. After the bridge collapsed, the Pioneer Press had a banner on its website that served as a disclaimer, advising readers that the event was a breaking news situation. The facts were unclear and were expected to change throughout the day as the situation developed.

The news media have to be careful about jumping to conclusions during the course of reporting, especially when it comes to presenting the names of those who are missing or dead, journalists said. The adverse effects of misreporting such facts is far worse than simply not having the information to begin with. “You’re feeding a frenzy, and that’s not a good thing to do,” one interviewee said. Running assumptions in the paper can be harmful to a news organization’s credibility, and may spur panic in readers. As the Internet becomes a quick and increasingly more popular medium for news delivery, journalists will need to be extra cautious about what gets posted. “Even though
we file things quickly, we have to be real careful that we’re not libeling somebody, that we’re not making stupid assumptions that lead to bad errors,” a journalist said. Once made, errors are difficult to take back.

With the bridge collapse situation, errors could have caused exceptional trouble with regards to one of the first questions that arose. Apart from rescuing those trapped and injured from the river, authorities were determined to discover the cause of the incident. “You’re not going to report someone saying, ‘I saw an explosion go off under the bridge.’ The magnitude of that assertion is pretty clear,” an interviewee said. The window of opportunity for false conclusions about how the bridge fell closed shortly after the event occurred, when Minneapolis Mayor R. T. Ryback released a statement saying there was no evidence to suggest terrorism. In general, journalists have to ensure they do not assume causality when evidence is insufficient. “If you have a license plate number of somebody from a terrible accident, it doesn’t mean they were driving the car,” an interviewee explained.

In addition to ensuring information is accurate, journalists have to grapple with the use of certain connotative words and phrases. Disagreements about whether given words were appropriate for use in a story come up often in newsrooms and with readers. Several interviewees said the media can be too generous with words like “catastrophe” and “disaster;” which make news organizations run the risk of sensationalizing a story. In the case of the bridge collapse, however, none said this was an issue. “There was no hyperbole that was too over-the-top. Bridges don’t just go down like that,” said one interviewee. In more general terms, journalists should avoid printing expletives unless there is a clear and convincing reason for an exception. Once papers have been
distributed or web articles have been posted, journalists have no control over what age
groups see the story. Inflammatory language is likely to offend a portion of readers. The
same applies to stereotypical statements. “Racist or racially insensitive phrases come out
sometimes,” one journalist noted. “I won’t get into an issue with the speaker of the quote,
but I’ll find a better way to say it.”

An especially delicate aspect to consider is that of graphic descriptions and
images. Journalists said they need to take care not to be grotesque or disrespectful in their
coverage of those who died. Descriptions of people crushed, burned or torn in two, for
example, will compound the grief and aggravation of their family members, which
journalists should never knowingly do. “We talk about people being shot in the head, but
we aren’t going to talk about the fragments of skull that are laying on the ground or the
fountain of blood coming out,” a journalist said. Ample imagery may be available for
use, but journalists should pick details selectively from their observations as not to
overload the public with brutality. The goal appears to be to give people a picture of what
happened without getting into any grisly descriptions that would have too strong a
negative emotional effect on them.

Some unsavory details are necessary, however, as one journalist recalled from the
bridge. “The bodies were literally pulverized to the point where that’s what was
preventing the identifications for a long time … You did have to say that to explain why
it was taking so long to get the information out.” While journalists should be careful not
to sensationalize what they write, many interviewees said that graphic descriptions are
sometimes the only way to convey the pain, anger and grief that people actually feel at
the scene of a disaster. They recalled seeing people covered in blood, and later let some
photos go unprinted because of how much blood was in them. One interviewee mentioned having discussions about whether to use photographs of bodies, covered by a sheet, that were taken with a telephoto lens from across the river.

Deciding exactly how much graphicness to put in the paper, then, can be difficult. A large news organization’s audience spans so many demographics of readership that finding a single, hard-and-fast limit is unrealistic. Many interviewees mentioned intentionally being more liberal with what they include in their stories. They consider too much a better direction to err than too little, and know their editors will rein in the details if their stories get excessive. Readers, several interviewees remarked, will not hesitate to reproach the news organization if descriptions or images of gore go overboard.

About half of the interviewees made a distinction between publishing in print and publishing on the web. Generally, the web was considered suitable for slightly more graphic material than the paper. While children probably will not stumble across a particular page on a news website, the odds of them seeing the front page of the morning paper are high. One journalist pointed out that the Internet gives a news organization the possibility of warning people before they see an image they had not intended to. “You have ways of saying, ‘The next picture is graphic; don’t click if you don’t want to see it’ on the web.” That said, news sites still have to be cautious. Neither the Star Tribune nor the Pioneer Press uses a paywall to prevent non-subscribers from viewing their content, meaning anyone could get to it. The images online, unlike those in print, are always in full color, which reveals more detail and represents reality better than black and white.

Curiously, responses were all across the board in regard to how often interviewees consider omitting graphic images or descriptions. Several said they rarely considered
holding back information. “You report on what happens; the reality of it, not a sanitized version,” said a journalist. “Some of the details are unsavory or difficult to digest.” Other interviewees suggested that the act of discussing what should be left out of a story takes place frequently, and is a continuing conversation in the newsroom. “If it’s very graphic, it takes a host of editors and a lot of discussion to decide whether it’s over the top and over the edge or if it’s really relevant,” said a journalist. Regardless of how commonplace interviewees find omissions based on graphicness to be, all believed that vivid descriptions and images were a necessary inclusion for stories about disasters. One interviewee summarized this point: “The emotional impact of an incident or tragedy is part of the news.”

Compared to previous literature, the interviewees in this study largely agreed on the ethical issues surrounding accuracy and deciding what to publish. Good communication and editing, they both said, will help prevent errors from being published, and a controlled supply of graphic images and words is sometimes necessary to truly convey the news on a given disaster. Where the correlation faltered was on the subject of correcting errors that do end up getting printed. While the previous literature stated it was imperative, this study’s interviewees did not speak much about it at all. In sections of both the Star Tribune and Pioneer Press, however, their respective new organizations run corrections of errors from previous issues. Such attention to errors and meticulous efforts to correct them suggest the interviewees, had they discussed the subject, would have been of a similar mindset.
Communicating Ethics in the Newsroom

Ethical coverage of disasters is not solely a product of how journalists react to what they discover while at the scene of the incident. How to behave ethically and how to handle disasters are subjects that receive attention, at varying levels, in every newsroom. Many sources speculated that their news organization may have had a disaster plan in place for how to handle an event like the bridge collapse. Of these interviewees, all of them said they did not remember talking about one and were unfamiliar with it, if it existed, at the time. Several mentioned that many news organizations had come up with one after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, but none were familiar with one at their organization before the bridge fell in Minneapolis.

Disaster plans are more common with foreseeable events than with sudden accidents like the bridge collapse. “We’ve had meetings about flood coverage, and who will go to each site to cover it,” an interviewee said. Smaller-scale or more continuous disasters are likely to get the reporters on duty, while large and sudden ones pull in those who are off the job. Journalists unanimously agreed that an attempted disaster plan to deal with an event like the bridge collapse would have been useless. The occurrence was too unique and too unpredictable to prepare for. “You can’t plan effectively for a bridge coming down during rush hour,” a journalist said.

One interviewee from the Star Tribune indicated that, since the bridge collapse, the paper has put together a quick response team of up to 15 people who are willing to both shoot video and do interviews. Each member of the team keeps “go bags” filled with clothes and other necessities under their desk or in their car so they can leave on a
moment’s notice. Their areas of coverage include disasters like airline crashes, highway pileups and bridge collapses anywhere in Minnesota or outside of it. The concept of the quick response team reflects what many journalists already assume takes place during a disaster scenario. “It’s probably one of the things papers and T.V. do best,” one interviewee said. “We just go.”

The idea of how to naturally respond to a disaster is so ingrained among journalists that many of the interviewees believe the ethical considerations and reactions come inherently with the line of work. While guidelines may be written down somewhere, professionals understand what is expected of them and how they should conduct themselves while on the job. They refer to it as an unspoken code, or a sportsmanship of sorts, that everyone in the newsroom is familiar with. “We’re a big newspaper and a lot of the reporters and editors have been around the block a few times,” said one journalist. “People are accustomed to knowing how to react.”

There are many expectations that accompany the unspoken rules of conduct. For example, journalists said they should not break the law or dishonor the institution for which they work. All should have integrity and keep their word to the people they come in contact with. Whether these rules are discussed or not, many interviewees indicated that new journalists would quickly learn to pick them up as they started covering disaster scenarios. “It’s like riding a bike,” one journalist said. “You don’t think about balance or how to steer it, you just go out and do it.”

The day of the bridge collapse, the Star Tribune set at least 50 employees working in some way on the story. “A lot of us were going home to our families, and we turned our cars around and came back to work,” a journalist said. “That’s the way it should work
at a newspaper.” Every photographer in the newsroom grabbed their cameras and ran, and beat reporters who would normally have had no involvement with covering the area were sent straight to the scene.

The interviewees who believe a disaster plan is unnecessary have other ideas for how best to approach the scene of a sudden disaster like the bridge collapse. The consensus for the most effective way is to saturate it with people of all disciplines and plan on the fly. Reporters, photographers and videographers on-scene feed those back at the newsroom with bits of information as they gather it, and editors in the office help figure out what should be used. “Everybody scrambles to get what information they can as quickly as they can,” one journalist said.

The most significant difference between the ethical views of the previous literature and this study’s interviewees came into play with how to communicate ethics in the newsroom. Responses between the two contrasted in nearly every way. The previous literature asserted that journalists should discuss ethics regularly among themselves to create a “culture of ethics”, an environment where ethical practices are frequently considered and employed. Whether a fixed ethical code was necessary to accompany this was hotly debated among the previous literature sources. Conversely, the interviewees of this study collectively decided that ethics was not necessarily something that needed to be discussed. A professional journalist would understand what the expectations were, and disciplinary action could be taken if they failed in exercising them. The interviewees also gave an overwhelming response that a written ethics code was entirely unhelpful, and conveyed that such a document was unimportant to them.
Conclusion

This study finds strong correlations in the responses from the 12 interviewed sources, suggesting even a matter as complicated, abstract and, at times, subjective as ethics can still benefit the journalistic community, and consequently, the community as a whole. All twelve interviewees reacted enthusiastically and attended thoroughly to the questions the study posed to them, signifying their occupational interest in the subjects discussed. Given the results found in this study, one can say with certainty that defining and following disaster ethics is a worthwhile pursuit, and one that will be relevant to professional journalists throughout their career.

When comparing the literature reviewed before interviews for this study were conducted, widespread correlations are evident. Largely speaking, the journalists of the Star Tribune and Pioneer Press agree with the ethical practices suggested by previous literature. The exception was on the subject of communicating ethics in the newsroom, for which there was no agreement between this study and previous ones whatsoever.

Several points of exceptional interest arose during data collection. The first came from journalists’ agreement that gaining access to the scene itself was not always necessary to talk to witnesses. The hectic atmosphere of a disaster draws journalists looking to get the story, but only upon second consideration is it clear the same franticness would repel the victims who so unfortunately were initially part of it. Those not incapacitated by injury or trapped in some other way have good reason to want to leave the scene as soon as possible, and journalists can take this into account to ensure they find sources.
Another striking point that surfaced was that many interviewees thought journalists’ on-scene responsibilities and ethics were unnecessary to discuss in newsrooms. After the plethora of previous literature articles concerned with the subject and organizations like the Society of Professional Journalists keeping an ethics code, such a response was unexpected. It should be noted, however, that the assumption by most if not all of the interviewees who agreed on this matter was that the journalist in question was an experienced professional who had already had time to learn the ropes.

This study did have limitations. In order to be concise, it focused on the Minneapolis area both for sources as well as its case study. While nothing about the data suggests its application would be significantly different anywhere else in the country, it should be noted that the information comes exclusively from journalists who were working in Minnesota at the time. Presently, several have moved elsewhere, including Jason Hoppin, who reports for Santa Cruz Sentinel in California, and Regina McCombs, who works for the Poynter Institute in Florida. Another limitation was that it did not cover the broadcast side of journalism. While one source, Tim Nelson, now reports for Minnesota Public Radio, broadcast media are otherwise unaccounted for. Likely, an all-inclusive study would have found some similar results from broadcast, especially because there is some overlap; newspaper websites regularly feature video and audio components. Several differences would have persisted, however, because of an emphasis on live reporting and the anchor’s role in framing and presenting a newscast.

The balance between practicing effective reporting and humane ethics is a difficult enough one to achieve in commonplace situations, let alone disaster scenarios. Yet by combining hard-and-fast rules with considerate, case-by-case judgments,
journalists can cement themselves as part of the aid, not the injury, when sirens across town signify the unthinkable has happened. To authorities, journalists must be respectful yet persistent, and to victims, compassionate yet inquisitive. To its audience, the news media must be reliable and accurate, thorough and honest, and prepared to account for mistakes.

Aggregate answers from interviewees highlighted countless approaches to reporting, shooting photos and video, writing stories and editing that an ethically-conscious journalist of any skill level can incorporate in his or her work. They range from the basic, such as not crossing police lines, to the counter-intuitive, such as using the detail of how no one at the scene will talk about it to strengthen a story. But these interviewees’ input serves as more than just data, and goes beyond the fascinating material it proves to be for study and discussion.

These suggestions are the concentrated, practical advice of a dozen of the most experienced print journalists in the state of Minnesota. It is a reference guide, an elaborate, themed code of ethics complete with anecdotes and examples. The data in this study could be harnessed to inform aspiring reporters and correct erring ones. In the end, it could serve to promote good journalism during a disaster, the time when people need it most.
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