

Leveson Inquiry – Disaster Action Submission



The Leveson Inquiry – Submission by Disaster Action

Background

Survivors and bereaved people from UK and overseas disasters founded the charity Disaster Action (DA) in 1991. Members have personal experience of surviving and/or being bereaved in 25 disasters of different origin, including terrorist attacks, transport and natural disasters. These include: the Aberfan coal tip disaster (1966), the Zeebrugge ferry sinking (1987), the Lockerbie bombing (1988), the Dunblane shootings (1996), the Paddington rail crash (1999), the South East Asian Tsunami (2004), the London bombings (2005) and further terrorist attacks and transportation incidents overseas. The organisation consists of an informal national network. DA's funding sources are primarily grant-making charitable trusts and one-off gratuities. The purpose of DA is to represent the interests of those on the receiving end.

DA works in an advocacy and advisory capacity. Its aims are to:

- Offer support to those directly affected by disaster
- Raise awareness of the needs of survivors and the bereaved in the short- and longer-term aftermath
- Help create a safety climate in which disasters are less likely to occur.

Inevitably, members have had extensive experience of dealing with all forms of media throughout the 20-year span of the organisation.

We draw your attention to two documents on the DA website. The first is in the leaflet series **When Disaster Strikes**, and is entitled *Interviews about Disaster Experience: Personal Reflections and Guidelines for Interviewers* – see http://www.disasteraction.org.uk/support/da_guide11.htm. The second is in Guidance for Responders, *Working with Disaster Survivors and the Bereaved: Code of Practice on Privacy, Confidentiality & Anonymity* – see http://www.disasteraction.org.uk/leaflets/Guidance_for_Responders_Working_with_Disaster_Survivors_and_the_Bereaved_Code_of_Practice_on_Privacy_Anonymity_&_Confidentiality.pdf.

We have selected from the Key Questions those where we can offer a perspective that we hope will be useful to the inquiry, and provide examples from the experience of our members relevant to the questions.

Leveson Inquiry – Disaster Action Submission

Culture, Practices and Ethics

1. In DA's view, the pressure from the media for families and survivors to be 'good victims' in the face of trauma can be intense. Families are praised for their dignity and restraint, with disapproval for those who do not behave in a way that fits public and media expectation. An exceptional article was written on this subject in the *Daily Mail* after the 1998 Omagh bombings, by Aileen Quinton, whose mother had been murdered in the 1987 Enniskillen bombing.

Following the Lockerbie bombing, a respected journalist and writer contacted one of the bereaved, the sister of a man who had been killed on the plane. She agreed to give an interview during the Fatal Accident Inquiry taking place at that time (1991) in Dumfries, Scotland. The journalist travelled to Scotland and carried out an apparently sensitive interview, visiting the memorial sites and the inquiry. Some time later a photographer arrived to take pictures to accompany the article. He showed it to the interviewee, saying 'I am not supposed to do this, but it is so good I will'. The article was written in the first person, representing the widow of the man who had been killed, and bore little relation to what had been discussed in the interview. Clearly the journalist had wanted to interview the widow, but made do with the sister. *Bella* magazine contacted the widow to say that she had a contract with the magazine for the article, which was untrue. The interviewee resorted to obtaining a solicitor's letter – at some expense – to prevent publication. This stressful experience created a lasting distrust of the media and compounded an already distressing situation.

The use of images of those dying against the fence during the Hillsborough football stadium disaster was controversial at the time. These images are still available for further use and continuing distress as a Google Images search shows. Please see also article from October 2002 concerning more recent use of the images - see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2002/oct/21/pressandpublishing1>. One survivor's personal experience included being rung up (by a Sky reporter) to be asked how she felt about this FHM feature. The survivor was not aware of it, so it was a shock and caused distress, compounded by finding out through such an insensitive cold call. That the reporter was also recording the telephone conversation (found out by his being asked and his admitting to it) added insult to injury.

In 2011, there is far more widespread use of often highly distressing imagery, not least because of the advent of 24-hour news and the development of the Internet and mobile phone technology. We would argue that there is an inconsistency of approach and that above all, careful consideration should be given to the purpose of using such images. The recent publication by many broadcast and press outlets of the death of Colonel Gadaffi is a case when the arguments that 'everyone is doing it' and that he was a bad person were used to justify this usage.¹ Other examples include images of those killed in the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2008 Mumbai attacks on the Internet. These

¹ In 2012, Disaster Action intends to publish guidance on the use of imagery following disaster.

Leveson Inquiry – Disaster Action Submission

images then become part of the fabric of the experience of those most affected. Increasing use of bystanders' mobile phone footage is the subject of some guidance as per the BBC's guidance on use of social networking sites, which is helpful.

24-hour news has also meant increasing pressure to find stories to fill the time, leading to increased speculative reporting, not least with reference to the 2011 conflicts in the Middle East.

On the sinking of the riverboat the *Marchioness* on the River Thames in August 1989, 57 young people were killed. They had been attending a party. Articles appeared in the press, one in the *London Evening Standard* suggesting that the dead had been born with 'silver spoons in their mouths' and were at a drink and drug-fuelled party. A significant consequence was the detrimental influence on public sympathy for the dead, survivors and bereaved: the disaster trust fund, set up to raise money for those affected, raised the sum of approximately £89,000. This is in contrast with figures of over 4 million pounds raised after the 1985 Bradford football stadium fire and the 1987 Zeebrugge ferry disaster.²

An example of good practice followed the 1996 Dunblane shootings, when as far as we are aware those affected were not door-stepped by the media in the immediate aftermath. We recollect that an across-the-board editorial decision was taken not to intrude upon the funerals. However, when the surviving Dunblane children reached the age of 16, the press used personal profiles written by them on Bebo to write articles suggesting that 'there is nothing Dunblane survivors do not disrespect'. How can it be appropriate for young people to become 'fair game' in this way as soon as they are no longer considered children?

At the same time, through our relationships with working journalists, we are aware of the often very considerable and inappropriate pressure exerted on them by editors or the newsroom.

During the 1990s and in more recent years, the *Guardian* encouraged survivors and bereaved to tell their own stories, giving a welcome degree of control to those normally on the receiving end of stories about disaster experience. DA member Pam Dix wrote her first article, a review of the book *The Media and Disasters: Pan Am 103* in 1992, a refreshing opportunity both to understand the impact on journalists of reporting such tragedies and to express the view of those on the receiving end.

The *Guardian* 'Comment is Free' has proved a useful means of contributing views through a respected outlet, with monitoring of comments made on articles, as has the Reader's Editor with opportunity to comment on articles in this newspaper.

² *Disaster Funds: Lessons & Guidance on the Management & Dissemination of Disaster Funds*, Disaster Action, London 2010, p. 9

Leveson Inquiry – Disaster Action Submission

5. Much has been said and written about the impact of the coverage by the *Sun* newspaper of the April 1989 Hillsborough disaster which suggested that the dead and survivors were responsible for what had happened. DA members are some of those directly affected for whom this distorted fiction reported as fact has added to their distress. While this story has been refuted, the idea that ‘there is no smoke without fire’ might continue to perpetuate the myth of responsibility in this case. Blaming the victim in this way is inappropriate and deeply hurtful.

6. DA members participate in annual panel discussions with post graduate journalism students at City University concerning working with and interviewing vulnerable people. We find this very productive and would advocate far greater involvement by those who have been on the receiving end in training and awareness raising for journalists, as well as greater consistency within training for journalists.

Standards

7. Normal practice is for features not to be shown to interviewees and those who have contributed to background research. In DA’s experience this approach is not appropriate when the media is working with vulnerable people and those affected by trauma. There is an anxiety on the part of the press that interviewees will simply change their minds, or not like what has been written. In our experience, the most productive working relationships with journalists have been where copy has been shown and agreed by the interviewee. The intention is not to censor (though we see no reason why people should not change their minds) but to ensure accuracy and a true reflection of what was said. In our view, this constitutes good practice.

8. Concerning the Editor’s Code of Practice, DA would suggest a possible lack of knowledge on the part of the general public (which would include vulnerable people after an incident) of the very existence of the Code. Paragraph 4 on Harassment notes that journalists should not pursue individuals ‘once asked to desist’. We are unsure whether this covers a situation such as when two competing broadcasters are standing in the street both attempting to interview a woman bereaved in a disaster (a real example) and squabbling about it in front of her.

Paragraph 5, Intrusion on personal grief or shock – we would suggest that consideration be given to rephrasing this. At what stage would potential interviewees be considered to be over ‘shock’? Is this based on a legal and/or medical definition of ‘nervous shock’, for example? We appreciate the intention to protect the public from possible copy-cat suicide attempts, thereby restricting reporting of details of methods of suicide. However, the intimate description of the death of a train driver, for instance, following the 1999 Paddington rail crash by a survivor reported the day after the disaster, before the family would have had any knowledge of how he died, should also be considered problematic in its potential impact.

Public interest

No. 4, 71 Upper Berkeley Street, London W1H 7DB Tel.: 01483 799066

4

www.disasteraction.org.uk

Registered Charity No.: 1005728

Leveson Inquiry – Disaster Action Submission

10. One example of media good practice within a democracy is when a media outlet supports campaigning activity. A specific instance is that of the *Sunday Telegraph* support from 2009 for the Lockerbie families' call for a public inquiry. While the government has decided not to hold such an inquiry the *Sunday Telegraph* determined that it is in the public interest for the debate to be aired in the media, offering a platform for the families' views to be expressed, reported and commented on.

More generally, it is important for a free press to be in a position to hold to account and challenge those in authority. Specific examples relate to the *Sunday Telegraph*'s recent exposure of government ministers' activities in Libya during 2003-04. Bereaved relatives from the Lockerbie bombing were being given a different picture of these activities by ministers (including the then Prime Minister Tony Blair). The opportunity to contribute came from a mutually trusting relationship between the paper and a Lockerbie relative.

The efforts of families and survivors to memorialise and integrate the events of the past into current experience can be rewarded through some media attention, though there is always a price to be paid in terms of individual privacy.

11. It is difficult to sustain an argument that anyone can be above the law in the UK.

Pamela Dix
Executive Director
Disaster Action
30 November 2011

