

ABC'S ALEX SLOAN- REPORTING ON TRAUMA

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Award-winning journalist, Alex Sloan is certainly a well-versed woman and something of a local Canberra celebrity.

After 27 years on Canberra's ABC radio, Sloan has done her fair share of navigating the ethical turmoil of reporting.

The recently retired journalist is relishing in her newfound freedom to speak her mind. I was fortunate enough to sit down with Sloan in her home town to discuss some of the moments in her career that strengthened her moral compass.

"It was the morning after the Port Arthur massacre," she told me.

Alex was briefed by her bosses that she would be interviewing, a man "who says he was there, who actually looked Martin Bryant in the eye and had survived. He saw lots of dead bodies and lots of people killed."

Alex recalls that man explaining his narrow escape when Martin Bryant looked away to momentarily reload his gun.

"As he was telling me his story he started to freeze. I was looking into his eyes and realised he was going into shock," Sloan said.

"He was just really coming to terms with the fact that he had just survived death."

Sloan wrapped up the interview immediately. Afterward, she recalled her boss going "berserk," as he wanted her to tease the story out for its media value.

Sloan's dispute was that she was "not on commercial television, was not Andrew Bolt and was not going to hurt him even more."

"Michael, you did not see the look in his eyes, he was damaged."

The plight of ethical journalism is the dilemma between informing the public and protecting the vulnerable, in the case that they are mutually exclusive.

In Sloan's case, the interviewee's wellbeing outweighed the value of any story he could have told.

"Every day you are thinking about legal stuff and you are thinking about ethics."

Sloan believes her choice "didn't do (her) career any favours", yet still considers her choice an ethical no-brainer.

Sloan was under the impression that the interviewee had suffered immense psychological stress and was potentially suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Researchers Rodger Simpson and William Cote explain in their book *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma*, that severe trauma "confront(s) human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe", (2006, p. 24).

The authors expand on this, saying how trauma can "separate the emotions of an event from other activities," which can often lead to "self-destructive behaviours" (2006 p. 24).

This brings to light whether those who experience trauma, regardless of if they develop PTSD, are at a higher risk of being taken advantage of by news media.

The Port Arthur massacre was unprecedented in Australian media history and when looked back on it is full of sensationalism and insensitivity (Trina 1999).

There were evocative headlines often coming from sources that never left their offices, nationally. Such headlines were accompanied with graphic images and line drawings to “recreate” the event for those who weren’t there.

There was a clear competition within both broadcast and commercial media for the juiciest angles and interviews. There were also allegations of distasteful “deal-making” for video footage and photographs.

The Australians 30th of April 1996 edition is an example of how the event was treated by the media. An edited image of Martin Bryant was published on the front page in which his eye were digitally modified to look more haunting (Voumard 2006).

Claims of “media harassment” was confirmed by Tasmanian police officials in the weeks that followed the event.

Damien Bugg, then Tasmanian Director of Public Prosecution criticised the media reportage during the days that followed the event. He reminded media corporations involved that careless decision making could jeopardise Martin Bryant’s future prosecution (Trina 1999).

Professional expectations for journalists are set out in the Media and Entertainment Arts Alliance’s (MEAA) Code of Ethics. A major review took place between 1996 and 1999 resulting in the current set of codes that are clear in discouraging deceptive practice and maintaining an integral standard of journalism.

Standard 8 reads: “never exploit a person’s vulnerability or ignorance of media practice,” which applies to those affected by trauma.

Like other larger corporations, the ABC has its own guidelines to administer “self-regulation”.

Since Port Arthur, the ABC has extended its Codes of Practice. Section 7.5 of harm and offence reads: “The reporting or depiction of violence, tragedy or trauma must be handled with extreme sensitivity. Avoid causing undue distress to victims, witnesses or bereaved relatives.”

Sloan deems this change is due to high reports of post-traumatic stress disorder in journalists who have covered challenging stories.

It is highly likely that a newsgatherer will be exposed to events during work that would be considered traumatic, largely situations that involve a threat to life. Journalists often respond to events involving car accidents, murders, sexual assaults, and mass casualties.

Sloan’s friend and colleague, ABC’s Africa correspondent, Sally Sara has reported on more than 30 countries including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Zimbabwe.

“She saw a lot of stuff, post-Rwandan genocide and years later back in Australia discovered she has PTSD.”

“I think the ABC now realises they have a duty of care.”

When asked how far she thinks trauma reporting and awareness has come at the ABC, Alex believes that if an identical situation arose today, like her Port Arthur interview, her boss would support her decision.

“I think now just in terms of reporting on trauma it would be far different,” Sloan said. “It used to be all about the story,” she continued.

By the end of her time at the ABC Alex believes it became completely “risk-averse, practically a 180-degree attitude change”.

Refence list:

Simpson, R & Cote, W 2006, *Covering Violence: A guide to Ethical Reporting About Victims & Trauma*, Columbia University Press, Columbia.

McLellan, Trina 1999, *Fair Game or Fair Go?: Impact of News Reporting on Victims and Survivors of Traumatic Events*, Asia Pacific Media Educator, vol. 7, pp. 55.

MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics, available at: <https://www.meaa.org/meaa-meida/code-of-ethics/>

ABC Code of Practice (& associated standards), available at: <https://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CODE-final-15-01-2019.pdf>

Voumard, S 2017, *The Media and the Massacre: Port Arthur 1996-2016*, Transit Lounge Publishing, Melbourne, Australia.