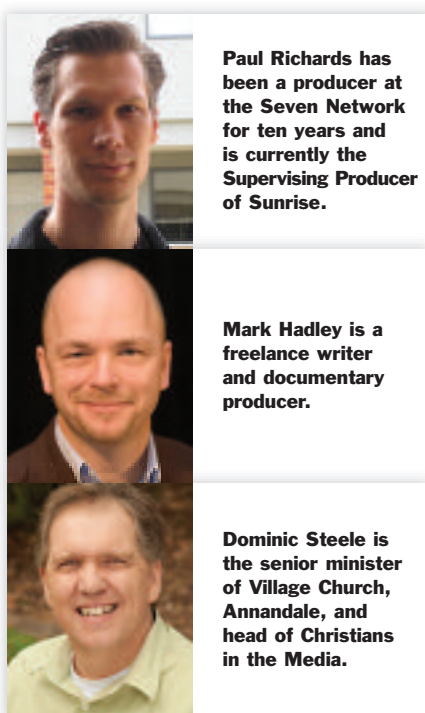


DEATH PORN?

Media Ethics in Disaster Zones

AUTHORS PAUL RICHARDS, MARK HADLEY, DOMINIC STEELE

In April, Christians in the Media (CIM) hosted a live debate on the topic 'Media ethics in disaster zones'. The following article is based on the presentations of debaters Paul Richards and Mark Hadley; question time; and closing comments by Dominic Steele.



Paul Richards has been a producer at the Seven Network for ten years and is currently the Supervising Producer of Sunrise.

Mark Hadley is a freelance writer and documentary producer.

Dominic Steele is the senior minister of Village Church, Annandale, and head of Christians in the Media.

Paul Richards: Most people will not be surprised to hear that this has been the busiest start to the year for news crews in about a decade. We had the Queensland floods, cyclone Yasi, the bushfires in Western Australia which wiped out seventy homes, and of course the Christchurch earthquake. Then, about a month ago as I was just winding down on a Friday night, my wife asked if I had heard about the earthquake in Japan. Next came the text message from my boss at *Sunrise*: Who shall we send? We had sent our regular

hosts to Brisbane to cover the Queensland floods, and into the path of the cyclone to cover Yasi, and then to Christchurch to cover the earthquake.

We found a host to send to Japan. If a disaster is big enough and dominating enough of the show, it makes sense for us to send a host into the disaster zone, especially considering we're on air for three hours each day. This is true whether the disaster is happening in our backyard or whether it's happening on the other side of the world. What all this meant was that a great deal of our broadcast time for the year was taken up with disaster coverage, and it was around the time of the Christchurch quake that we began to get a bit of a backlash and see some messages from viewers and other media labelling us 'ambulance chasers'.

One of the strongest attacks in the media of the media's coverage of the natural disasters came from the editor of the ABC's *Drum* website, Jonathan Green:

Key network anchors and reporters were en route to New Zealand within hours ... papers and websites can't get enough of the words and pictures. Maybe we should be honest about the way in which our media treats events of this type, maybe we should ask whether coverage like this in a nation once removed from the scene of devastation, can in any way be constructive. And if

it's not constructive, can it be anything but voyeuristic? Are the networks, the papers, the websites milking our collective fascination and turning it inevitably to profit, for no good end?¹

I want to address a couple of the criticisms that Jonathan Green brings up in his article.

First of all, is the media coverage of disasters we've seen recently voyeuristic? Some have even suggested that the media is peddling 'death porn'. I find that phrase extremely distasteful. It sounds like the sort of thing that's been made up by someone who doesn't really understand how the media works. Technology is changing the way that people want their news: they expect it now and they also expect to be part of the story.

A couple of days into the Christchurch quake, rescuers thought



that they'd found a survivor in the rubble of one of the collapsed buildings. We had a live camera that was pointed on the area where the rescuers were digging and we were broadcasting this on the show. Of course we were all hoping for a live rescue—that would have been great for the person they brought out alive, great for their family and great television—but they could have brought up a body. We didn't know which it would be, so we had to make a judgement call on the broadcasting. As it turned out, it was a false alarm and nothing came of it, but it could have been different.

and caring for those stories, is part of what makes us human.

Turning to Jonathan Green's other point, are the networks, the papers, the websites milking our collective fascination with disasters, and turning it inevitably to profit for no good end? Commercial television is in a ratings race. It's a business, and the job of those who work in it is to get the most people watching. Does it mean we throw standards out the window? No. We don't use movie special effects or double the death toll just for dramatic effect. Our job is to choose the most powerful,

the message out about what's happened to them, and let people know that they are either okay or that they need help. Secondly, when the media provide accessible and fast coverage of natural disasters and present the stories of people caught up in them, donations to relief funds are much higher than they would be otherwise. In both these ways, the media's coverage of natural disasters plays an important role.

In conclusion, I think the Australian media does an excellent job of covering natural disasters in an ethical way. I think it's healthy for our society to be saturated in news and informed, and it shows that we have a heart connected to our brain.

Mark Hadley: I was in Africa a week ago on the Northern Ugandan border. I was involved in food distribution and was dealing with child soldiers. There's something affecting about watching children, every one with a swollen belly, and knowing each represents a household of six. I confess my journalistic background made my hand itch towards my camera. What I really wanted to do was capture that moment, that feeling, that one photo that will say everything.

I'm currently working with World

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Should we stop covering news as it unfolds just because it might offend some people? When you're broadcasting during a disaster, people are going to see distressing images and plenty of them, again and again. There's no sugar-coating the awfulness of what's happening in a natural disaster. People who have seen enough can stop watching, but ratings don't lie and there are plenty of people who are willing to watch and who want to watch. Is that desire to watch purely voyeurism and titillation? I don't think it is. We all remember where we were when the planes hit the World Trade Centre on 9/11, and there are always a few stories from major news events like this that burn into our memories and help us to comprehend the magnitude of what has happened. Caring for those moments,

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compelling and emotive images to tell the *truth* about what's happening. If we cross the line or get the balance wrong, our viewers tell us pretty quickly by switching off.

As to whether we're achieving any good by our coverage, it's hard to quantify 'good' by just putting out broadcasts, but I have a couple of examples of the way this kind of disaster coverage achieves good ends. First, rather than being shy about talking after a natural disaster, we often find that people who are caught up in the calamity actually want to tell their story. They want to get

Vision to do a documentary on poverty and it's taken me through South America and India and a number of other places. You would think that if there was one organisation on the planet that would want to make you understand the death and suffering there is in tragedy, it would be World Vision. They make their money on the basis of you feeling for the people they want to help. But in fact they are the least likely to want to see the images we see coming in through the news to continue because they know that in the long term those images will not

encourage generosity. They may evoke it in the short term, but in the long term those images will actually help to dehumanise their subjects, not make them greater objects of sympathy.

The way footage is obtained can break down the idea of the person. Trauma that is filmed for daily consumption becomes entertainment. It has to be visually compelling to hold an audience, and the more traumatic it is, the more compelling it is. So journalists and cameramen - I myself have been in this situation - actively look for the shot

start to differentiate between the disasters we see on the grounds of human culpability. If the disaster is connected to a government failure or AIDS or education where people 'just should have known better' or moved somewhere else, compassion is thwarted. If we get a hint that a tragic situation is actually someone's fault as opposed to a 'natural' disaster, our sympathy falters. If you're involved in a disaster, pray that it's a bushfire, a cyclone or a tsunami because in terms of the response, dollar for dollar, the money raised for so-called

Images can even go as far as to prevent awareness. The commercial media are in a difficult position because they have to turn a dollar on the very thing that they show, and this can lead standards down a slippery slope. But I would like to say that a focus on images can mask real need. I have sat in newsrooms, and the fire is chosen over the education crisis any day of the week, and the screaming mother over the HIV pandemic. These less visually impacting issues get buried by our coverage, not enlightened by it. In the end, the response is up to us as consumers of the media. If we want good quality news we need to make a choice. Turn off what isn't responsible and turn onto something else.

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that is most effective at conveying the pain of those involved to all who are watching. It becomes a tool for engaging attention rather than evoking sympathy. And we'll run it in the promos for the bulletin, in the bulletin itself, and we'll run it again when we're promoting the show.

Questions like, 'How do you feel?' are constructed on the same basis. Make no mistake, this is not about trying to get at the heart of the issue. It's about creating the most emotional moment possible so that we can film it. To some degree, we turn these people from victims of disaster into victims of the process of gathering an audience.

The tendency to titillate audiences with highly emotional material has an effect on society that sociologists call the 'cultivation effect'.² People start to see the world differently. If I say the names 'Ethiopia, the Sudan, Somalia', what images come to mind? Did any of them have starving people in them or gunmen running around and out of control? Many people's perceptions of Africa are built up from the coverage of disaster after disaster. The world is a more fearful place because of that, and we become less sympathetic.

According to World Vision,³ we become even less sympathetic when we

natural disasters is much greater. Ultimately, we're overwhelmed. The rolling, highly emotional coverage does not produce lasting sympathy. It makes us retreat. After a while I don't want to receive another phone call from the fire department or the surf life savers or Red Cross because I've heard enough.

Question: As a Christian in the media, how do you think about this question differently?

Mark: I work on documentaries and when I choose to do a job it's generally because I want to bring out something I think reflects my Christianity. But even when I worked in commercial





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television, I applied what my parents referred to as ‘the golden rule’. Christ said, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’. So I would look at potential footage and say, ‘If that was my mother, would I show that? If that was my father behind the door, would I do that doorknock? How would my dad look if a camera came blaring in?’ I had to remember that they were real people on the other side, and that the medium gave me a huge amount of power, and so I had to be much more sympathetic to their situation.

It is no surprise that after a while I had to get out of commercial news because too many arguments arose with the news editor regarding whether or not I would do this or that. It got to the point where people knew what my attitude would be when I was asked to do a doorknock, and I was no longer put on those jobs. But they put me on other jobs and people respected me for what I did.

If you don’t start seeing the subject as someone like yourself who deserves what you hope someone would give you, then it’s always going to be some less helpful thing that directs your choice of pictures in the story.

Question: Paul, do you think you have to get out of commercial news?

Paul: There’s no doubt it’s a tough place to be a Christian in. I don’t think a day goes by when I’m not faced with

an ethical dilemma about a story that we’re running, or that I’m choosing to put on the show the next day. But I also think that questioning the story I’m uncomfortable with can help encourage debate among my colleagues, and this is an important part of being a Christian in the media. Just being there, in the fight and part of the discussion is really good. If you can encourage a particular take on a story, that’s a good thing. I

Imagine if a news service sold themselves, week in week out, solely on the basis of being ethical and accurate.

often make mistakes, but I think it’s better to be in there and making a few mistakes than not be there at all.

Question: Do you think there should be more censorship of what appears on the news?

Mark: Because I’m a big believer in a free market system in terms of news, I believe that we should allow these things to go on to some extent, and try to encourage people to think differently. I cannot change commercial news directly; the only effect I have is in terms of ratings. Take the analogy of fairtrade coffee. People demanded its presence in shops and then it became almost important to fly a flag and buy it. To say that your news is ethically produced and to hang your hat on that

as a news organisation, to make that your selling point, is not that far away from fairtrade coffee as an idea. Imagine if a news service sold themselves, week in week out, solely on the basis of being ethical and accurate. Sure for the first year people would take pot-shots at them—maybe they’d take pot-shots for ten years—but in a commercial market, it becomes a differentiator.

Question: What would you do with live shots coming in from a disaster such as Christchurch or Fukushima?

Mark: If you’re going to be ethical, there is no place for absolutely live coverage. You have to introduce at least fifteen minutes between what comes in and what goes to air if you’re going to apply any standard at all. As journalists we were all taught professional ethics but the truth is, they’re not enshrined in our newsrooms. The ultimate rule is the quickest, the fastest, the most extreme – and let’s hope our host is there on site.

Dominic: Judges 19 gives a chillingly graphic report of horrific events: murder, rape, desecration of a corpse. The events are so graphic that in the context of this discussion we might even describe it as ‘death porn’.

I refer to this passage so that you can see that the Bible doesn’t avoid bloodshed, violence, rape, murder, or awful human anguish. It’s part of the world and it’s part of the Bible, so I’m not going to argue that there are *prima facie* reasons that storytelling or pictures should be censored. But there’s a reason for the passing on of this information. The Israelites have come into the land of Canaan, and God gave it to them partly because the Canaanites were so wicked. Yet as the book of Judges approaches its conclusion we find this account of how spiritually and morally



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My question for us is not so much, what pictures are right or wrong to show, but what is my motive in showing this particular picture?

bankrupt the people of Israel have become—even more wicked than the Canaanites. The story ends with the charge: ‘Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen since the day the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt to this day. Think it over, discuss it, and speak up!’ (Jdg 19:30)

What’s all that got to do with how we cover natural disasters?

Luke 13 tells of another disaster, in which the tower of Siloam collapsed killing 18 people. Jesus’ answer to the implicit question of why they died turns the pressure on the askers: unless you repent, you too will all perish. The Bible is not squeamish about telling the story of a natural disaster, but it’s telling the story for a purpose.

This doesn’t mean all news that doesn’t have a moral point like these is necessarily wrong. Ecclesiastes 3 tells us there is a time to enjoy a story, a time to enjoy watching breakfast television. But when I’m trying to decide what picture to put on, how close to go, what interview to show, Christians should have a different paradigm for making decisions.

There are four basic paradigms for

the way people make these decisions.

The first one is pragmatics: do what works, do what rates. It starts off maximum benefit for maximum people but it ends up very quickly being maximum good for our company, for us, for our organisation, for our ratings, our sales.

The second one is intuition. It’s the gut feeling ethic and it almost relies on being self-evident. At one level it is much more persuasive than pragmatics, but on the other hand is much more difficult to argue rationally. A good example is the media coverage around the death of Princess Diana. There was a massive outcry about the way the paparazzi had hounded her in the weeks and months before her death, and this ‘gut feeling’ that the wrong thing had been done held the consensus for some months.⁴

The third paradigm is, ‘humanity says’, or current acceptance. Look around and if everybody does it, I do it too. There are things we can do in whatever position, whatever role, whatever industry we are in, simply because everyone else is doing it.

The fourth one I want to put forward is ‘God says’ or ‘Jesus says’ and as someone who recognises Jesus as their Lord and saviour, a Christian should stop and say: ‘Before I’m a journalist I’m somebody who is bought by the blood of the lamb. I’m someone who recognises Jesus as my personal Lord, and so I’m not just making pragmatic decisions, I’m not just making intuitive decisions or decisions based on what everybody else does. I’m making decisions based on what Jesus says I should do.’

What does Jesus say? Jesus says it is a wrong thing to exploit people, to use people, to abuse people, to damage people, to hurt people. Christians are to be people of light, who expose the fruitless deeds of darkness for what they are, and alert people to wrongs so that they will ‘think it over, discuss it and speak up’ (Jdg 19:30); but not revel in the shame of ‘what the disobedient do in secret’ (Eph 5:8). I am to look after the hurting and vulnerable (e.g. Jas 1:27), not exploit them. They are the principles that the Christian journalist/editor/camera operator will have to hold in tension as they decide what to do in a particular situation.

My question for us is not so much, what pictures are right or wrong to show, but what is my motive in showing this particular picture? What is my motive in running this particular interview? Answers here are often easier to see in principle than when I am in the middle of it. But if I know that this is only about gratuitously exploiting and not about helping people to ‘think it over, discuss it and speak up’ I should stop! ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2011/02/23/3146945.htm>. Accessed May 2011.
- 2 <http://cultivationanalysisrvtv173.pbworks.com/f/ViolenceonCollege+JJ.pdf>
- 3 Tim Costello, the Chief Executive Officer for World Vision Australia develops this idea in his contributions to a collection of essays on Christianity and social work, Tim Costello and Rod Yule (eds.), *Another Way to Love* (Melbourne: Acorn Press, 2009), pp8,9.
- 4 Intuitive ethics, for many people in our post-Christian society, are indirectly shaped by the ‘Jesus says’ ethic.