

Mourning Strangers: The Impact of Emotional Reporting on Public Discourse

BY LESLIE VRYENHOEK

The once smiling face of the now dead child. The soldier portrayed as husband and son. The grief-stricken family member recalling the tragic loss of a loved one. These are the familiar human faces that bring a media story, and all its inherent issues, to life.

Leading with the personal account is a time-honoured and effective technique designed to draw in the audience and build an affinity for the subject matter. Increasingly, however, the personal narrative doesn't lead us into the larger story – it is the story, without context or further substance.

The immediacy and intimacy achieved through modern technology, when coupled with this focus on the personal, can lead the media consumer to experience profound emotional involvement in the lives – and the tragedies – of others. As a result, it has become commonplace for Canadians to expend large amounts of energy mourning strangers.

By strangers, I don't mean Pierre Trudeau or the Princess of Wales, who were known to us in life – even if we were not known to them. Our desire to mourn them, bolstered as it may have been by overeager media coverage, was a natural outgrowth of our loss. When I speak of strangers, I mean those who become known to us solely due to the circumstances of their death.

Quite apart from the effect that mourning strangers has on the personal well-being of the individual, the danger of engineered grief lies in its impact on public discourse. High emotion is as likely to foster outrage as it is to inspire wisdom and generosity borne of sorrow. The result is a move away from informed decision-making toward something less rational and more visceral.

Grief politicizes and polarizes. Those who have experienced personal loss are moved to action with a single-minded ferocity that makes change not just possible but inevitable. This can be a tremendously positive force for change. Canada's drunk driving laws, for example, have been transformed by the organized fervour of parents who channeled their grief into meaningful, relentless advocacy.

Armchair mourners are not as motivated as grief-stricken parents, of course, and so are likely to undertake only armchair advocacy – writing a letter to an editor or a cheque to charity, perhaps, or expressing an impassioned opinion in the lunchroom or to a pollster. While the

impact of those actions, when taken individually, may not seem great, the combined volume of similar reaction can make them significant.

During the years that I have worked for an international humanitarian aid organization, I have been grateful for the media's predilection for vivid images of human suffering. The ability to get the story, bring it back to people far away and make it real is what drives humanitarian impulse. When flooding devastated Mozambique in 2000, the images of people hanging from trees, filmed from a rescue helicopter, provided gripping drama that drew a tremendous response from Canadians. Donations poured in. Like it or not, the cameraman who took a seat on that rescue helicopter helped to finance the relief effort. Contrast that with the much larger humanitarian disaster that took hold in southern Africa in the winter of 2002. Famine makes lousy television, and as a result, it was impossible to draw the donor response necessary to save lives.

Like donor impulse, public policy in a democracy often turns on emotion more than it does on reasoned debate. Never mind minds – hearts and guts are what guide voters, just as polls measuring the mood of the country guide politicians. The brain, however, must be allowed to play a pivotal role in informing the heart.

The greatest impact of any medium lies not in its intellectual ability to inform (or deceive), to present facts (while concealing others), or to illuminate (and obscure). These factors all have influence, to be sure, but the surest path to change is through an emotional connection. Advertisers, filmmakers and fundraisers know this, so they employ emotional content to fire memory cells and provoke action. The best journalism must also engage the emotions. But unlike artists and promoters, journalists have a larger mandate – to motivate and improve public discourse. If a news story elicits only a visceral reaction, then no matter how memorable or moving, it has failed in its responsibility to foster an informed state among its audience.

No event has more vividly underlined the impact of media-inspired grief than that which began on September 11, 2001. This caught-on-camera calamity, and the weeks and months of coverage that ensued, raised the bar on collective mourning and became, in the minds of an enormous chunk of the North American population, the largest event to happen ever, anywhere.

In that first remarkable week, the world (the western world, at least) sat glued, grief-stricken, to its television screen. One woman confided that she sacrificed three nights' sleep to watch the coverage. Another told me her father had cried inconsolably for days, all the while seeking stories that would make him cry harder. I heard someone else say that they felt guilty when they turned off the TV, as if they were abandoning those trapped in the rubble. These responses, and the millions like them, were genuine reactions to the astonishing intensity of emotionally charged media content.

It would have been impossible to report on those first astounding days without focusing on the intense emotion of the time. But it is impossible to deny that, when the world caught its breath and we all found our feet, the media turned up the volume with endless features on victims and families. Music played, flags unfurled, emotions were manipulated.

Unfortunately grief – along with its close relative, fear – provokes extreme reactions that can make rational debate difficult, if not downright dangerous. Public commentary in Canada reflected the considerable emotional impact following 9-11. It became easier to distrust foreigners, to call for tighter immigration controls, to start talking about curtailing freedom to in the interest of freedom from. “After what happened to those poor people on September 11th” became a common opening refrain among callers to talk radio who wanted to rage and be heard.

The emotional involvement of Canadians in this tragedy made the commitment of our troops to the war on terror in Afghanistan *a fait accompli*, with none of the hand-wringing and divisive, if necessary, debate that marked the Canadian reaction to the war in Iraq. Even with regard to Iraq, listen to the pro-war forces in the streets and on talk radio, and you will hear *After what happened on September 11th...* This is an earnest reaction, based in nothing but immense grief. And that grief was, in part, inspired by a media frenzy that capitalized on individual victims' stories, wringing tears from the tragedy at the expense of a larger understanding.

Many of those who most avidly watched the 9-11 coverage later expressed disgust with the media, complaining of manipulation and exploitation. But it is the nature of mass media that what prompts a

strong reaction draws more coverage – leading the media, in essence, to chase its own tail. Consumers must look to their own unquenchable thirst for personal stories before casting blame on the media.

What drives us all to peer closely at news of others' tragedies is not just voyeurism, but the need to confirm that the dead differ from our own loved ones. This is why tragedy far away, in cultures vastly different than ours, is so much easier to take. *Those people aren't like us, they don't feel the same, we believe. They think life is cheap so death doesn't bother them, we lie. They don't love their children like we do.* We find ways to find distance. And when we find those differences, even the most emotionally-charged footage has the effect of diminishing the enormity of a tragedy. If they are not like us, we reason, then it matters less.

But if instead we find unbearable similarities, we are driven to grief, and sometimes to fear and outrage.

Large-scale catastrophes provide extensive material for emotional coverage, but the greatest danger to our institutions and to sensible public policy is often sparked by the atypical individual death.

Local and limited in nature, these tragedies are covered precisely because of the unusual circumstances under which they occur. However, they make more compelling stories if the anomaly is underplayed, and the potential danger to the audience is highlighted. Fear becomes the conduit through which the audience is engaged. In these instances, the personal story is not used to put a human face on a larger issue, but to create a larger issue from an aberrant human tragedy.

As with fear, any suggestion of negligence or bureaucratic failure will almost surely guarantee an emotional response among mourners.

Family members, of course, can be forgiven for expressing emotional outrage and looking to lay blame during times of deep personal crisis. Lamenting the shortcomings of a public health system that failed to save a loved one, for example, or questioning the virtue of safety protocols that prevented emergency workers from rescuing trapped family members, are natural reactions of the bereaved. But when a large contingent of strangers, spurred by evocative news reports, takes up the cause and demands changes, an unsettling groundswell occurs. Policies forged through careful balancing of priorities can be laid to waste in the rush to accommodate the feelings and fears of an ill-informed but outraged public.

Unfortunately, once grief, fear and outrage have taken hold, rational discourse becomes improbable. Any refusal to give in to the sentimentality of the moment appears heartless, even suspect.

The media can, and should, guard against helping to foster such an irrational climate in which the ideals and institutions that give strength to democracy cannot flourish. Journalists place enormous importance on their obligation to provide balanced coverage of issues. That concept must be expanded to include a balancing of emotional content with intellectual rigour.

Emotional connection is a place to start, because engaging the heart is the surest way to opening the mind. We would all do well to remember, however, that moved to tears is not the same thing as well informed. Emotional content has a place in Canadian journalism as a means to an end – but it is not an end in itself.