

The Eye of the Disaster

A Study of Journalists' Work at Accident Scenes and Disaster Sites

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Abstract

This occupation study combines perspectives and theory from mainly journalism and crisis psychology. It covers journalists (reporters and photographers) - a work group with a professional mission in an extreme situation, as eyewitnesses to disaster, and their editors. The research is a case study of the 1998 fire disaster in Gothenburg, Sweden, which ultimately took 63 young people's lives and injured another 213, thereby becoming the largest Swedish fire disaster in modern times. The ensuing media reporting brought up questions concerning how this type of journalism actually comes into being. How is the reporting influenced when journalists themselves are indirect victims and are struggling to master their own reactions to the crisis? How does the accident scene function as a workplace for unprepared and shocked journalists? What coping strategies do reporters use to manage to carry out their mission? And what can we learn in the future from our experiences with these types of events?

Journalists' experiences of their own *reactions* to working at an accident scene are related to three factors: the *person* – the human being who is a journalist; the *occupation* – the journalistic mission and the journalist role; and the *situation* – the traumatic event and site. A further dimension of the mission, *reflection* – the need for crisis support as well as self-evaluation and learning – is also presented and analyzed.

Keywords

journalism, journalists, news coverage, trauma, disasters, coping, stress, competence, journalist roles, media ethic