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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Journalists as first responders

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### ABSTRACT

Covering terrorist attacks has posed numerous challenges to mainstream media across the world. Bringing information to the public quickly remains a primary goal for news media, but the journalistic duty to tell the truth comes with an increased responsibility for the accuracy of reports. When news is broken by civilian eyewitnesses and is posted by social media before it has even gone through the barest of verification checks, news media editors struggle to fulfil the task of informing the public while reporting on stories that hold the potential to alarm the audience. This paper offers some insights into the ways the New Zealand news media organised reporting on the March 15th terrorist attack in Christchurch. Based on face-to-face interviews with selected editors of major news organisations in New Zealand, it investigates the ways they operated in this situation. It explores key moments in editorial decision making on 15 March 2019, the first day of coverage of the terrorist attack. It focuses on the 'first responder' elements of news media work – speed and accuracy in providing information about the mosque attacks – to identify how journalistic norms are adapted and changed to report this breaking news.

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## Introduction

In a small country where mass killing is rare, and racism unwelcome, a terrorist attack is more than a breaking news story. On 15 May 2019, a white supremacist killed 51 people and injured 49 in the attack on two mosques in Christchurch. It was Friday, a day soon to be described as the end of national innocence: 'It was a shocking, brutal assault, the kind New Zealanders had told themselves happened only in other countries. But the terror of a hate-filled mass murder had visited our nation now. This was the end of our innocence' (Stuff 2019). Crystallising the feelings of the nation is one of the most delicate occupational hazards in journalism, but the end of innocence headline had the kind of precision that such a destabilising moment needed. It captured both the event and its political and social significance. Scholars have documented how journalists' experience in the fast processing of information supports their ability to bring together facts and their meaning (Peters and Broersma 2013), but how the expertise is managed and how the newsroom actually operates in such a situation is far less known.

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This paper examines the way editors in six newsrooms in New Zealand organised coverage of the terrorist attack in Christchurch. It investigates the critical role journalists play in communicating and making sense of cataclysmic events by focusing on their work as first responders: people trained to react quickly and respond to emergency situations on the spot (Perry and Lindell 2003). The study is based on interviews with the editors of mainstream news organisations in New Zealand: *Radio NZ*, *TVNZ*, *Newshub*, the *New Zealand Herald*, the *Press* and *Spinoff*. The paper starts with a brief overview of key issues that define journalists as first responders, it then explains why editors' perspectives on the issue matters and presents editors' responses to the major challenges in covering the Christchurch attack. It identifies processes taking place in newsrooms related to the news media's duty to report accurately and the moral responsibility not to create panic and cause harm.

## First responders

Providing citizens with accurate and reliable information in a timely manner, a primary role of journalism in society (Schudson 2008), gets magnified in the moment of crisis when accessing information about the situation is crucial for the management of the crisis. Along with police officers, doctors and nurses, journalists are the first responders, describing what is happening, supporting individuals and communities to understand what is going on and overall, over time, contributing to citizens' preparedness, recovery, and resilience in the face of the crisis (Houston et al. 2012). Their role as first responders is well documented in the case of natural disasters (Pantti et al. 2012; Cottle 2013; Joye 2014). A study of editor's perspectives on the coverage of terrorism in the US, UK, France, Belgium, Russia, and Australia shows how this reporting comes 'with an overwhelming sense of responsibility not to make a mistake, induce panic or cause harm' (Rupar and Murrell 2019, p. 34). Indeed, horrific events bring to the forefront feelings of chaos, disorganisation and panic but this image, reinforced by popular culture, only partly relates to what is really happening. Study after study has shown that the immediate reaction might occasionally be shock but 'panic flight occurs only rarely and people tend to act in what they believe is their best interest, given their limited understanding of the situation' (Perry and Lindell 2003, p. 49). Perry and Lindell's work on citizens' response to disasters with implications to terrorism demonstrates that immediately after the event, people can feel frightened but rationality wins long term. It wins out mainly as a result of the coordinated work of first responders, civil and emergency authorities.

The internal organisation of first responders' work is particularly intriguing. Scholars noted that the main challenges in responding to crises are technological, social and organisational (Manoj and Baker 2007). When a communication network is down or connectivity destroyed – as was the case in Belgium during the 2016 terrorist attack – journalists are forced to move swiftly to a new mode of communicating. Faced with power cuts, Belgian public service broadcaster VRT's journalists, used WhatsApp to organise work, to share information and support each other in critical moments of the coverage (Inge Vrancken, news editor, personal communication 7/06/2017). Challenges are social too and include questions such as how to communicate with traumatised victims, how to establish trust, and how to operate in an environment where security issues still have to be considered. And finally, the main challenges to journalistic work

are organisational. Organisational problems are 'prevalent in disaster response, especially when groups that are accustomed to hierarchy and hierarchical (centralized) decision making must suddenly work in the flatter, more dynamic, and ad-hoc manner which emerges during post-disaster relief efforts' (Manoj and Baker 2007, p. 52). We will see later that this particular trait played an important role in the coverage of the Christchurch mosque attacks. Journalists' experience, knowledge, and skills support responding to technological, social and organisational challenges. Journalists' responses to the crisis are habitual, where *habitus* stands for 'socialized subjectivity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 126). Since Breed's (1955) study of social control in the newsroom, scholars have documented that the selection of news is shaped by not only by the newsworthiness of the event but by a range of social factors, among them editorial hierarchy and conflict avoidance. Learning on the job determines journalists' behaviour. How to cover the terrorist attack, therefore, comes as a result of learning on the job: the result of an organising action (a structure), a way of being (a habitual state) and a predisposition, tendency, or inclination (Bourdieu 2002, p. 214). The dispositions are 'durable' because they last throughout a journalist's life, are shaped by the long-term process of socialisation, and are constantly being modified. The study of journalism decision making in the coverage of terrorist attacks in six countries (Rupar and Murrell 2019) revealed that all three challenges merge into the single task of finding a balance between being first and being right. This stands at the centre of editorial reasoning in these situations: 'When facts are contradictory and hard to verify, editorial judgment on moving fast while avoiding confusion, comes with increased responsibility regarding the use of news material' (p. 34). This tension is a universal feature of journalism practice regardless of the national context.

This paper offers some insights into the ways the New Zealand news media organised reporting on the March 15th terrorist attack in Christchurch. To find out how the coverage of the terrorist attack in Christchurch relates to patterns of reporting on terrorist attacks in other countries, this paper explores key moments in editorial decision making on 15 March 2019, the first day of the coverage of the terrorist attack. It focuses on the 'first responder' elements of journalistic work – speed and accuracy in providing information about the mosque attacks – to identify how journalistic norms are adapted and changed to report this breaking news.

## Approach

The practice of journalism is rooted in positivism. Reporters claim to tell the truth and represent 'facts as they really are', but each segment of journalists' everyday work, from selecting events to giving the news a headline, clearly demonstrates journalism practice's embeddedness in constructivism in the representation of reality (Rupar 2017). This paper captures this ambivalence by looking closely at key challenges in editorial decision making and how reporting is created and given meaning. Following the model established in the previous collaborative study of reporting on terrorism, interviews with seven New Zealand editors were conducted. Editors were interviewed, because reporting a breaking news event is a joint work of journalists on the spot and the editor in the newsroom. What is prevalent in ant disaster response 0 people working in the flatter, more dynamic, and ad-hoc manner (Manoj and Baker 2007) applies to the new media work too. The Boston Marathon attack in 2013 highlighted the speed with which information and

misinformation spread (Javris and Ashraf 2015) bringing to the forefront the responsibilities of editors. They organise reporters' work, designate duties and ensure reporting resources, but more importantly they coordinate information gathering, provide advice and guidelines, and are responsible for ethical decisions related to the coverage. As will be explained later, reporters on the spot have a segment of the story at hand, and the editor is the one that ensures segments are put together into comprehensive coverage. A semi-structured interview is used as the main method of inquiry (Galletta 2013). Interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. The analysis started when all interviews were completed and fully transcribed, using Braun and Clarke's model of thematic analysis. A relatively small sample of seven interviews allowed manual identification of key themes as 'patterned response or meaning within the data set' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 82). Following earlier studies of editors' perspectives on covering terrorism (Murrell and Rupar 2018; Rupar and Murrell 2019), editors were asked to provide details about their newsgathering practice, reflect on the key moments in the coverage, explain the internal organisation of a newsroom and information gathering process, and highlight main editorial dilemmas in the coverage. The objective was to capture journalism practice in terms of what is done rather than what should be done, to explore the patterns of choices editors make when faced with a dilemma about what is the right thing to do. The critical examination of the news-making process allows identification of how normative expectations are met in everyday practice. The editors' description of newsroom responses to the Christchurch event indicates professional discourse – the communication of journalistic beliefs and their interaction in a dramatic situation.

The editors were selected so as to represent mainstream news media organisations working across different platforms – newspaper, radio, television and an online-only newsroom. Editors were approached by email and phone. Interviews were conducted face to face. All editors were asked to describe and reflect on particular moments in the coverage and the distinct turning points that defined their approach to reporting on the Christchurch attack. In two newsrooms, Spinoff and the New Zealand Herald, two editors who worked closely on the coverage were interviewed, in all other news outlets, one editor was interviewed.

## Findings

Researchers have documented how breaking news intensifies a sense of professionalism among journalists (Lewis and Cushion 2009). There is a job to be done and a procedure to follow: gathering information from witnesses and officials, doing background research, checking and verifying facts, monitoring social media, moderating and curating information gathered. In small countries such as New Zealand, and in an event happening in a city of fewer than 400,000 people, reporters and editors are likely to know some of the people affected or involved in the response. The issue of proximity to sources intensifies a sense of moral responsibility (Hirst et al. 2012). Studies have shown that journalists 'socialized subjectivity' determines the way news media cover events, and indeed the editors interviewed in this study say they immediately go into auto-pilot when covering breaking news – 'you know what to do because you know what you need to do to make it work' (O'Sullivan interview). However, this process is more complex than it

seems. The interviews with New Zealand editors in charge of the coverage of the Christchurch attack generated a number of themes that characterise journalists' work as first responders: their ability to stay calm and approach event rationally (Perry and Lindell 2003), to respond fast by relying on experience in covering breaking news, the set of ethical decisions that are to be made on the spot, the ongoing management and negotiation of reporting on the event, and taking moral responsibility for the information provided. The following section presents the editors' perspective on these issues.

### ***Friday afternoon, breaking news***

Locating news media's approach to the coverage of the Christchurch terrorist attack starts with the editors' description of this breaking news. It was Friday, a time when everyone, journalists included, is already winding down, thinking about the weekend. The *New Zealand Herald's* news editor David Rowe explains that it had been a long busy week, the lead story that evening was going to be the children's climate strike that had taken place that morning. The news about the attack came in around 1.50 pm when the police tweeted there was an ongoing situation at the Al Noor mosque. Kamala Hayman, the editor in chief of *The Press* and the head of *Stuff's* Christchurch office, outlines it minute by minute: a gunman opened fire at 1.40 pm, *Stuff* started sending a mobile push alert at 1.57 pm warning of 'a major incident'. Live coverage was launched at 2.11 pm. What began as a breaking news file with vital security details and rolling updates became a 15-day *Stuff* live blog with 792 posts, videos, and images. Editors in other newsrooms ran a similar schedule. In the first 36 h of the coverage, they all aimed to work fast and provide accurate, reliable information the country would trust. When the news broke about a possible shooting in Christchurch, Elizabeth Binning, the *Herald's* chief of staff thought 'it must be a gang or a domestic – something where someone's holed up inside'. 'Who would have thought there would be a massacre in Christchurch', echoes the South Island Bureau Chief for the *Newshub*, Hamish Clark. Still, the fact it happened in Christchurch meant the newsroom was prepared for the coverage. It is the experience of Christchurch based reporters that was the most relevant for understanding the ways the event was covered:

Just remember we've all been through earthquakes – not one but two, and then Kaikoura: three. Then the Port Hills fire: four, which went on for days. So our newsroom is very ... it's not ingrained, but we do disasters well. So with that experience, it was very helpful, so we were able to react quickly, we were able to make decisions quickly as well. (Clark, interview)

This experience, part of a more universal practice that Bourdieu (2002, p. 8) calls 'orchestration of habitus', is crucial for reporting on the spot and for organising the work of reporters. Phil O'Sullivan, editor of Newsgathering for *One News* – TVNZ, who worked for CNN and reported from the Middle East, and was in Mumbai in 2008 when the terrorist attack occurred, stresses the importance of good organisation:

The important thing for TV is that we don't have lots of people calling the reporters, we want to have as few people calling the reporters as possible, so we make sure that it's done centrally through one person and in this instance it was the person in Christchurch.

As the news broke, international media started calling New Zealand newsrooms, asking colleagues for up to date reports and live-ins. The *Herald*, immediately allocated one reporter just to answer these calls:

Phones were ringing non-stop, absolutely non-stop. We had them coming into the news desk and if I'm honest I ignored most of them because I was so busy out there, but a colleague at ZB, she spent most of her time that day dealing with the calls. She would talk and I could hear – I was there till about 4am – and I would hear her almost on autopilot saying the same thing over and over. (Binning, interview)

When breaking news occurs, journalists on the spot are the ones who gather the information but supplementary information is needed to produce a comprehensive report (Hansen et al. 1994). Editors interviewed for this study highlight the fact that journalists on the spot 'work in a bubble' (Clark, interview) knowing only part of the story they collected, not the whole story. It is an editor sitting in a newsroom, the one who coordinates the work of all reporters, that feedback information gathered by all, helping the team to generate comprehensive coverage of the event. The whole team has to be involved in the coverage and Christchurch was no exception. As soon as the news broke the team got together, everyone wanted to help. The *Herald's* CEO came to the newsroom that night, as did the *Newshub* editor's son whose scooter became the best vehicle for bringing batteries to reporters in the field. This professional solidarity played an important role in the coverage of the mosque attacks:

You had people who had no experience reporting on hard news or terrorism or anything like that who just figured out a way to contribute. So that whole weekend you had people in here or everyone was just working remotely. I've never seen everyone volunteering their time and energy to the same extent and I thought it was a signal moment for us in terms of showing what our purpose was and how we respond to a crisis. (Grieve, interview)

Journalism collegiality has advantages in covering unexpected events (Marchetti 2005) and was in place in all newsrooms, between the team covering the event, but also in front of the mosques – information was shared gladly between journalists working for different news organisations and their editors.

### ***What to publish and what to omit***

Much has been written on the politics of naming in relation to terrorist attacks. Coleman's (2003, p. 88) suggestion to look at the assessment of the geopolitical threat in the light of 'reasserting the state as a site of belonging and as the legitimate location of orderly politics' resonates in the New Zealand context. Mainstream news media started coverage by reporting that there was an 'armed gunman', then labeled the event as 'Christchurch shooting' and 'mosque shooting', but the language changed after the Prime Minister Jacinda Arden's press conference when she qualified it as a 'terrorist attack'. This is not an occasion to explore why the Prime Minister's decision to name it terrorism was made (for some indication see Trevett 2019) but in any case, the Christchurch attack fits into a definition of terrorism as an anxiety-inspiring method of repeat violent action, motivated by political reasons (Patyk 2009). Belinda McCammon, *Radio New Zealand's* South Island Bureau Chief, explains the importance of the PM's statement by saying: 'Jacinda's press conference set up a tone and standard,



provided good information. We certainly didn't want to name the shooter, we didn't want to make him a hero.'

Journalism practice, based on norms, standards, values, and protocols (Bourdieu 2005) is far from a static application of routine. It incorporates a chain of communicative events where the final report for example, embeds the interview between journalist and source, the conversation between journalist and colleagues, between journalist and editor, and extends – through the audience – to the new chain of communicative events related to the reading of the text (now in the private as well as the public domain). Some events in this chain open unexpectedly and that was the case of the *Spinoff's* coverage of the story. This online magazine was the first news media outlet to report that the attack had been live-streamed on Facebook. The managing editor was in Singapore, at a conference organised by Google called 'Newsgeist':

Before it even started I remember I got a series of notifications on my phone from RNZ, unconfirmed reports of a shooting and your immediate response is: it's probably just a car backfiring, because it's NZ and we barely have much in the way of shootings. But later as I was preparing to go and meet Facebook, you know we'd just got an account manager with them because we spend enough money to be in that top 2% of their global spenders, you realize that no, something really serious has happened here. I get a phone call from Toby back in NZ, he was just operating at a very high level – he'd made a whole bunch of decisions and was running them past me. He said that they'd found out that it'd been live-streamed on Facebook ... (Grieve, interview)

There was obviously a lot of pressure at that moment, both in terms of time, because *Spinoff* got an extraordinary story first in the world but also pressure in terms of deciding which information to disseminate and which not to disseminate:

By that point we had the live stream and the manifesto, we had all this information and Duncan was with Facebook for a comment but we decided that we would not link to the video, nor the manifesto nor include any passages of the text which would be searchable so that people could find it themselves. I was still aware of the general research that showed the dangers of sharing that information in terms of serving the purposes of those who are responsible for terrorism. But it was pretty obvious to me that there was no public interest purpose served by distributing those images further, there was no public interest purpose served by directing people to the manifesto. (Manhire, interview)

An hour after the attack, all major newsrooms in New Zealand made similar decisions regarding the focus on victims and not the terrorist, about not showing the his live-streamed killing, or taking extracts from his political manifesto. But what was happening before that, why did some news outlets post and within a minute deleted the link (negating they put there in the first place)? How were these decisions made and what do they tell us about journalists working as first responders? The video material triggered the most heated debate within the newsrooms. The terrorist live-streamed the killing on his Facebook page. While no one wanted to post this recording online, some argued that the edited clips would be visual material suitable for broadcasting. The *New Zealand Herald*, for example, took four screen grabs from the video for the digital presentation but they didn't show any violent acts as such. They depicted the car, the license plate, a reflection of the gunman's face in the mirror and a scene on the street before he went into the mosque, and a shot of weapons in his car:



Part of the reason for this is, essentially you're balancing the need to know versus the danger of promoting the terrorist message. So, in this case, we had a situation where there was an active shooter and this information could actually potentially help apprehend him and get the information out there. It was very much a breaking news situation where you've got information and you're trying to present it in the most straightforward way that you can. (Rowe, interview)

All editors stress that both video and manifesto were worth reporting, but the potential disturbing consequences of its publication were considered to be higher than its newsworthiness. *TVNZ's* robust debate about the footage illustrates the spectrum of arguments journalists evoke in such a situation:

On one hand, there was an argument that the material is already in the public domain, people were watching it, so why censor something that is already publicly available. On the other hand, as the editor who made the final call, John Gillespie, said the terrorist obviously carefully designed the footage for maximum effect, it was providing the shooter with a platform. We also had considerations under the Broadcasting Standards Authority statutes around taste and decency – not to show things that may be inflammatory for our audience. (O'Sullivan, interview)

If we were to sum up the first phase of the mosque attack coverage, it seems that newsrooms relied on previous experience of covering breaking news in terms of speed and the duty to provide information citizens needed in the crisis, but with that duty from the very beginning came a great sense of responsibility not to create panic.

### ***Moral responsibility and journalism of care***

A strong sense of moral responsibility characterised the editorial approach to Christchurch's attack. This logic, one might argue the logic of practice (Bourdieu 2002), relates to journalism of care that can be defined as public centered, socially responsible reporting aimed at supporting citizens in times of crisis. In the New Zealand context, it has been historically developed and is reflected in the system of journalistic self-regulation as 'the vehicles for media responsibility and accountability' (Tully and Elsaka 2002). The editors interviewed in this study cited the principles of the Media Council and the Broadcasting Standards Authority as the markers that were used to make a call. They stressed breaking news as a site of increased focus on what good journalism is and should be:

We apply the same approach that we apply to any situation. We certainly want to have our facts straight. I mean, mistakes are made in terms of error and judgment – I don't shy away from that. But I think fundamentally it's not that we created a whole new playbook. Well we did in effect by accident because it was so unprecedented, but we went in with our initial model of covering things – it wasn't like 'okay guys, don't do what we normally do', it was like 'right, this is the way we do things' and we carried through with that. (Rowe, interview)

Editors talked about their journalists as teams, rather than individual reporters. Some names were mentioned but in all interviews, the emphasis was on a newsroom's response and journalism practice. This shift from journalists to journalism is a move from a logic of personal responsibility to the logic of a field, 'the structure of the journalistic field and the mechanisms that operate within it' (Bourdieu 2005, p. 41). The tone of the Christchurch coverage came from the interviews with witnesses, citizens, civil and medical authorities.

The editors pointed out that the attack made them realise not much was known about the Muslim community in New Zealand:

Journalists always try to be alert to those [missing voices], but having said that I don't think we have adequately represented voices from the NZ Muslim community and obviously, that's not just the Muslim community, it's the Sikh community, the Jewish community, whatever community. One of the lessons of all this is that we all need to try harder to make sure that those perspectives are represented. (Manhire, interview)

From the very beginning, the words that journalists used to describe the massacre and its effect on the community were carefully chosen to do justice to what witnesses, families of victims, friends, neighbours, and ordinary citizens saw, felt and thought. In the days after the attack, journalists began publishing articles that would break down the anti-migrant rhetoric of certain MPs, the Islamophobia across the country, and the racism of New Zealand's colonial past. The violent terrorist attacks over the last couple of years and the news media coverage of these events have raised questions of the media's role in amplifying the divisive extremism and/or censoring and limiting the coverage, each providing fuel to increasing distrust in the news media. New Zealand editors stress the importance of trust highlighted in their mission statements. As Rowe explains, the *Herald's* 'keeping Kiwis in the know' means the task is

first and foremost to provide information in a way that helps people understand it, to explain what's going on in NZ and around the world as well and to shine a light on things that people wouldn't otherwise be aware of.

One of the first things *Spinoff* did was to run a 'What can I do?' post, because

there were so many people feeling distraught, upset, angry, and not knowing how to channel that [?] included the right places you can give money or give support or turn up to help because as you saw so powerfully, people in NZ wanted to do that. (Manhire)

New Zealand news organisations have a tradition of offering an op-ed space to people with knowledge and interest in an issue affecting a community, and the most qualified people to speak to the experience of that is believed to be someone from the community. In the case of Christchurch's attack, *Spinoff's* task became one of commissioning and editing texts written by people who weren't necessarily skilled in writing. But that came later. The immediate coverage of the breaking news, the work that positions journalists as first responders, is based on a well-established model of producing hard, fast and accurate news that is published because journalism aims to serve the public interest. The main concern, to inform, be comprehensive and get it right has been always a precondition of trust.

## Conclusions

The dangers of reporting events as they occur have always been multi-layered. Following Manoj and Baker's (2007) taxonomy of challenges, it is evident that technological, social and organisational challenges play a role in the coverage of terrorist attacks. Journalists' experience, knowledge, and skills support responding to these challenges. Journalists' responses to the crisis are habitual and come as a result of a newsroom structure and the interaction between an editor and a journalist. Editors stress that reporting on the

Christchurch mosques attacks has shown that the dangers for the journalists were similar those faced by all first responders. Being in the line of fire, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, being threatened with arrest for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, seeing things that other people would not see, whether it's the shooting or whether it's dead bodies, just like in the earthquakes – that's what happens when journalists go into the field. Reporters and cameramen are like police and ambulance officers, first responders who see and hear exactly the same things. This study has highlighted the collaborative nature of newsroom's work, expanding the existing scholarship on journalists covering terrorist attacks on editors whose contribution to the coverage of unfolding dramatic event tends to be neglected. News media's main duty is to report and inform, to help both individuals and the community to understand the crisis, and therefore support recovery and social resilience. This study focused on editorial decisions in the coverage of the mosque attacks. A number of processes taking place in newsrooms supported timely, accurate and socially responsible reporting based on norms, values, and experience in covering breaking news.

## Disclosure statement

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