My-o-my, you ’re not looking so good today!”

von Ulla Fröhling
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The sensational story of Natascha Kampusch, the young woman from Austria who escaped her kidnapper in August 2006 after eight long years of captivity, has revealed that journalists have a great responsibility when dealing with people who have suffered a traumatic experience. Here are the journalistic dos and don’ts when encountering such individuals.
The group of journalists and reporters was full of anticipation. I met them at a special course on “Taboos and the media” at the Freie Universität Berlin. The topic of my talk that day was “The sexual abuse of children”. I introduced myself briefly before asking, almost abruptly, “Who among you has been sexually abused during your childhood?” Not a whisper. “Who has been systematically mistreated by their parents?” Again, the question was greeted with the same silenced stupor, as was my next one, “Who has been raped as an adult?” It was only when I asked, “Who has ever had something stolen?” that the shocked audience began to stir, some raising their hands, others chuckling awkwardly.
“Did you really expect to get answers?” a female student asked. Of course not! I had even hoped that no one would react. However, I wanted them to experience first-hand that these truly are taboo topics. It was a bit risky to start off things like that, and perhaps a bit mean, but it led us straight into our topic, i.e., how to act as a journalist when dealing with the victims of violence and other traumatic events.

Hunted by the media
Kidnapping victim Natascha Kampusch seems like the journalists treated her badly, “hunting” her down, lying about her and humiliating her publicly. That was what the 18-year-old woman said in the dramatic TV interview by journalist Christoph Feuerstein for Austrian national broadcaster ORF (www.orf.at, Sept 6, 2006), only two weeks after her escape from the cellar she was held captive in for eight years. As a protective measure against this “media hunt”, Ms Kampusch surrounds herself with a team of psychologists, lawyers and media consultants who aim to create a media image of her that is as undamaging as possible and, at the same time, as beneficial as possible for her future.

The ORF interview
There has been an intense debate about this interview, conducted so soon after her escape. However, as a case study of how traumatised victims should be treated by the media, it offers us valuable insights. Of course, the questions she was asked during the interview had been discussed with her in advance; her team of advisors was present in the TV studio and one could clearly sense their influence, down to the very wording of some of the questions. Unlike in a “normal” interview, this pre-determined sequence of events makes complete sense when interacting with victimised persons since it instils them with a (vital) sense of security. Also of interest was the way TV reporter Feuerstein introduced his questions on seven occasions with the explicit question whether she wanted to talk about a specific aspect of her case or not, whether she wanted to go into details or not. This underscored her autonomy as an interview partner: unlike during the last eight years, now she had the right to say “no”.
“If you don’t want to continue, please, just say ‘stop’”, Feuerstein introduced one of his very last questions, offering Natascha Kampusch – consciously or not – the opportunity to use a stop signal the same way traumatised people have the right to stop their therapy sessions with

their psychologist. By doing so, they can diminish the risk of flashbacks, i.e. painful memories of what happened to them, which may be triggered by specific smells or sights (see box no. 1 at the end of the text).
To prevent such flashbacks, journalists should always offer their interviewees the opportunity to interrupt the session at any time, ideally using some kind of pre-agreed non-verbal signal, like raising a hand, as trauma victims often have difficulties in articulating themselves when the memories become too painful.

The Osthoff interview
Since the Kampusch interview, more and more journalists have realised how important it is to have a basic knowledge of trauma treatment when interacting with victimised persons. Fee Rojas, a coach at Germany's two national broadcasters ARD and ZDF (www.zfp.de), was one of the first to organise workshops on topics such as "Trauma and journalism". She describes how little people originally cared for the topic, and mentions how recently – particularly after the TV interview with kidnapping victim Susanne Osthoff had been on the air (www.heute.de, Dec. 29, 2005) – had there been a veritable surge of interest.
The Osthoff interview, conducted by Marietta Slomka, host of the popular German news program *heute-journal* (ZDF), turned into a more disastrous affair with each question. Susanne Osthoff, the German archeologist, held captive in Iraq for a period of 23 days, had regained freedom only 11 days before the interview and thus was still in the difficult phase where trauma victims normally need time to recover. "For people who have lost their bearings after suffering a great misfortune, it is vital that they recuperate as fully as possible before talking about what has happened," Fee Rojas explains. They should be given the chance to cope with their experience at their own pace, only telling their story when they are really ready.

Badly prepared
A short exchange before the actual interview with Osthoff was planned, allowing the TV journalist and her interview partner "to warm up to each other", in the words of Marietta Slomka (www.faznet.de, Jan. 22, 2006). Of course, everyone who has gone through a traumatic experience will be hesitant to open up to a perfect stranger. The same applied to Osthoff, who had just endured a life-threatening situation, a time during which neither fight nor flight had been possible. But establishing some kind of mutual trust is all the more difficult if there's no eye-contact between interviewer and interviewee, as was the case during that short pre-interview talk: in the Al Jazeera studio there was no control monitor for Susanne Osthoff.
"I can see you, but you probably can't see me," is how Slomka described, rather naively, the asymmetrical power relations between the two. From the journalist's viewpoint, this was simply a comment on the technical side of things; for Osthoff, however, it must have felt like a re-enactment of her situation as helpless victim – again, not a very effective way to build trust. When interviewing a victim of violence, a good preparation, including a check of all the technical facilities, is a must. For the Osthoff interview to become a "success", therefore, chances were slim at best.
The first question the TV presenter asked was "How are you?" While it is true that this is a polite way of starting any verbal exchange - and it was certainly intended as a friendly overture - in this case it was inappropriate. Anyone who is visibly struggling not to lose their composure doesn't really appreciate an inquiry regarding their emotional state. In a setting like this, such niceties as "How are you doing?", "How are you holding up?", etc. are strictly taboo. No wonder Osthoff's answer was rather short and crisp: she simply answered "Bad".

Every word counts

Marietta Slomka went on to ask, “What exactly happened on the day of the kidnapping? You were in your car, and suddenly people dragged you out of there?” As a journalist, she had to be interested in such details because, ultimately, their TV audience wanted to know exactly how does it feel to be in the hands of a kidnapper? And by wording her questions in an emotional and dramatic way (“suddenly dragged out of there”), she probably wanted to jog the victim’s memory. However, in this situation, it was definitely wrong to ask for specific details like these. A journalist who probes and enquires like this runs the risk of involuntarily “triggering” the traumatised person, pushing them into, once again, reliving their tragedy. A trauma victim’s memory is in a state of fragile balance. Normally, they have to try hard not to conjure up unwanted recollections and the emotions they entail. One such trigger is enough to make a person experience an overwhelming flashback.

Reckless behaviour
The interviews with Natascha Kampusch and Susanne Osthoff are without doubt the most intensely discussed examples of journalistic encounters with victimised people. Many others, however, whose fate does not make the national or international news, regularly complain about having been badly mistreated by the media mob.

Two examples
Ulrike M. Dierkes is one of the very few children, borne of incest, who have publicised their experience. Her father was a man with a flawless reputation in the little village he lived in – at least until his daughter, was pregnant with his child. Yes, Ulrike was the daughter of her father and her sister. In an attempt to cope with what happened, Ulrike, now a journalist, wrote a book entitled “Meine Mutter ist meine Schwester” (“My Mother is my Sister”).
In her native village, however, people didn’t take it in the right spirit. They felt that she turned the crime into a public affair. When she revisited that place in August 2006, reporters had her stand in front of her former home, answering the same question over and over again, retake upon retake – without ever being fully satisfied by her answers. At one point even the equipment failed, which made Ulrike furious: “I’m not too keen on standing here, in a place where people have threatened to pour gasoline over my head and burn me alive. Don’t make me stand around here any longer!”

Even though their trauma might lie well in the past, many trauma victims often struggle with its aftermath for a long time.

Another example would be that of radio journalist Susanne Poelchau who lived through the bomb attack on Dahab, Egypt, on April 24, 2006. Remembering the time she was in the hospital in nearby Sharm al Sheik where the dead and wounded were treated, she describes her fellow journalists as a “pack of wolves”, chasing greedily through the building in search of newsworthy material. Ms Poelchen survived the bomb attack, but her son, 10-year old Marcel, was not so lucky. He died from his wounds at the place of the explosion. Together with her dead child, the journalist was brought to the hospital only to be victimised again. Reporters beleaguered her, filming her without her knowledge. They even promised to provide her with drinkable water and a mobile, and to contact the embassy on her behalf – but forgot about it quickly after they had secured what they had come for.

The writing process
Any responsible journalist who writes about the survivors of a traumatic event should bear in mind that they, too, will read the text. The question, therefore, is how pleased they will be with their media portrait. According to a new study published by researchers at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, most trauma victims show negative reactions to the media reports

about themselves – even if they are factually accurate. After having read or watched them, two thirds say they feel sad, half of them shocked, and one third downright angry. The more traumatised a person, the more negative their reaction, with the most negative reactions caused by media reports that contain factual errors. The researchers assume that those reports trigger memories of the ordeal, in some cases causing even a re-living of the events.

Professor Andreas Maercker, one of the co-authors of the study, is convinced that "from a psychological perspective, it is inexcusable to drag violence victims into the limelight". By telling their story in the media, those people would neither gain support nor acceptance, but quite the opposite. Those who are still struggling with the aftermath of their ordeal are likely to be traumatised again (Maercker, 2006).

Radio journalist Susanne Poelchau, who survived the terrorist attack on Dahab, sees things somewhat differently. After reading many articles over which she had had no control at all, she felt relieved when she finally was granted a long interview with a journalist who was also a long-time friend and, she says, "who allowed me to actively decide what to include and what not, and to have the text published with a photo of my son – instead of his grave, as the editor had originally suggested".
Despite the negative experience she has had with reporters, she is convinced that a "positive journalistic encounter can empower traumatised persons, can help them step out of their position of passive victim and take active control of their lives again".

Unsatisfied curiosity
So far, Natascha Kampusch and her advisors have managed to play such an active role when dealing with the media. But many questions about this unique and spectacular case remain unanswered, the existence of similar crimes notwithstanding. Journalists, therapists and physicians would lie if they claimed that their curiosity was completely satisfied. Hopefully, in the future journalists will treat her, as well as less famous cases, with the dignity they deserve.

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THE AFTERMATH OF A TRAUMA
The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a trauma as a "life-threatening event that can drive almost everyone to great despair".
About two thirds of the people suffering from a trauma manage to recuperate from the

psychological effects without therapy. After six months, approximately one third still suffer from sleeplessness, nightmares, panic attacks and flashbacks (i.e. uncontrollable memories that can be caused by triggers, such as smells or sights). All these reactions are completely normal effects of abnormal events!
Some trauma victims show the symptoms of a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), i.e. they are emotionally numb, actively avoid any recollection of the event and experience flashbacks. They may use alcohol or drugs to block out bad memories or attempt to hurt, sometimes even kill, themselves.
Single events like natural disasters, accidents, technological catastrophes are more easily dealt with than violence, especially if committed by persons with close ties to the victim. Survivors of the Holocaust or victims of long-term sexual abuse during childhood develop in 60 percent of cases chronic PTSD.
The life of many afflicted persons is in a fragile balance that can be easily disrupted. Careless journalists can cause such a disruption – respecting people's boundaries, therefore, is imperative.
For more information, see www.dartcenter.org

THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN INTERVIEWING A TRAUMATISED PERSON

Preparations

Do you really have a good reason to interview that person? If your main motive is voyeurism you better forget about disturbing them at all!
Have you chosen the right moment for conducting the interview? Doing so is often key to achieving a successful journalistic encounter. Traumatised persons need time before they are ready to open up.
It is probably a good idea to contact the person in writing first (via letter, fax, e-mail). Right after a traumatic event, the victims have often difficulty getting the facts right.
Never show up unannounced!
Discuss how you intend to conduct your interview and do involve the interviewee in your planning.

Pre-interview

If you plan to conduct the interview at the scene of the crime/disaster, do it in a safe and accommodating area – never next to an ambulance car with whaling sirens!
Introduce yourself and the publication you are working for in detail.
Treat your interviewee with respect and don't forget that a "no" really means "no". Remain calm even if you and your questions are met with strong disapproval. If in doubt, hand over your business card and leave.

Interview

Show up for the interview well-prepared and with plenty of time.
Accept if your interviewee shows up with someone to keep them company.
Make clear that the interviewee has the right to interrupt the interview at any time.
To do so, it's best to agree on a stop-signal, e.g. raising one's hand. In a moment of painful memory, traumatised persons often have difficulty articulating themselves verbally.
Ask your questions in a calm and controlled manner, without being too compassionate. This is not a talk among friends.
Listen and don't insist too much on getting an answer. Don't ask for too specific details – trigger alert! The memories might surge up in a way that can no longer be controlled by you or your interview partner.
Never make statements like "I know how you feel" – you simply don't.

Writing up
Be careful when using passive constructions. Your interviewee might feel victimised again.
Don't assume that the person you're interviewing will be a victim "forever". You don't know how well they will cope with their experience – some manage to lead a perfectly normal life again.
Discuss in detail what kind of photographs or illustrations you intend to publish with the interview. Never show degrading pictures of the victim.
Keep your promises. Provide your interview partner with a copy of the final text for revision and take any suggestion they might have seriously.

Follow-up
Inform your interviewee about how you intend to use the interview, including time and date of publication (broadcasting) and any planned re-runs or re-publications etc.
Ask your interview partner afterwards how they experienced the interview when it was published in the media.

WHEN JOURNALISTS BECOME VICTIMS
In August 2006, US-photographer John McCusker was arrested after police had hunted him down following a wild car chase. "Shoot me!", he begged the police officers. The pictures he had taken months before of the havoc wrought by hurricane "Kathrina" in New Orleans, USA, may have earned him the Pulitzer Prize, but he simply couldn't get over the things he had seen.
Another extreme example of undiagnosed posttraumatic stress is the eye witness report published in the British newspaper The Guardian about the killing of a "Chinese dissident". The report turned out to be completely non-factual. Its award-winning author, however, was absolutely sure he had seen what in reality never had happened. Apparently, the pictures in his head had played a bad trick on the 24-year old, obviously traumatised journalist. "War and violence can invade us, infect us," Carolin Emcke agrees, a reporter for German news magazine *Der Spiegel*.
For military personnel, police officers, firefighters and ambulancemen and -women, there is professional help for coping with stressful experiences: supervision. But journalists, too, are "first responders", i.e. they are first to arrive at the scene of armed conflicts, natural disasters and other catastrophic and distressing events. The same applies to local reporters who must deal with car accidents, child pornography, bank robbers or suicides. Those reporters might approach such incidents as professionals – but many might not manage to forget the things seen or experienced. Sleeping disorders, depressions, domestic problems and alcohol abuse are among the warning signs. Talking about such psychological problems with their colleagues, however, still seems to be one of the biggest taboos.

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