Restraint in the age of *speed*:

Protecting vulnerable news sources in the 24/7 global news cycle

Amanda Gearing
PhD candidate, QUT

USQ Springfield
July 2014
Addresses the conference question:

What is the role of investigative journalism when dealing with the challenges of tomorrow?
Digital news coverage

- Virtually instant transmission speed
- Increased permanence of online material
- Easily searched archives
- Global searchability
- Difficult/impossible to retract
Digital age

Increased responsibility upon journalists for accuracy
Loudon Homestead, Dalby
Susannah and her father John Andrew.
Baby girl’s throat cut

A 2½-year-old Dalby girl is in a dangerous but stable condition in Brisbane’s Royal Children’s Hospital following an alleged knife attack on Monday.

The girl had severe lacerations to her throat. It is alleged the girl’s 29-year-old mother tried to kill her with a knife.

Det Sen Sgt Darryl Young, of the Dalby CIB, said a large bladed knife covered with blood was found in a saucepan on the stove near where the child was found.

The incident occurred on a property 10kms from Dalby on the Moonie Highway.

At 10.26am Dalby Police received a call from a distraught woman telling them she had tried to kill her daughter.

Sgt Young said both the mother and child were treated at the Dalby General Hospital before being transferred.

The mother was taken to Toowoomba’s Baillie Henderson Hospital for psychiatric assessment.

He said Police conducted a brief interview with the woman on Monday and investigations are continuing.

No charges have been laid at this stage and Police are awaiting results of the assessment.

“The incident is somewhat bizarre,” he said.

Sgt Young added that a letter, which allegedly the woman had written to her husband, was found with other evidence.

No further details and the names have not been released.

“In all the incident was quite traumatic for all those involved,” Sgt Young said.

“In particular I would like to praise the work performed by Ambulance bearer Holloway and Constables Patterson and Sycz of the Dalby Police who were the first people at the scene.”

Sgt Young also praised the efficiency and professionalism shown by the doctors involved and staff of the Dalby Hospital.
Operating theatre, Dalby Hospital
Risks

Physical risks to Susannah from her mother

Physical risks to Susannah’s pre-school children from her mother

Mental health risk to Susannah – anxiety, PTSD
Minimising the risk

• Interview method
• Reporter responsibility for accuracy – read over of draft script
• Time for Susannah to consider the risks and decide she’s willing (or not) to accept them.
A living sacrifice

Tuesday 31 March 2009

Sunday 10 April 2009

Suzannah’s 7th birthday was only two years after her mother’s death. The celebration was a small and muted affair. The family was numb from grief, and there was little energy to plan a party for their daughter. Suzannah’s mother had been a loving and devoted parent, but her death had left a void in the family that would take time to fill.

Suzannah’s father was a sensitive and compassionate man. He had always been there for his children, but his grief was intense. He was struggling to come to terms with the loss of his wife and the future that had been snatched from them. He was also responsible for the welfare of his young daughter, who had been left with a hefty burden.

The family was still trying to come to terms with their loss when Suzannah’s father was given a lifeline. He was offered a job in a distant city, and the family was given the opportunity to start afresh. Suzannah was excited about the move, as it promised a brighter future for her and her father. She was also glad to leave the city where her mother had died.

Through a series of meetings and interviews, Suzannah’s family was able to find a new home and start a new life. They were also able to access support services and counseling to help them through their grief.

In this moving documentary, Suzannah’s family describe their memories of the shock and grief that followed her mother’s death and how they have coped since then.

Further Information

Facebook page for A Living Sacrifice

Suzannah’s response to the story

Suzannah’s father responded to some of the questions and criticisms that have emerged since this story was aired on RN and elsewhere. He has expressed his gratitude for the support he received from the community and his family and friends. He has also talked about the process of grief and how he has coped since his wife’s death.
IT TOOK toddler Susannah Birch six weeks to speak again after her mother slit her throat but it has taken almost 25 years for her to be able to talk about it publicly.

On Australia Day 1989, during a psychotic episode, Susannah’s mother Linda dressed her in new pyjamas, boiled a large knife in a saucepan on the stove, turned on the gas oven, laid her baby on a sheepskin rug, anointed her with oil and cut her throat.

Susannah owes her survival to quick-acting police and ambulance staff, and to the expert medical team at Dalby Hospital.

Police hushed up the event because of suspected similarities to the death of Azaria Chamberlain, whose mother Lindy was also a Seventh Day Adventist.
Listener feedback

Lexi
Wow, amazing story, made me cry. Good on you for having so much strength to come out of this a stronger and better person, and to use your story to help others!

Helene Thomas:
After hearing this story what kept coming into my mind was the way Susannah's father John dealt with the incident, which is no doubt, any parent's worst nightmare.
Perhaps Susannah's unconditional love and her desire to help others is testament to her father's compassionate love both as a husband and a father, and the way he did his best to look after both Susannah and his wife, despite what happened. I think John is brave and wise and an incredible father.
'My mother cut my throat and then prepared to roast me in the oven': Horrific ordeal of the woman nearly killed in Biblical sacrifice when she was just two

Susannah Birch was two when her mother cut her throat in a ritual sacrifice. Psychotic mother cut her throat to enact Old Testament passage. She was preparing to roast her daughter in oven of Australian family home.

'I can remember her boiling the knives,' Susannah recalls her Mum's attack. She is now an inspiring young woman and mental health advocate.

Susannah and father recall speak about about shocking event for first time.

By CANDACE SUTTON
CREATED: 11:03 AEST, 14 April 2014
In Italy . . .
Marian (New York)
If my spouse had tried to murder my child, there is not a chance in hell they would ever again be in the same room together.
Harmony, The Village, U.S.A, 2 months ago

I can't believe the mother was accepted back home by the father. What a betrayal. So Susannah was 3-4 years old when her mother came back. Still too young to be able to protect herself from an adult. The fear of having to live with the monster who slit your throat and prepared to roast you.....

SusannahBirch, Toowoomba, Australia, 2 months ago

Harmony, the article is about me. No, I wasn't scared of my mother after it happened and social services, my father and extended family were all involved in caring for me. I still love my mother. Just I can't have her in my life.
Unauthorised use of ABC material by the Daily Mail Online

‘It has recently come to the attention of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (“ABC”) that an article in the Daily Mail Online section of your website, contains material owned by the ABC.’

‘In our view, the Daily Mail’s Article is a substantial reproduction of the ABC’s original publication. . . . it is the ABC’s view that its copyright has been infringed.’

Tony Macgregor
Arts Editor
Radio National
Daily Mail Online rip-off sends a mother’s trauma viral

EXCLUSIVE

Sharrri Markson

WHEN she was a child, Susannah Birch’s mother, suffering from severe asthma, cut her throat and held her for 40 minutes as she died.

Birch, at age two, nearly died.

Miraculously, her mother had a moment of sanity and called emergency services for help.

Birch, from Toowoomba in Queensland, had kept this traumatic story a secret her entire life. It was a private matter and, apart from close friends and family, it was no one else’s business.

But 23 years later she felt it was time to share what had happened to her, to reach out to other children with mentally ill parents.

It was a major decision, because Birch’s mother was still alive and a story going public was likely to affect her and her wider family.

But after lengthy discussions with her father and other family members, Birch, who has two children, decided to tell her story in a documentary with the ABC, where she would have final editorial sign-off and, she knew, her story would be handled with compassion and delicacy.

Journalist Amanda Coeling worked on the story with Birch for six months. “Perfect” was how she described the polished document-

ary when she listened to it in full for the first time.

After it aired on April 13 this year, Birch said the reaction from friends and family was wonderful. The support was touching.

But a day later, the satisfaction she felt at finally going public with a story she had hidden her entire life would be destroyed by the national caricature, the Daily Mail online site.

Less than a day after her story was aired on the ABC, the Daily Mail’s senior journalist, Candice Smith, lifted most of the content.

Smith published the most sensational aspects of the story and, without prior warning, she had never spoken to Birch, published the story on the Daily Mail’s website under her own byline.

Birch said there were at least nine inaccuracies raised in the Daily Mail, many of which were continued posting negative comments about her and her father based on the Daily Mail’s beat-up, which did not explain why her father died or followed the horrific attack.

Susannah Birch, from Toowoomba, says the Daily Mail Online’s lifted story was full of inaccuracies and that they “just wanted the shock and the headline”.

I was absolutely shocked when I read it. I figured that anyone who wanted to do my story would get in contact with me,” Birch said.

People were taking things out of context and saying nasty com-

ments, particularly about my father.

People were saying what’s wrong with my father? But in the original documentary my father speaks about how he felt about my mother and me.

“We just wanted the shock and the headline.”

In a statement, she sent the Daily Mail Online an email, explaining the delicate nature of the story and the carelessness of the inaccuracies and sensational reporting.

I am aware that parts of the story were edited, but as no one talked to me or the journalist who I have been working with, a lot of things have been taken out of context or rewritten,” she wrote.

Both Amanda and myself were easy enough to contact, especially if your reporter is Aus-

tralian-based. I don’t understand why you didn’t approach one of us directly.

Sutton previously worked with


She did not respond to The Aus-

tralian’s questions about why she failed to contact Birch to seek

permission or to check facts.

But both Birch and Gearing were horrified the story had been entirely lifted with Sutton’s online.

And Gearing was not mentioned anywhere as the original journalist responsible for the extraordinary story.

The ABC sent the Mail Online a legal letter asking for the article to be removed, requesting a res-

ponse from the outlet within seven days.

The Mail Online did not take the article down, arguing an earlier email from Birch containing several inaccuracies gave them permission to publish.

The Daily Mail seems to draw

up replies to legal complaints as long as possible to keep people from

complaining further,” Birch said.

I think people assume that

if you get just rewards for your efforts, the producers can’t keep it up to the standard which makes it attractive to these th-

ieves. And then we all suffer.

It doesn’t stop and it’s not set-

tled, we’ll be forced to go to court because of the end of the day that’s the only way you can enforce your rights. Rather than people crime-

ning The Australian for taking a similar attitude, everyone should know that you get without seeing that if you steal from people you

It’s straight-out theft and must stop

Bruce McWilliam

JOURNALISM is not just important a part of our society to have the Daily Mail Online staff think they can just lift the benefits of other people’s creativity and hard work.

You cannot follow these people to steal your content. This issue is important.

We spend an incredibly large amount of money on producing our programming, including news programming, and we cannot allow the Mail Online to use it without paying. We are not the ABC. Unless you get just rewards for your efforts, the producers can’t keep it up to the standard which makes it attractive to these thieves. And then we all suffer.

It doesn’t stop and it’s not settled, we’ll be forced to go to court because of the end of the day that’s the only way you can enforce your rights. Rather than people criminalizing The Australian for taking a similar attitude, everyone should know that you get without seeing that if you steal from people you

are entitled to take action. It’s straight-out theft.

Rather than questioning what we’re doing to stop it, people should ask why they’re doing it. It’s a brief unpunished since the Great Bank Robbery of 1983 and the crimes of convicted American bank robber Bernard Maloff. Maloff is in jail. If the Mail Online did it at the Woodworth, they’d get arrested.

It’s the greatest exploitation of private property since the advent of commission.

Order should be restored. How do we then be felt we so put our content on Yahoo?

Bruce McWilliam is convicted director of the Seven Network.
Given the speed of digital news coverage, it is more important than ever that journalists do their best to protect vulnerable news sources in the 24/7 global news cycle.
Contact details

gearingap@bigpond.com

amandagearing.com

Amanda Gearing – Journalist

Amanda Gearing