Notes for RNZ slot from Ursula Cheer (Professor) Canterbury University, 22 February 2012

1. Today I want to talk a bit about a media project that I started work on over the summer, which is part of a larger project the Faculty of Law at Canterbury is carrying out, investigating the many legal issues that have arisen from the earthquakes.

2. My part if the study is focussed on exposing and analysing the various challenges faced by media in disaster reporting. The project has been broken up into two parts - fieldwork involving in-depth interviews with media, followed by a literature review looking at disaster reporting worldwide. Much of the legwork has been carried out over the summer by my excellent research assistant, Sarah Rosanowski.

3. In the fieldwork, Sarah and I have been looking at the practical, legal and ethical issues that arose in Christchurch in the past two years. Methodology for fieldwork:

   Information was gathered through interviews with 24 people participating in different aspects of the newsgathering process, including reporters, camerapersons and editors of news organisations. They worked for various print, broadcast and online media outlets, namely The Press, Radio New Zealand, Newstalk ZB, TVNZ, TV3, an online subscription news agency, and a PR company. One person in particular had experience working both as a reporter on the earthquake, and also on the other side of the line, as a communications employee for the Christchurch City Council. Each interviewee relayed stories about their experiences of reporting on the earthquakes and gave sometimes-differing perspectives on how to deal with different challenges that arose.

4. Background:

   We considered first how disaster communication might be different for media. What the interviews showed us is that conventional professional norms might be displaced for a time, but then they tend to be reinstated or adapted.
The professional norms conventionally are two kinds:

- Routines – preparing, gathering and packaging the news;
- Values – Objectivity, accuracy, fairness, balance.

In a disaster, both are still there but two stages in what others (the authorities and individuals) are doing impact on this. Those two stages appear to be:

- 1) Response
- 2) Recovery

So these have impact on how the law might apply also.

5. The three main areas of concern we distilled from the interviews were:

a. Ethical issues
b. Interactions with Authority
c. The presence of international media

6. As to ethical issues, these break down into:

1) Being a Reporter vs. Assisting others

   When do you put the notepad down?

2) Privacy vs. Public Interest

   Is it appropriate to record and publish images of the dead & grieving?

3) Publication vs. Withholding?

   Is it appropriate to publish correct but unconfirmed information?

7. Issues with Authority broke down into:

a. Access to the CBD
   i. Inconsistent
   ii. Accredited Identification
   iii. Bus tours
   iv. Daily press conferences
b. When does controlled media coverage outweigh public interest in transparency?

c. Memorandum of Understanding between Civil Defence and ‘lifeline utilities’ but limited.

d. It is clear once again that what is acceptable will depend on what stage has been entered: response or recovery

8. Issues relating to the presence of International Media broke down into:

a. Different information gathering priorities

b. Story of fact-based

c. Benefit: foreign aid; Disadvantage: hinders local media

9. Tentative suggestions to explore:

1) Proper Accreditation of the media

   - Would need to set up a body to regulate

   Raises questions:

   - Who should be able to be accredited?
     - People who pay? Media companies? Bloggers?

   - Who should have authority?
     - Private or state body?

2) Agreement for media pool in a disaster

   - Pooling information/pictures not unfamiliar

   - One reporter is allowed access

   - Writes “pool report”, sends to others

   - Would assist with access and International media

3) Clear protocols for dealing with media. Would include:

   - Separation of local & international media
Local media briefed separately

Use of one system of accreditation

Rewritten Memorandum of Understanding

An attempt to define when government control of access and information outweighs the public interest in news publication

10. The work ahead:

- More interviews with Civil Defence, Police, CERA, Council;
- Analysis of literature review.

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