PAPER

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Local journalism and the ethics of inquiry

Much of the public and scholarly attention on the role of journalism in public discussion of historical clergy sexual abuse has focused on investigative reporters and the national impact of their coverage, which is widely understood as the impetus for the highly significant Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-2017). This paper looks beyond the national role of interventionist journalism in creating political pressure for the Royal Commission to consider the importance of media witnessing in the context of local journalism, virtue ethics and the 'response ability' model for reporting sensitive issues. It draws on interviews with editors and reporters who covered the issue of clergy sexual abuse and the Royal Commission for news audiences in the Ballarat region, which was positioned as a key site of church-based crimes and cover-ups through the inquiry process. The aim here is to understand how news-makers' perceived moral and ethical responsibilities shaped their reporting.

Key words: local journalism, civic custodians, virtue ethics, clergy sexual abuse, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Introduction

In this paper we explore the moral and ethical decision-making practices of local journalists who reported on clergy sexual abuse linked to Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-2017) (RCIRCSA or Child Abuse Royal Commission). Until recently, both public and scholarly attention to the role of journalism in relation to this sensitive and complex issue has mostly focused on the interventionist role of investigative journalists who are largely credited for bringing the issue into the national spotlight. Some research has been conducted on the ethical dimensions of journalism's part in truth and reconciliation commissions responding to revelations of child sexual abuse across the world (see McCallum and Waller 2021; Mitchell 2020). This

research has identified the common factors in making public past crimes and the limitations of journalism to challenge dominant power and racialised structures underpinning the need for inquiry in the first place. However, as these crimes always occur in local communities, there is a need to address how media coverage plays out in place-based news settings, particularly where the town is the focus of national reporting (Myers, Waller and McCallum 2021). We contend that such scholarly inquiry can go some way to addressing Callison and Young's provocation about journalism's own reckoning, when they say: 'Questions are increasing about journalism's epistemological foundations ... and what role they should (and do) play in society' (2020: 2).

The diverse and geographically extensive Catholic Diocese of Ballarat has 43 parishes and covers the western third of the state of Victoria, extending from the Murray River in the north to the Southern Ocean in the south. Its headquarters are in the regional city of Ballarat, which became known as an epicentre of clergy sexual abuse through national and international news coverage of the Child Abuse Royal Commission. Two of the most high-profile investigations of Australia's longest, most complex and expensive royal commission were Cases 28 and 35 that pertained to clergy sexual abuse in the Ballarat Catholic diocese (Wright, Swain and McPhillips 2017; Wright and Swain 2018). Over the five years of unprecedented coverage of the RCIRCSA (Waller et al. 2020), public commentaries represented the region as 'one of the most dangerous places to be a child' in the 1970s when paedophile priests and Christian Brothers were enabled in their crimes through inaction and cover-ups by the Catholic Church (Marr 2013: 9). During this period, reporting of clergy sexual abuse and its devastating effects on individuals and families became central to the news agendas of the city's regional daily newspaper, *The Courier*, other regional newspapers such as Warrnambool's *The Standard*, and ABC Ballarat, the largest Australian Broadcasting Corporation regional newsroom in Victoria, which also broadcasts into the south-west of the state.

While diverse in purpose and practice, national inquiries can provide spaces for investigating complex social systems and problems and can also function as 'truth-telling' missions informed by a liberal politics of recognition (McCallum and Waller 2021). The act of 'making public' previously silenced voices is a widely recognised feature of major inquiries and integral to the act of transitional justice, and overwhelmingly scholars emphasise their national importance (Borsa 2017; Laplante and Phenicie 2010; Salter 2019). This national gaze is understandable when the subject of inquiry is of high relevance to the whole society, but it has arguably created a scholarly blind-spot when it comes to the local significance of major inquiries and their relationship with place-based journalism.

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The aim of this paper is to move beyond the national gaze and, instead, explore the moral and ethical practices of local journalists who bear witness to the suffering of victims of child sexual abuse within the communities they serve. In media studies witnessing refers to the role of the journalist as an agent who experiences an event on behalf of the audience. While research on witnessing typically focuses on how journalists bring distant suffering to local audiences (Peters 2001), here we are concerned with witnessing by local journalists who are integrally connected with the people and the place-based institutions on which they are reporting. Through interviews with journalists and editors from the Ballarat region we consider the transformative dimensions of 'proximal witnessing', whereby local media defines, confronts and owns past crimes and trauma in its midst (Myers, Waller and McCallum 2021).

The following sections provide an overview of scholarship that positions local journalists as having a uniquely close relationship with audiences and who serve as a powerful moral compass in shaping the way a community understands itself. We then discuss the importance of bearing witness and the concept of 'proximal witnessing', before outlining our research approach which was to gain first-hand histories and insights from journalists reporting on the Child Abuse Royal Commission. The findings sections present our analysis of in-depth interviews with editors and reporters. We extrapolate the ethical and moral implications and imperatives highlighted by journalists as part of their 'response ability' in relation to 'responsible, accurate and sensitive representation' (Skehan, Sheridan Burns and Hazell 2009) of clergy sexual abuse.

Local journalism: Morality, ethics and community

Historically, local journalists had a close relationship with their communities and occupied a central position in local communication networks. Local journalists, for example, have been positioned as advocates (Hatcher 2012), champions (Bowd 2017), civic custodians (Hess 2016) and community caretakers (Mathews 2020). Of note here is literature that focuses on how local reporters reinforce, denounce and shape perceptions of acceptable codes of conduct and how a community should view itself. Silverstone (2007) highlights that morality and ethics are not one and the same. To him morality refers to the 'generality of principles and to the possibility of their justification' (Silverstone 2007: 6), whereas ethics is the application of those principles in particular social or historical or professional contexts. Our focus on the local reporting of clergy sexual abuse overlaps two areas of moral and ethical inquiry: virtue ethics in terms of how local journalists as individuals conduct (and reflect upon) themselves and their character traits such as integrity, honesty and commitment to justice (see e.g. Couldry 2012; Quinn 2018); and a more morally universalist position that examines how journalists influence how we ought to behave as 'communities',

what is morally right or wrong, and what it means to live a good life (for full discussion see Hess and Richards 2021). Communitarians and public journalism scholars who emphasise the value of local journalism have long argued that we must look beyond morally minimalist approaches of journalism that stem from the Fourth Estate and social responsibility models of the press (Borden 2014; Christians 2011). Christians' view that the focus should be on the moral life as a whole is valuable here because, as he has argued, 'how the moral order works itself out in community formation is the issue, not first of all what practitioners consider virtuous in their own codes of ethics' (Christians 2011: 410).

In a global context, this raises a range of issues, from questions as to which community's moral order and formation should take precedence, to the fate of community-based ethical decision-making when confronted with global or national debates and issues (Hess and Richards 2021) – such as a royal commission with a national focus on abuse that most often took place at a local level. In positioning local journalists as 'civic custodians', for example, Hess (2016) contends this requires acute attention to issues of media power. There are always certain institutions and individuals in society to whom we turn to help shape our understandings or reinforce certain values and virtues. Importantly, it is in the interests of such institutions or individuals to perpetuate how we ought to behave and shape understanding of a shared (albeit contextually specific) common good for their own legitimacy (ibid). This is significant in the context of witnessing theory, which we shall next discuss. Local journalists not only play a role in bringing past atrocities to light, but the audience is presented with and expected to help make sense of these experiences as guided by these powerful media witnesses who keep and confer common values and shared virtues.

Local journalism and proximal witnessing

The concept of proximal witnessing draws on extensive literature around media witnessing that typically concerns the mediation of distant suffering, whereby journalists take responsibility for bringing physically or historically distant atrocities or traumas to public consciousness and situating the audience as a witness to the depicted events (Chouliaraki 2010; Frosh and Pinchevski 2009). In his landmark essay on media witnessing, Peters (2001) argues it is an explicitly moral practice, usually linked to events that involve mass death, suffering and grief. Chouliaraki writes: 'In this capacity, journalism turns evidence of human suffering into moral discourse, so as to invite our judgement and action upon it' (2013: 271), a view that resonates with the communitarian approach to local journalism, morality and ethics outlined above. Journalists are considered dominant actors in the witnessing field, and to 'bear witness' is a key tenet of journalism's legitimation (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013:

758). The act of 'bearing witness' (as distinguished from simply witnessing or eye-witnessing) entails specific practices of recording traumatic events so that (distant) audiences and communities are enabled to take some responsibility for them (Peters 2001; Tait 2011). To this end, Zelizer argues that bearing witness through journalism 'moves individuals from the personal act of "seeing" to the adoption of a public stance by which they become part of a collective working through trauma together' (2002: 698).

Despite local journalism's widely documented 'closeness to community', there is a surprising lack of scholarship that understands witnessing at the local level (Myers, Waller and McCallum 2021). We argue local journalists have a particular ethical responsibility as they work through the trauma *in situ* with the audience who are also the subjects of the trauma. Rather than 'second-hand' witnessing (Peters 2001), 'proximal witnessing' accounts for how local journalists, in their role as civic custodians, act as agents who reveal and provide testimony about past traumatic events to the community, about the community, on behalf of the community. We have identified elsewhere this can take place through three overlapping phases: revelation, where journalists through their reporting expose previously hidden events or traumas; reckoning, where local media confronts past traumas on behalf of the community; and recovery, whereby local media works with the community to come to terms with its past (Myers, Waller and McCallum 2021). In this paper, we unpack how journalists use their professional education and authority to practise 'proximal witnessing' in ways that are understood as 'response ability' (Skehan, Sheridan Burns and Hazell 2009: 196), which means not avoiding the issue or stigmatising victims but rather 'responding appropriately' through 'responsible, accurate and sensitive representation'. Here local news media provide testimony about historical trauma and suffering that was, and continues to be, part of the lived experience of the communities they serve.

Research approach

We captured and recorded the spoken word of journalists who had lived in and reported on child sexual abuse in the Ballarat region, to extend our understanding of the ethical phenomenon of 'response ability' (Skehan, Sheridan Burns and Hazell 2009) in local journalism. Interviews are the central method, drawing on social constructionist, oral history and expert interviewing perspectives. The approach draws on Couldry's (2004, 2012) 'media as practice' approach that emphasises participants' practices rather than analysing their responses to survey questions, discourses or narratives. Gamson (1992) argued politics is socially constructed and best understood through interviews and 'peer conversations' in localised social settings. We have, therefore, involved participants from the early stages of the project and conducted the research locally where possible.

Journalists are often considered challenging interview participants for social researchers, as 'both interviews and framing are core competencies in the everyday work of academic researchers and journalists' (Nikunen et al. 2019: 490; see also Bowd 2004).

Our interviews were, therefore, carefully prepared to ensure maximum contribution to our project aims, but also to respect the commitment and expertise of the journalists who told this story. We drew on the tradition of 'elite' or expert interviewing that has been developed in the social sciences to elicit and synthesise the practices of those highly knowledgeable about their chosen subject (Döringer 2021; Herbst 1998). Semi-structured depth interviews were designed to access the lived experiences and professional practices of nine journalists who reported on the RCIRCSA and related issues for the Ballarat *Courier*, ABC Ballarat and the Warrnambool *Standard*. Potential participants were identified according to their experience and their role in the organisation, based on our earlier examination of media coverage of child sexual abuse in the region (Myers, Waller and McCallum 2021). The researchers directly approached selected journalists, who then recommended others who had been involved in reporting the story.

Angela Carey	Former reporter, editor and general manager, *The Courier*
Andrew Eales	Former reporter and editor, *The Courier*
Eugene Duffy	Current editor, *The Courier*
Fiona Henderson	Former senior journalist, *The Courier*
Tom McIlroy	Former reporter, *The Courier*
Melissa Cunningham	Former reporter, *The Courier*
Monique Patterson	Reporter, *The Standard*
Danny Tran	Former reporter, ABC Ballarat
Charlotte King	Reporter, ABC Ballarat

Table 1 - Interview participants

Interviews were conducted in homes, cafés or via the Teams online platform. The interviews were wide-ranging and allowed the interviewee to focus on their story, while enabling them to address the project research questions. Oral history interviewing techniques are particularly useful for locating the interviewee at the centre of the interview and allowing them to explain their experiences (Janesick 2014; McCallum 2010). All the journalists we approached willingly engaged in the research and gave fully informed consent to be named in accordance with the approved University of Canberra institutional ethics process. Nevertheless, the topic of child sexual abuse is highly sensitive, and some interviews were emotionally charged. We shared research findings with participants as the research progressed and encouraged participants to be consistently

reflexive about their media practices (Couldry 2004, 2012). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then thematically analysed to identify and theorise the journalists' ethical and moral insights as part of their witnessing practices.

Bearing witness 'proximally': Personal and professional responsibilities

As discussed earlier, local journalists are highlighted for their 'closeness' to community – they have a deep understanding and personal investment within the places, people and relationships that often shape news coverage. From a normative framework of 'objectivity', proximity to a 'community' has been at times questioned and positioned as unethical, especially regarding individuals and sources of news (see, for instance, Stephens et al. 2020). While such scrutiny may be warranted, it is necessary to consider how journalists work through and understand their ethical obligations in instances of dealing with trauma in local contexts.

Frosh and Pinchevski (2009) suggest that the ability of journalists to bear witness to traumatic events of the past can be a way for the press to atone for its past silence and reinforce its legitimacy. In the context of reporting on the Child Abuse Royal Commission, *The Courier* editor Eugene Duffy acknowledged that powerful institutions in Ballarat, including police who are key sources for local media, failed to acknowledge or take action to address clergy sexual abuse for decades: 'There was just this code of silence around – we don't talk about that. Did it extend to the newspaper? I can't prove it. I hope not, but…'

He recounted historical instances where he felt *The Courier* had downplayed the issue through practices such as placing relevant court reports at the bottom on inside-facing pages and not mentioning that a convicted pedophile priest was from Ballarat.

For some journalists, there was a personal moral responsibility to move from a position of silence because of their deep sense of connection to the Ballarat region and being a 'local', while others felt this moral responsibility despite being 'new' to the town. *Courier* journalist and long-time Ballarat local Fiona Henderson wrote more than 100 reports on clergy sexual abuse, including coverage of the first public hearing of Case Study 28, 'Catholic Church authorities in Ballarat', that was held in Ballarat in 2015. She said she was driven by a deep compulsion to provide reports of the highest standard for the city of Ballarat and felt a special responsibility to do a good job on behalf of the survivors and families of victims with whom she had close personal and professional ties. She described the experience of covering Part 1 of Case Study 28 in the Ballarat Magistrates' Court, where she had reported for years, as the 'best and worst' two weeks in her career, working alongside leading

journalists from major media outlets from around the country who attended the hearings. Henderson said: 'I knew I led the coverage … but I should. [It's] my home ground. My people.'

Some reporters who were 'new' to the area, and in some cases had limited experience working as journalists, said they were particularly reliant on colleagues with a history and knowledge of the area for offering professional and moral guidance. Tom McIlroy said he was able to offset his lack of reporting experience and knowledge of the issue to some extent by 'learning a lot' from editors and senior editorial staff about the role he should play. He described Eugene Duffy, Angela Carey and Fiona Henderson as 'people in those kinds of positions who have been in [Ballarat] for a long time, and who have the kind of scar tissue of what has happened'. For others, this moral responsibility was triggered primarily by cultural (religious) proximity to the Church and their lived personal experiences of being practising Catholics in regional Australia. Monique Patterson, who grew up a Catholic in a rural town near Ballarat, felt compelled to use her journalistic authority to 'make up' for wrongdoing of the past.

> I think, as a community, we had the Church on this slight pedestal ... I was brought up Catholic. I went to a Catholic primary school … the priest, you do what he says. Like, he's this all-powerful messenger of God. And some people may wonder why these paedophile priests were able to get away with it. I don't think that the media reflected how big of an issue it was for the Church.

In the section that follows we will highlight how this moral quest to address past injustices and silences led to transformations in what reporters understood as 'ethical' journalism practice itself.

'Response ability' revisited: Responsible, accurate and sensitive representation

The concept of 'response ability' is discussed by Tait (2011) in the context of media witnessing, where it is used in a general sense to refer to reporting that positions the audience to respond empathetically and actively to the depicted injustice or abuse. However, the concept of 'response ability' as we use it here first emerged through an Australian collaboration between mental health professionals and journalism educators over the decade 1997 to 2007. It was funded by the Mindframe National Media Initiative and is taken up here to think through the role of powerful local institutions and storytellers in bringing the trauma of clergy sexual abuse into public discourse. The 'response ability' project sought to influence the professional education of journalists so they can respond appropriately to issues related to suicide and mental illness through 'responsible, accurate and sensitive representation'

(Skehan, Sheridan Burns and Hazell 2009: 196). It advocated 'not for the avoidance of these important issues in the news media, but rather some attention to ensuring accuracy and examining the framing of such reports' (ibid: 193). Research findings from the project suggested that 'mindful' reporting, which is the hallmark of the 'response ability' approach, reduced the stigma associated with mental health problems and encouraged help-seeking behaviours among distressed individuals. The model has been adopted and adapted for other important controversial issues in Australian journalism, including reporting on cultural diversity, and is a most appropriate concept for understanding the moral and ethical dimensions of the survivor and victim-centred approach of the journalists and editors who participated in this study.

The Royal Commission not only developed as a forum to provide safe spaces for survivors and victims' families to express their voice, it also recognised, attended and was responsive to the experiences of the vulnerable. We, therefore, argue that within the institutional space of the inquiry, journalists and news media organisations had a duty to seek out, listen to and amplify the voices of the previously silenced (McCallum and Waller 2021). The local news organisations at the centre of this study did not shy away from this normative responsibility. Many of the journalists and editors who were interviewed discussed the importance of changes to editorial policy that put the focus on survivors, reflecting the truth-telling mission of the Royal Commission. All the journalists we spoke to with experience of the issue reflected on the fact it was a transformative approach. Without exception, interviewees paid tribute to survivors, victims and their supporters for leading the campaign for truth-telling and changing the media's approach and city's response to the issue. *The Courier*'s Angela Carey said the newspaper's victim-centred approach did not compromise its ethical commitment to 'maintain the balance' but enabled it to 'call out unfairness and give the victims the voice that they had never had previously'. Former *Courier* editor Andrew Eales discussed how this approach shifted media representation of survivors:

> [T]hey went from being anonymous, you know … can we believe them? Should we believe them? To being real humans, and I think that the bravery of some of those individuals … to come out and say: 'Actually I'm going to tell my story and I'm happy for you to name me and we'll go through the process of, you know, the legalities of all of that …' But I think that was the real difference, and the reason why the community started to turn in favour of the victims.

Journalists said working as local reporters did not offset their professional ethical responsibility to deepen their understanding of the issue and build trust with survivors, victims' families and supporters through meaningful engagement. Both Charlotte King

and Melissa Cunningham met with survivors in the lead-up to the second hearing of Case Study 28 in Ballarat. Cunningham said:

> I just started going along, every Tuesday morning … to get to know them, to build up a rapport and to find out what was going on with them in the lead-up to the Royal Commission … and that was a really good way for me to get to know the survivors [who were] leading that movement in Ballarat but also get introduced to a lot of other survivors who might not have been … in the media but were a part of this network of survivors that were supporting each other through this and their families as well.

Journalists also highlighted both intrinsic and strategic decisions to engage in a 'reckoning' process of proximal witnessing and show moral support during important moments of the inquiry. Reporters recounted interactions and ongoing relationships with survivors and their supporters that spoke to what we might term a 'shoe-leather commitment to the story' because they literally stood, walked and travelled around the city and across the globe to bear witness to survivor truth and experience. ABC Ballarat reporter Charlotte King recounted a tense stand-off between survivors (who call themselves 'Nazzie girls') and nuns at Nazareth House, the former Catholic orphanage for girls turned aged care facility where Ronald Mulkearns, a disgraced former bishop of Ballarat who the Royal Commission declared 'derelict in his duty', was in the nuns' care:

> I stayed with the women though, even when the recorder was off. And then it just felt like I became much more embedded in the story because of that. And then when we came out, I was able to tell the story in a more genuine way because … you know, I could more comfortably ask them what happened in there and 'tell me what happened and how are you feeling now?' And yeah, it was just a crazy sort of series of events that unfolded and it was really just about being there with a microphone to witness it, and bear witness to it.

Consider too the extraordinary step of *The Courier* sending Melissa Cunningham to Rome in February 2016 to provide coverage. When it was announced Australia's most senior Catholic and Ballarat local Cardinal George Pell would only give evidence about the Church's handling of child sexual abuse via video link, there was a highly successful crowdsourcing campaign to send a group of Ballarat survivors and their supporters to be present and witness his evidence. These survivors wanted Cunningham to travel with them to provide 'local' coverage from Rome. Cunningham explained:

> [T]he reason why I went wasn't because I was saying to my editor: 'You've gotta send me.' It was basically … the survivors were coming into the office and saying to the editor: 'You have

to send Mel with us because she's covered our story and we want her there and we trust her.'

This highlights the rapport and trust she had developed with victims through being both personally empathetic as well as professionally committed to knowing her sources. It provided the newspaper with the opportunity to walk in the shoes of survivors and serve as witness in building reckoning and recovery, and it demonstrates how the moral quest to address past injustices transformed what reporters understood as 'ethical' journalism practice itself, as we address further below. This strategic decision to send Cunningham to Rome occurred despite major resourcing constraints affecting regional journalism nation-wide.

Negotiating tensions and establishing trust

Media witnessing is understood as an explicitly moral practice (Peters 2001) and Chouliaraki argues that by turning evidence of human suffering into moral discourse, journalists invite 'our action and judgement upon it' (2013: 271). This creates ethical rebalancing and challenges for journalists. Positioning Ballarat media audiences as witnesses to survivors' and victims' experiences of clergy sexual abuse meant journalists were dominant actors in the witnessing field and opened their practice to public scrutiny and debate. The embeddedness in a journalism context of 'getting too close to sources', as highlighted above, was by no means considered unethical practice by interview participants, resonating with Callison and Young's (2020) call to rethink journalism's epistemological foundations. A resistance to normative ideas of 'objectivity' and maintaining professional distance from sources was embraced as part of the role of bearing witness.

That said, journalists were accused of bias by some people in the Catholic community. Interviewees spoke about negotiating the tensions attached to truth-telling and were reflexive about witnessing as a key tenet of journalism's legitimation (Frosh and Pinchevski 2009). Andrew Eales termed the substance of these complaints as 'the yuck factor' of revealing and reckoning with Church cover-ups of the evil deeds of pedophile priests and Christian Brothers and their impact on survivors, victims and the wider community. As discussed above, national inquiries can provide spaces for truth-telling and recognition of past injustice. This very act of 'making public' or 'bearing witness' to previously silenced voices can cause discomfort, but journalists highlighted it was key to the act of bringing citizens to a new understanding of the past. For the *Courier*'s current editor, Eugene Duffy, the story of recovery and healing for survivors and the city remains high on the newspaper's agenda:

> That's been the *Courier*'s real – I don't want to call it a triumph, because when you haven't solved the problem, it's not a triumph and you've still got a problem. But I think it's been a really interesting history of advocacy that's gone from the exposé of the crimes, whether it's in court or otherwise to … you know, we support [the victims] as a community … what can we do next?

ABC Ballarat reporter Danny Tran described Ballarat as 'tribal', with Catholics and Protestants taking different positions on clergy sexual abuse. He described covering the Royal Commission as 'the reporting of history' and underlined that not everyone in Ballarat agreed with its version of events or his coverage, and that this involved the 'risk of alienating people'. Journalists and editors indicated, however, that overcoming these tensions and not caving in to pressures from some parts of the community had generated a notable shift towards acceptance and a community desire to ensure the past would not be repeated. This has created an ongoing sense of 'response ability' to discuss a sensitive issue of public importance without increasing the risk of re-traumatising survivors or reinforcing stereotypes (Skehan, Sheridan Burns and Hazell 2009), and it reflects a shared sense of responsibility among the journalists and editors interviewed to show care for both the survivors and the wider community.

While some of the journalists interviewed for this research had left Ballarat to work at metropolitan news outlets or left the industry, they all spoke of their continuing personal and professional relationships with some survivors, and many of them still report on or deal with the issue of clergy sexual abuse. Eales said the *Courier* 'felt really, really strongly that no matter what people thought of our reporting, that we had to be really clear about what we stood for in terms of our community'. Similarly, Duffy said:

> What's really key for Ballarat is this whole cultural issue of the cover-up … I must have written 20 or 30 editorials on it, but it's a hard thing to draw people's attention to when they want a scapegoat, or they want a sacrificial target – and I know that argument has been used in defence of Ballarat a lot. But my point is not to defend it, my point is to put the focus on the whole cultural problem within the Church as an institution and possibly the whole town. So rather than individuals, to investigate as a broader concept the culture that let this happen and, I guess, how it can change so it doesn't happen again.

What emerges from both Eales' and Duffy's comments is how they position their news agendas as being driven first and foremost by a sense of what was right for their community, over and above ideas of newsworthiness or what other outlets were doing. Duffy's resistance to putting too much focus on a single individual or

'scapegoat' is particularly significant considering previous research showing Cardinal George Pell was by far the biggest driver of media attention across five years of coverage of the Royal Commission in Australian media outlets (Waller et al. 2020: 186-188).

For Warrnambool journalist Monique Patterson there is still much work to be done to help victims and community come to terms with the past:

> We are just scraping the top of the iceberg. People used to think there were a few bad eggs but we need to show how big of an issue [it is] so it never happens again. It happened because people like me had blind faith and we need to show people that this is what happens if you have blind faith.

Patterson highlighted that at times she has felt hamstrung by news routines and resourcing restraints that have limited her ability to shine the light on sexual abuse since the Royal Commission finished. She has turned to writing non-fiction to continue supporting victims as part of her own virtue ethics to right the wrongs of the past (Patterson 2021).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the moral and ethical practices of local journalists who bear witness to the suffering of victims of clergy sexual abuse within the communities they serve. Our study has departed from the national-level gaze that most commonly privileges investigative journalism and assumes geographical and cultural distance to explore the 'response ability' of local journalists in opening the discursive space by revealing past crimes, actively taking part in the recovery process, and working with the community in the process of healing. We have documented how, through their coverage of clergy sexual abuse, the journalists and editors we interviewed created public spaces for critical community-based conversation and entered a public reckoning with their audiences. This has provided valuable insights to understand how local journalists carefully cultivated relationships with local sources and audiences in order to report sensitively and respectfully on the local impacts of a national inquiry. By taking 'response ability', the journalists were able to confront and 'own' the past and ongoing trauma of clergy sexual abuse in their communities.

As 'civic custodians', local journalists are attributed with a great deal of power (Hess and Richards 2021). Journalists in the Ballarat diocese reporting on the Child Abuse Royal Commission were acutely aware of the normative expectations of truth-telling and recounted how they enacted that responsibility, including the challenges that arose when their deeply felt moral responsibility to honour survivors' voices was perceived by some in the community

to clash with the journalistic responsibility to remain neutral and not 'take sides'. Personal moral and professional ethical considerations came together here around a common thread of justice; a conviction that victims and survivors had not been treated justly in the past, and this conviction shaped journalists' processes and enabled them to engage in 'response-able' reporting. This approach required journalists to rethink normative practices and journalism ethics (such as 'objectivity'), in order to fulfil a moral imperative to serve community and advance journalism practice.

This complex fusion of virtue ethics led to transformative editorial policies that developed a survivor-centred approach. On a personal level, many interviewees reflected that their reporting of clergy sexual abuse and especially their engagement with survivors, victims' families, and their supporters, changed them forever. This approach aligns then with the communitarian view that local journalism should be understood as part of the moral life as a whole not first of all what practitioners consider virtuous in their own codes of ethics. This means we are acutely aware of how standing in for the moral order can also shape media legitimacy in local settings. As we have demonstrated, this is a power that can and should be activated to give voice to those once silenced and to lead community healing.

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Conflict of interest

This research was funded by the Australian Research Council Discovery Projects scheme ('Breaking Silences: Media and the Child Abuse Royal Commission', project number DP190101282). No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.