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Barling, Kurt ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2233-2044> (2017) We've been here before.
British Journalism Review, 28 (3) . pp. 30-35. ISSN 0956-4748
(doi:10.1177/0956474817730766)

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Lessons from Lakanal House - How journalism impacts public policy?¹

Public interest journalism

It's an oft-answered question, what difference does or can journalism make? It was a question put to me over and over again by Rafael Cervi who lost his wife and two children in the Lakanal fire in July 2009. It was never an accusatory question, just a quiet rhetorical plea to make my journalism count so his family's story would be told.

As a Special Correspondent for BBC London News I was closely involved in the coverage of the Lakanal story. When I took up the post of Professor of Journalism at Middlesex University I took that practice example to analyse the value and impact of public interest journalism

Those reporting now on the Grenfell disaster will have to be diligent and wary once interest in the reporting on the initial blaze and its victims wanes in the public mind. Journalists will have to find new information to keep refreshing that interest.

Regional journalism finds itself under relentless resourcing pressure but can still generate exceptional content. Judging this year's RTS regional journalism awards I got to see this first hand with plenty of examples of winners and nominees work that often outshone storytelling on national networks.

The Lakanal House fire was catastrophic but looking back it would have been impossible to predict a disaster on the scale of Grenfell. For a start no one would have believed us. But it is worth looking back over the journalistic coverage of Lakanal for another reason. Using the '*who, what, why, where, when*' method of journalistic inquiry, would have been insufficient to unpack the complexity of this story.

Our contrasting journalistic approach reveals how much could have been done to prevent Grenfell, if the lessons that were clearly ventilated in the public domain had been learned. No one can say with a clear conscience there were no warnings.

Six key questions

Peeling away the layers of the story in the weeks after the Lakanal Fire revealed a wide range of range of troubling issues that each needed addressing to bring greater clarity to the problems the initial story revealed.

It very quickly became obvious that a fire-risk-complacent culture had taken hold, not just at Lakanal and in the London Borough of Southwark, which was the social landlord, but more widely around the country. The widespread view was the deaths were preventable and this meant urgent lessons needed learning.

There were six key questions that emerged as our investigations took shape. All given added urgency because we began to realize that our journalism could quite possibly save Londoners lives in the future.

They were all practical questions for which answers could be given or remedies found. Why did the fire spread so quickly? Are High-Rise residents more vulnerable in a fire? Do the Building Regulations ensure buildings are not made more vulnerable

to fire after a refurbishment? Was the advice to stay put correct? Were the Fire Risk Assessments flawed? Were the six deaths unavoidable? Did landlords comply with the law?

Very similar questions were asked publically in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Towers fire where the number of fatalities was so much higher.² Past journalism justifies the claim that this is a national scandal.

Building a strong narrative

Public interest journalism is clearly the province of public service broadcasters. I certainly saw it as important part of my role at BBC London. Arguably developing a strong narrative on such an important public interest story should be at the heart of the mission at regional level because the BBC Charter for example asks that they “reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all the United Kingdom’s nations and regions”.³

I discerned in my coverage a number of key themes that I characterized as the narrative arc of the story.

Reporting the human story and the trauma was the obvious priority in the initial stage. Meeting the victims, listening to their stories and reporting them. Rehousing them being a top priority, as the building was deemed immediately uninhabitable.

It struck me as ironic that the two blocks at the heart of the story were named after French scientists who had tried to improve public health (Marie Curie) and public education (Joseph Lakanal) something utterly lost on those who the local authority that was dealing with the needs of families in the wake of the fire.

People wanted to know why it happened, how it spread and whether there was any experience of this kind of fire elsewhere in the country. How safe were tower blocks in the capital city?

The more questions we asked and failed to get answers for, the more obvious it became that we needed real data to push for specific responses away from platitudes from local officials that offered residents precious little reassurance.

The Fire Risk Assessment – Not exactly a science

Very quickly it became clear that the key document to identify was the Fire Risk Assessment (FRA). This is a kind of safety MOT for tall buildings. When we approached Southwark Council for a copy of the FRA on Lakanal House it was, they said, unavailable because it was subject to an investigation.

I requested the FRA on the sister block and discovered that it had not been completed and it turned out many months later to be the same for Lakanal. Economical with the actuality it turned out. No FRA meant that the authority had not complied with the new fire safety self-regulatory regime. Neither they nor the London Fire Brigade, the regulations watchdog, had noticed this.

In the meantime I wondered how many other High Rises had no FRAs across the capital. Along with my colleague Ed Davey we drafted a series of 32 FOI requests

for every London Borough asking for the FRAs for all buildings over 6 stories.

In the narrative arc I described this as the Investigation Stage which required us to dig deeper into exactly who knew what and when about the safety of Lakanal House. Unhelpfully the local authority press office was advised not to speak to us about specifics.

The FOI returns were slow to arrive and some authorities refused point blank to do the work. It turned out they might have had good reason not to. Eventually we had enough returns to form a credible picture of the paucity of FRAs on High Rise blocks across the Capital. Just 5 months after the fire, over 400 High Rise blocks still had no FRA. Over 100 blocks were deemed to have high fire risks.⁴

In the initial phase of the FOI requests only 19 out of 32 councils responded. When we broadcast this poor response rate and named and shamed those who did not respond, miraculously more began to arrive by email. The picture of neglect however did not improve. Up to 80 per cent of High Rises in some authorities had no FRAs and so no one could say how many buildings were at risk. This single piece of journalism, the London Fire Brigade told us, led to a surge in FRA compliance.

So how accurate were the FRAs that had been carried out? We contracted an experienced building surveyor Arnold Tarling to compare several FRAs on particular buildings across boroughs with his own professional assessment of the risk. What we found was appalling in some cases. In particular he described cladding and faults with windows on blocks being refurbished that increased the risk of fire spreading.

We could barely believe this was possible. We challenged the London local authorities to explain why they had so comprehensively failed to comply with the regulations. A serious risk of fire spreading was in the public interest. Making buildings less safe even more so. In the wake of Grenfell Tower, hundreds of tower blocks have been deemed not to be adequately fire safe. Our work gave warnings aplenty.

Indeed armed with so much data we broadcast several reports that were ultimately picked up by the London Assembly who launched their own investigation into the spread of fire.

Public authorities often choose to wait for the storm to blow over so they can move on to business as usual. This formed the next stage of the narrative arc; the slowing of the response of the public authorities. We began to ask questions about the validity of the FRAs if, in the rush to compliance, housing officers completed them as a tick box exercise. Most would have had cursory training and no structural expertise.⁵

Ultimately by reporting on this inadequacy and raising the question we played no small part in getting Southwark Council to reconsider who carried out the inspections and to commit to £19m worth of making good works. Some authorities began the process of making the Fire Risk Assessments readily available to residents and tenants.

The first anniversary gives way to family despair

The first year anniversary of the fire gave the residents; audience and many journalists pause for thought. How much had changed since the fire? Still the families of the victims were no closer to finding out why their loved ones had died. The grief they were suffering endured and it was clear that the public inquest would not happen for years because of the complex train of investigations that needed to precede a public inquest into the deaths. Calls were made for a public inquiry but these were rejected.

This led to a number of exclusive interviews with relatives that reminded the audience of the agony of families waiting for years to find out why their loved ones had died and who was responsible. The parents of Catherine Hickman took me to visit their daughter's grave in a rather idyllic spot in the New Forest. It was a chaste and sobering meeting that just demonstrated to me how the families were expected to suffer in silence. This was an important intervention to keep the story alive and the pressure on the authorities to come up with answers.

More fires and more risks – a widening narrative

By now our audience had begun to email me with concrete examples of fires that had caused death, damage and distress. One building site of a timber framed structure, again in Southwark, went up like torchwood and opened up the story narrative beyond the victims and Lakanal. A resident in a timber-framed block delivered fresh evidence of the vulnerability of timber framed buildings to fire as a response to this story. It was a firm illustration that as a journalist I was no longer simply a gatekeeper of official information but a significant curator of user-generated sources of information including from social media on twitter and facebook.

This was an effective counterbalance to the pressure coming from a number of constructors and their lobby groups who started to become frustrated by our reporting and issued warnings that we were exaggerating the problem and become alarmist in our tone. There was plenty to be alarmed about and by keeping key questions in the public domain the London Fire Brigade had to take notice.⁶

A new round of FOI requests about the prevalence of timber framed buildings followed. It brought us into conflict with the Building Research Establishment which we were told had mis-reported the results of a fire safety test in 1999 which raised questions about the resilience of timber framed buildings to fire. Reported to us by architect Sam Webb it was clear that if such a report had misled the public that was clearly of public interest. At the time this was not admitted by the BRE but despite a lot of brouhaha were we not challenged after reporting the allegation.⁷

Those who govern begin to respond

As well as the inquiry led by the London Assembly⁸, prompted partially by our reporting, the narrative arc entered a phase where user generated stories began to highlight a range of risks associated with social and private landlords and their inability to comply with the regulatory reform order of 2005 which underpinned the self-regulation regime. The London Fire Brigade (LFB) used a light-touch enforcement approach.

The LFB were reluctant to admit that since the new rules came in they had barely prosecuted anyone for violations of their duties. More importantly, they had no idea until we reported it that most of London's Tower blocks had no fire risk assessments.

The asked for our FOI research to play catch-up. We challenged them on whether their carrot over stick approach showed any evidence of bearing fruit.

Lets not forget there was no new Fire Risk Assessment of Grenfell Tower after the 2014 refurbishment as far as we can tell. This suggests that Grenfell Tower tragedy eight years on only demonstrates how little progress was made.

Finally an inquest

The combined effect of the LFB Fire report and the Metropolitan Police Investigation meant it took until May 2012 (three years after the fire) for the Met Police to decide there would be no corporate manslaughter charges. An unauthorized leak of that decision gave me the opportunity to put the story back on the public agenda.

This opened the final phase of my narrative arc. The public inquest into the deaths would finally address those questions (and others) we had raised during our investigations of fire safety. It is worth remembering that much of the resolution of conflict and the negotiating of change in our society happens in our courts and the fact that that is reported less and less can only weaken public discourse on important matters of public interest.

The Lakanal inquest led by Justice Francis Kirkham was mostly very thorough. The questions we had identified through our journalism and had entered public discourse were all addressed exhaustively by voluminous evidence and serious considered recommendations were duly made.⁹

The recommendations from Lakanal

On the matter of fire safety it was made clear that there was “insufficient clarity” given to residents on whether to flee or stay put. The “stay put” principle is only common sense if fire cannot spread as the original architects intended. In the face of contradictory evidence the authorities have stuck to this mantra, journalism should shout loudest when the emperor has no clothes.

At Grenfell many residents claimed they only saved themselves by ignoring the “stay put” advice. In Lakanal and Grenfell 60 minute compartmentation was simply non-existent and this had consistently formed the basis of all firefighting and fire safety processes since the 1950s.

Fire-fighters need to be familiar with the layout of buildings to fight fires and the fact that no high ladders or aerial platforms were deployed by the LFB at Grenfell with only one way out for residents and the same way in for fire fighters clearly did little to help escape and rescue. These were issues raised at Lakanal.

The risk of fire spreading Justice Kirkham pointed out was vital to fighting the fire. As the lakanalhousefire.co.uk website illustrates all these recommendations were firmly placed in the public domain.

A whole raft of observations were made on the inadequacies of the Fire Risk Assessment regime and yet the uncertainty about the scope of inspections in high rise buildings and the expertise needed to identify possible breaches of the compartment have seemingly yet to be resolved.

The coroner recommended that one of the simplest and cheapest ways to fight fire and stop it spreading, would be to retrofit sprinklers in high rises but the leading advocate of this approach and former Fire Chief Ronnie King had battled to be heard above the loud protestations of the construction industry and Ministers to avoid red tape and public expenditure.

But perhaps most striking in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy, Justice Kirkham recommended that “particular regard be given to the spread of fire over the external envelope of the building and the circumstances in which attention should be paid to whether proposed work might reduce existing fire protection”. That one sentence stands as a savage indictment of the lackadaisical approach of government that allowed Grenfell Towers to be refurbished with flammable cladding.

Does journalism matter?

What *is* clear is that the public interest questions we identified in our journalism were some of the critical ones that the Inquest also chose to address. Journalism does affect the official record.

Grenfell has already sparked a lot more social media and media commentary and analysis than Lakanal. In this regard the public inquiry to be led by Sir Martin Moore-Bick, once it starts, will have no shortage of clear questions to ask, nor an audience eager to act on them.¹⁰

I would argue that journalistic coverage of the Lakanal Fire in particular that of BBC London made it possible to argue quickly after the Grenfell Fire that the blaze was not an accident precisely because government, local and national, had failed to respond adequately to that earlier tragedy.

Failure to act and deliver now would result in one of the most damning indictments of our approach to government on record; a singular complacency in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Journalism does matter because it can keep the questions coming and challenge those in authority to follow through on the recommendations once they emerge. Journalists should not take any official responses at face value and should test them against the evidence of what happened and what is being done. Grenfell might unwittingly provide a methodology for modern governance that shows respect to those doing the electing.

Before Rafael Cervi returned home to Brazil he reminded me my journalism had made a profound difference by giving him hope. Journalism of hope is not a bad aspiration. My personal regret is that all my efforts as a journalist, did not reach far enough to save those lives at Grenfell. Journalism will fail those who perished, if it fails to be vigilant, report on the avoidable mistakes and to ensure government responds to the lessons of this scandalous tragedy.

¹ Throughout this article I refer to journalistic output broadcast on BBC London News. This material can be reviewed and referred to online at www.Lakanalhousefire.co.uk

² In a number of media interviews I made it clear that there was a journalistic basis for describing the events in West London as a national scandal. In addition I knew from journalistic practice Lakanal had tried every other route possible to find answers and deliver reasoned and considered recommendation based on evidence. In the main these were still waiting to be implemented 4 years later. This history meant I was confident in calling immediately for a public inquiry. (BBC Five Live, 14th June, BBC Breakfast News, 15th June, BBC News Channel 15th June)
<https://mdxminds.com/2017/06/19/grenfell-is-no-accident/>

³ (BBC Charter, December 2016, p.2)
http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/about/how_we_govern/2016/charter.pdf

⁴http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/kurtbarling/2009/10/all_tenants_deserve_a_safe_roo.html

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/kurtbarling/2010/03>

⁶ The Assistant Commissioner for the London Fire Brigade, Steve Turek, confirmed during several interviews.

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-10645700>

⁸

https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_migrate_files_destination/Final%20Report%209%20Feb%202011.pdf

⁹ <https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ec-letter-to-DCLG-pursuant-to-rule43-28March2013.pdf>

¹⁰ Already the Prime Minister Theresa May has identified the work that needs to be done and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Sajid Javid has addressed Parliament (June 26th 2017) with promises of an adequate and substantive response this time.