How Journalists Can Tell Stories Without Making Sources More Vulnerable

Olivia Nepper Winther, DISPUK

As a journalist, you are trained to communicate. But when the work involves speaking with and telling the stories of sources in vulnerable positions, many find that they lack the tools to prevent the source from ending up even more vulnerable or re-traumatized than before the interview. That is why, together with psychologist Lasse Offenberg, I have been offering a course in recent years at DISPUK for journalists, documentary filmmakers, and communicators seeking professional development in working with vulnerable sources. One practice from this course that many of the participants—and I as a journalist—have carried forward is writing outsider witnessing letters to the sources. In this article, I'll share my reflections on why it makes so much sense to bring the narrative perspective into journalism—and how outsider witnessing letters can serve as a counterbalance to the loneliness and shame many sources experience after an interview and in connection with publication.

"Take care," she says. We stand there for a few seconds without moving. Then we hug, and she closes the door behind me.

It's been less than two hours since I stood in front of that same door and knocked. I had never met her before—but shortly after, I was sitting on her couch with a cup of coffee, listening to her tell me about her husband's tragic death.

She cried several times during the conversation; I was moved too, and a couple of times I had to make sure she was okay and checked in with her to see if we should stop the interview. But she wanted to keep going.

"I want to share my story because I hope it can help others."

This is neither the first nor the last time I've heard that sentence.

The Battle Against Cynicism

Sitting on the couch with my black notebook, I jotted down "good quotes" while the woman recounted some of the most vulnerable and difficult years of her life. When I put "good" in quotation marks, it's because these were the quotes I knew met one or more of the news criteria that we journalists have absorbed with our professional mother's milk. Quotes with drama, conflict, sensation, and identification.

In that sense, one could say there is a strong kinship between journalism and narrative practice. Both fields work with stories and plots, and in both fields, we know that we feel a story most deeply when it moves between the landscape of action and the landscape of meaning[1] .

As I will do now, by returning to the woman on the sofa:

The "good" quotes weren't necessarily the quotes that told us anything good or what the woman valued in her life. It was the stories that were good at getting her story out. And that, of course, was why I was there.

It can feel cynical sitting and listening for good headlines while people talk about their lives, but that's my job when I'm conducting journalistic interviews. Just as we, as people trained in narrative practice, listen for glimpses of alternative stories in conversations—my ears as a journalist are always tuned to what is known in the trade as an "angle."

Because as a professional communicator, I know that's the easiest way to get a message across. And the woman in front of me shared her story precisely because she wanted to get a message out.

What Else Is There to Tell?

The woman on the couch wanted to talk about an inadequate encounter with the healthcare system. How she—and especially her children—had not been offered a

[1] White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice.* W. W. Norton & Company.

spot in a grief support group because her late husband's illness was so rare that it wasn't supported by any advocacy group.

It was a relevant story, which I helped bring to life by finding all the small details and nuances in both the plot and the landscape of meaning that could support this angle.

But I didn't present readers with alternative stories or cracks. In my notebook, I marked the stories that also existed, where the family had been met with warmth and help from doctors and nurses. But I didn't devote column space to them, nor did I spend much time on the moments when life had offered anything other than illness and death.

"There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in," sings Leonard Cohen.

But as a journalist, it can almost feel as though you're in the process of shutting the shutters on every crack in the quest for the sharp angle.

The more I've delved into narrative practice, the more I've wanted to let the light in. And fortunately, I'm not alone in this. Two years ago, we launched a course that, to my knowledge, is the first in Denmark to combine journalistic practice and narrative therapy. Several of the students my colleague Lasse Offenberg and I have met here expressed an intention to fight against cynicism in their work.

It is worth noting that the course is not aimed at news journalists covering politics and society, but at journalists, documentary filmmakers, and communicators who encounter people in vulnerable positions—what is known in professional jargon as "vulnerable sources."

Whether they should be called that is, of course, open to debate. As we know, our thoughts are shaped by language, including clichés that have survived from the media itself, and perhaps this group of sources should be called something else that doesn't reinforce the notion that they are particularly vulnerable.

Looking Out for One Another in a World of Constant Deadlines

Along with the classic news criteria, the word "deadline" is a fixed part of a journalist's DNA. Ever since my student days, I've known that time pressure is a fundamental condition of the profession.

And even though I don't work as a full-time journalist today—my daily work is at DISPUK—I still do freelance journalism, and I have a clear sense that the number of tight deadlines in the media world has hardly decreased in recent years.

Time pressure may be particularly visible in journalism—but it is hardly limited to it. We all live in what Hartmut Rosa calls the acceleration society[2].

Time and again, on our course, we hear from the journalists we teach that they do not have enough time. And sometimes they lack the tools, but they certainly don't lack the desire when it comes to taking care of their sources.

Learning how to talk about trauma without re-traumatizing, following up with sources and keeping them informed about the publication process, knowing what's happening in the comments section—and much more—are tasks that rarely fall within the job description, and journalists are rarely given the time or guidance to develop the necessary skills.

A workday might look like this, not as a purely hypothetical scenario, but as a day that resembles some of those I—and many others—have experienced: Interview a woman about her problematic alcohol use in the past. Write the article. Send it for fact-checking. Make corrections. Forward it to the editor five minutes before picking up the kids.

The next morning, a new assignment is waiting: an interview with a couple whose child nearly drowned in a swimming pool. And while the journalist prepares for the next meeting with all the ethical and human considerations that most journalists, thankfully, consider, the woman from the day before sits waiting. Not knowing how the story will turn out. Whether her wish to help others with

[2] Rosa, H. (2013). *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity.* Columbia University Press.

alcohol abuse will be fulfilled. Whether she will be seen as brave or as a bad mother. Maybe nervous about how the comments section will focus on her experiences or perhaps – as it happens for many female sources – on something completely else as her appearance.

The journalist knows all this well. But the hours in the day seem insufficient. And the hours available are ones you want to spend—as the craftsperson you are and were hired to be—on making the next story stand out.

That is precisely why I have found that the outsider witnessing letter can serve as a small but concrete tool. It does not require a new workflow or a sweeping editorial restructuring. It often takes just ten minutes.

Outsider Witnessing Letters as a Response

Below is an email from me to the widow you met at the beginning of this article.

An email I had to write anyway to send the interview for fact-checking, but instead of just writing about the practical arrangements, I ended the letter by using the four categories of outsider witnessing inquiry developed by Michael White (2007):

> *Dear Lise,*
>
> *Thank you for the other day.*
>
> *Thank you for agreeing to meet with me and share the story of Jens's death and the lack of support you were offered. I hope your story will be read by many and perhaps spark a discussion about the right to a support group.*
>
> *I'm sending you the interview here for review. Please let me know if anything needs to be corrected.*
>
> *As soon as I receive your approval of the text, I'll forward it to my editor, and after that, it's out of my hands. This means the article*

may end up looking a little different from what's attached here, but the quotes won't change.

The interview focuses largely on what we had agreed to discuss: the lack of bereavement support groups.

But I feel compelled to tell you that there was much else in our conversation that moved me.

Something that stuck with me was what you said when you talked about Jens's way of being a father before his illness:

"He was so strong. When the kids were little, he'd often toss them all the way up to the ceiling and then catch them just before they hit the floor; they'd laugh and laugh. And then suddenly he couldn't even lift their stuffed animals."

As we sat in your living room and you pointed up at the ceiling where Jens used to toss your girls, it was probably the story of not being able to lift his children's teddy bears that struck me the most.

But when I read the quote again after I got home, I suddenly saw Jens very clearly in your cozy home. How he, strong and playful, first caught the girls right there, where for a split second they began to doubt he was about to drop them—that moment when you get a very special tingle in your stomach.

I started thinking about the Golden Tower ride in Tivoli. There's also that split second when you're in free fall before you feel the ride's steady machinery take over, and it's in those floating seconds that your stomach tickles the most. In a good way—because you know it's safe.

It made me think that your girls probably never really doubted that Jens would catch them in the end.

That made me think of my own husband, who, like Jens, is the father of two girls, and how he, too, occasionally tosses them high—sometimes higher than my nerves can handle—but never so high that he doesn't catch them. And never so high that they seriously doubt it.

Thank you for reminding me of the absolute wonder of being parents with such a Golden Tower. When we sit down tonight to plan next week's schedule, I'll remember to tell him that it's something I truly appreciate.

Best regards,

Olivia

The email took me fifteen minutes to write, not the usual five I would have spent just going over the practical details.

When I read it now, there are undoubtedly things that could have been written differently. Still, I work with a fair amount of discipline, aiming to keep an outsider witness email to a maximum of twenty minutes to write—otherwise, I might be afraid I won't get it done next time.

When Lise replied, she had only one small correction to a quote. The rest of the email was about something else: how happy she had been to read the last part of my email. She wrote that she had been touched that I had noticed Jens's way of being a father and that since my email, she and her daughters had noticed and put into words some of the many other stories about their husband and father that also existed, but which perhaps hadn't been given as much space in the years following his illness and death.

Thank You for Putting It into Words

Lise's story was vulnerable, but she wasn't in a vulnerable position when the article was published. Her story was met with sympathy. It certainly didn't spark

the debate about grief support groups she had hoped for, but the tone in the comments section was loving. Heart emojis and warm words—as is (fortunately) often the case when sources talk about loss.

There was no guarantee that the woman I mentioned earlier would have received the same warmth in the comments section of an interview about her past problematic alcohol use, particularly as she was a mother of young children.

The reactions could be far harsher, especially from people who might have reacted to the headline without reading the article, approaching it with preconceived ideas.

My email read as follows:

> *Dear Caroline,*
>
> *Thanks for the chat the other day—it was great that you had the time and were willing to talk, and thanks again for sending me your truly excellent debut novel.*
>
> *I'm sending you the interview here for review. Please let me know if anything needs to be corrected. As soon as I receive your approval of the text, I'll forward it to my editor, and after that, it's out of my hands. This means the article may end up looking a bit different from what's attached here, but the quotes won't change.*
>
> *One thing that particularly struck me when we spoke was your statement:*
>
> *"Other people's love isn't the right toolkit when it comes to addiction." When you said that, I was reminded of the time when my daughter couldn't walk yet. My love for her was immense. I held out my little finger and supported her as she wobbled along. But she didn't really walk until she was ready herself. It wasn't about how much I loved her. It was about when she felt ready.*

I have a feeling that you know many people could use a reminder of this. Just yesterday, I quoted you to a friend whose partner is struggling with a problematic addiction. She was very moved. I think your words helped her realize how she sometimes experiences her partner's addiction as a rejection of her love. We had a talk about it.

Thank you for giving me the words to start it.

Olivia

Caroline replied that very same evening. After some corrections to the interview, she wrote that she was touched to hear that our conversation had made an impression on me and it made her happy to know that there was at least one person who had taken something away from what she herself called her story of suffering.

My colleague Lone Kaae Morell often talks about outsider witnessing letters as a way to exchange a story with another person.

After Caroline replied to my email, I understood a little better what Lone meant. I sensed that it meant something to Caroline that in the email I hadn't just sent the article for fact-checking but had also shared a little of myself. A short story about me, my daughter, and not least about my friend, whose loved one was dealing with substance abuse-related problems.

In that moment, the dynamic shifted slightly. I was no longer just a journalist who had listened. I was a human being. Someone who shared a story in exchange for a story.

Working Against Feelings of Shame

It's hardly news that the media landscape has become a harsher place to navigate, especially when you share something that might provoke moral judgments.

That's precisely why I want to make a case for us as journalists to take those extra ten to fifteen minutes it takes to write a thoughtful response to sources in potentially vulnerable positions.

Because in a public sphere where many reactions can be marked by criticism and condemnation, it can make a difference to hear how one's story has touched someone, how it has struck a chord in others' lives, and how it may have given courage or resonance.

That kind of response can help strengthen the person who has come forward—even when critical voices make themselves heard.

My other colleague Anette Holmgren describes shame as the feeling that arises in the moment when I—in the gaze or action of another—perceive myself as less worthy and simultaneously lose the sense of my own worth. In other words: I feel shame when I perceive that the other person or the culture looks down on me, and I lack sufficient self-understanding or self-care to withstand that judgment.

In this sense, the practice of witnessing can be understood as a countermeasure to the feeling of shame, a strategy where the source is given the opportunity to step forward as a human being—not merely as a problem or a case—and where the source can simultaneously emerge as a person who has mattered to at least one other person.

This can shift the experience of standing completely alone with one's story. Now, through their story, the source is not only exposed in a potentially vulnerable situation but also connected, through that same story, to someone whose life they have touched, contributed to, or made a difference in.

Echoes of Values and Hope

No story can encompass the full complexity of a life lived. In narrative practice, we are therefore concerned with examining the stories that shape our lives—and with identifying the alternative and richer stories that also exist but are easily

overshadowed by the dominant narrative. This gives people the opportunity to live in accordance with what they choose to stand for.

Journalism doesn't have to encompass all of life, either. It can't. It requires angles, priorities, and omissions. A text that tries to tell the whole story often ends up telling nothing at all, because the reader loses interest.

But perhaps journalism, inspired by narrative practice, can strive not to lock a person into a single, unambiguous story. And perhaps, even when the angle is sharp, we can keep in mind that it is not the whole truth about the person we are writing about.

This is precisely where the outsider witness response is a surprisingly simple tool. It doesn't change the article's form. It doesn't significantly disrupt the deadline workflow. But in the email to the source, we can choose to see more than just the problem. We can echo values, hopes, intentions, agency, and what made an impression on us.

And the best thing is that listening and writing are tools journalists already master. Perhaps that is why it is not about learning something radically new, but about applying these familiar tools with a different perspective than the dominant professional logic: a perspective that focuses more on the person than on the problem.

Feeling Closer to Yourself, Even as a Journalist

Our starting point for a course that combines journalism with narrative therapy has been a desire to ensure that vulnerable sources do not stand alone when facing the public.

However, through the courses—and in my own journalistic practice—we quickly realized that this approach affects more than just the sources. Many of the journalists we have taught describe how working with outsider witnessing letters also affects them personally. The emails provide them with a sense of closure and

greater peace of mind—a form of “aftercare” that many have otherwise lacked, both in terms of time and language, once the story is in the can.

In an industry characterized by speed, criticism, clicks, and constant evaluation, outsider witnessing can become a way to hold on to why one became a journalist in the first place.

Some journalists are driven by the ambition to bring down a minister. Others—and here I include myself—by a persistent curiosity about other people. A curiosity that may not be so far removed from the one that drives therapists.

Perhaps the outsider witnessing letters also serves as a small shield when cynicism comes knocking. Not as a major systemic change. The letters do not remove the fundamental premise of journalism: that we often listen to conflict in a world where there is no shortage of conflict. But they can serve as a counterbalance to the feeling that this is the only thing we’re listening for.

Perhaps they make it possible to be present in space as both a journalist and a human being: with ears pricked for conflict, sensation, and identification, and at the same time with an awareness of the messier, alternative, and still-unfinished stories that don’t always fit the angle.

In a fast-paced industry where distance easily becomes a protective strategy, the practice of outsider witnessing can be a way to maintain connection—both to others and to oneself. Not as a rejection of deadlines or angles, but as a small, quiet act—one that, in just 10–15 minutes, reminds us we are not merely producing stories, but entering relationships.