

## Remembering

Richard Sambrook: Good morning everybody and welcome here to the Bute Building in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. I'm Richard Sambrook, I'm Professor of Journalism here and the Deputy Head of the school and I'm delighted to welcome you all here to today's event. I offer a special welcome to those of you from Aberfan who have come to join the discussion today and we greatly appreciate you being here. We also appreciate those who've travelled a considerable distance to be part of this event, including the photographer Chuck Rapoport, who's come from California, and you may have noticed some of his pictures on the display outside. We'll be seeing a lot more, I think, this afternoon. And later, Vincent Kane, who is going to be travelling from Cyprus to join us today to give the keynote speech at the end of the day. I'd also like to thank the Cardiff University City Region Exchange project for their support which has made this event possible. I hope that you're going to find it a very useful and positive discussion and day, and with that, I'm going to hand over to my colleague, Professor Kevin Morgan, to open the first session.

Kevin Morgan: Thanks Richard, and welcome to you all. My name is Kevin Morgan, I'm Dean of Engagement at Cardiff University, and I've been asked to chair this opening session. And before I introduce our speakers in this opening session, I've been asked, for a few minutes, to reflect on my own memories of Aberfan, coming from the Cynon Valley. And my memories basically are a mix of the personal and the professional. The personal are very hazy, very indistinct and the professional are very clear and very distinct and as resonant today as they were when I first encountered them.

The personal is a very simple one. I was just a grammar school boy in Aberdare Boys' Grammar School and I can still remember a rumour circulating in the playground. I remember this in the days before social media. It's impossible to believe how news travelled so slowly, and none of us knew anything about it until we got home, 'til tea time and saw it on the television. And the main memory is of the only time I can remember in our street in a council village in Rhigos, no kids playing on the street. That was my main personal memory of it as a young teenager.

That contrasts then with my very, very distinct professional memories as an academic, whose PhD involved studying the nationalised industries and their role in South Wales and the reconstruction after the war. And it was truly shocking for me to encounter the tribunal report. When I first read the tribunal report from the inquiry into the disaster, I was truly shocked to encounter the behaviour of what we called the board, the NCB, the National Coal Board, because I'd grown up in awe of the National Coal Board, as all mining villages did in South Wales. But then to encounter the behaviour of a coal board that you've grown up in awe of, was truly traumatic. And two things emerged from the tribunal report to me. First of all, the unmitigated arrogance of the board and its witnesses, and secondly the disrespect it showed for the South Wales Valleys and Aberfan in particular.

I'll just give three examples. We could speak all morning about the coal board's arrogance, but I think three are in a league of their own. First of all, in I think seventy-odd days of the inquiry, day after day, we were treated to coal board lies.

And the biggest lie of all, I think probably, in my own view, my own reading of it, was the coal board's insistence that nobody knew that the tip was built on a spring. Robens said it, Lord Robens, the chairman of the NCB, said it very early on, and it wasn't until I think day seventy-four of the inquiry, when the coal board's own counsel gave his summing up speech that they conceded that the spring was known of. All through that time, they'd insisted that it was down to nature and not organisational incompetence. That was truly shocking, when this knowledge was there in the community, it was there in the Ordnance Survey maps, it was all there in the geological surveys. It was a lie, and it was exposed to be a lie.

Secondly, there was the failure of the regulators, the lawmakers, the politicians. Even today, it's shocking to find that the regulation of the coal industry under the Mines and Quarries Act, as it's called, 1954, that's what governed the coal industry in South Wales, in fact the whole of the UK. The Mines and Quarries Act was drafted in such a way that only accidents to colliery employees were deemed a reportable incident. In other words, the Aberfan disaster didn't even qualify to be a reportable incident under the Mines and Quarries legislation. In other words, showing that this corporatist legislation focused entirely on industry relations in that drafting, community and environment counted for nought, which truly shocked... I used to argue with my NUM friends, that they were completely focused on industrial relations, health and safety, rightly so, underground, but nothing above ground. And we used to argue a lot about that, that the environment and the community counted for nothing.

Last but not least, was the biggest disrespect of all: that when the community asked for the tip to be removed, both the National Coal Board and the Labour government refused to remove the tip and pay for it outright without a contribution from the disaster fund. And in the end, they insisted that the disaster fund paid £150,000 to clean up the tip itself. That for me was the biggest disrespect of all, for a coal board to show to a community which had given both livelihoods and lives to this industry: to charge the community itself for cleaning up the mess. And my final point I would make about that. This incident loomed so large in Labour politics that on his first day in office in 1997, Ron Davies asked the Welsh Office civil servants to scrub his diary and to write him a cheque, and he took a cheque to Aberfan for £150,000. And if my memory serves me well, he actually gave it to Cliff Minett. I know Gaynor's not here yet, her father. And that was the first compensation that the Labour government ever gave to the clearance of the tip scandal.

So all these things add up, I think, to two things. It shows arrogance of a public body that showed no duty of care to the community in which it was engaged, and secondly, it shows us the need for vigilance on the bodies that work in our communities, that civil society needs to scrutinise these bodies to ensure that public, private, third sector bodies deliver their duty of care to the communities in which they work. And this is one of the great lessons for me as we remember; what does Aberfan mean today? And it means the duty of care of public bodies in our communities. So those are my personal and professional memories.

But we'll have much deeper memories today of course, and it's my great pleasure now to welcome Jeff Edwards, who I've known for many, many years. Jeff's CV is too long for me to do justice to it, his contributions to politics, culture in the

valleys and society in the valleys, too vast for me to do justice to, as I say. And Jeff is here because he is one of the original survivors and he will be giving what he calls, 'A survivor's tale'.

Jeff Edwards:

Good morning everyone, and thank you Kevin for that introduction. For those who don't know, Aberfan is a community that is situated 20 miles north of Cardiff and four miles south of Merthyr Tydfil. Prior to 1869, it was a community made up of isolated farms but in that year, John Nixon started the development of Merthyr Vale Colliery, which officially opened in 1875. This saw the rapid growth of the village as a close-knit community, with over 2,000 employed in the mine. This rising to 2,500 in 1918 at the height of the industry and reducing to 600 at the time of its closure in 1989.

The Aberfan disaster on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1966 was caused by colliery tip material being deposited on a spring high on the mountain above the village of Aberfan. As a consequence of this location, the tip slid down the mountainside, engulfing Pantglas School and surrounding houses with the tragic loss of 116 children and 28 adults. And here you can see the extent of the tip coming down and destroying where the school was. This was the junior school in this location here and the senior school here and that was the canal bank, the main water way between the Brecon Beacons and Cardiff, and that added to the velocity of the tip as it came down and hit the school.

I'm a survivor of that disaster; I was an eight-year-old child at the time, being in Standard Two of Pantglas Junior School. On that morning, I walked to school with my friend Robert, who was the local GP's son. It was a cold, misty morning, but we were looking forward to the October half-term holidays. On arrival, we registered. I had just finished the Janet and John reading scheme that was popular in those days and was now on library books which were kept on the window shelf in the classroom nearest the tip. I picked up Hergé's *Adventures of Tintin* and returned to my desk. Mr Davies, our teacher, began the first lesson of the morning. There was then a rumbling sound that progressively got louder and louder. The teacher assured the class that there was nothing to worry about, it was only thunder. The next thing I remember was waking up covered in material. I could only see a small aperture of light above me, with particles of dust reflecting in that light. I could hear screams for help but could not move, with my desk against my stomach. My right leg was caught in a radiator and hot water was coming out onto it. Above me was a cavity created by the debris that was thrown from the other side of the room and that had fallen from the ceiling of the classroom. On my left shoulder was a fellow pupil's head. She was dead. And as time went on, her face became puffy and her eyes became sunken into her head. The next thing I remember was shouts coming from the hall. The rescuers saw my white hair through the aperture above me. They began removing the debris and started to hack away at the desk that was keeping me trapped. I was then dragged out and passed in a human chain out of the classroom, through the hall and into the yard, where I was seen by medics before being sent to the hospital. All of the ambulances had gone by that time. I got out, and I was taken to St Tydfil's Hospital by Tom Harding, the local greengrocer, in the back of his light blue Bedford van. And this picture actually shows me being carried out by Tom Harding and that lady in the corner there is my mother. I was the last child to come out of the school

alive; the pocket of air had saved my life, whereas others had died of asphyxiation and physical trauma. Sadly, Robert my friend did not return home to his family.

I always remember being rescued by a fireman but didn't know who that fireman was until the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Over the years, I have participated in numerous programmes on the disaster, but on the 40<sup>th</sup>, I decided not to do so. Following a commemorative programme, the next day I went into council, and a fellow councillor asked me why I had not appeared on the programme. I said I hadn't spoken on that programme but was in the old footage that was being shown. I was the boy being carried out with the white hair. He asked me, 'Did I know who that fireman was?' I said, 'No, I didn't', and he told me it was him. It was quite an emotional experience, and at his inauguration as mayor of Merthyr Tydfil, I thanked him for saving my life. This was picked up by a local reporter and became a story that received international media coverage. What then have the effects been on me personally?

I had to grow up very quickly. One minute, I was an eight-year-old boy with no cares in the world, looking forward to playing with my friends. The next minute, I had death on my shoulder, the majority of my friends gone and no play and recurrent nightmares. I sustained physical injuries to my head and stomach but these injuries would heal over time. It was the psychological injuries that would go on for much longer and still have an impact today. I could not go to school, as I feared that the tip would come down again. In addition, my ability to concentrate was extremely poor. It was not until my O-Levels, some six years later, that I really settled back into education. I went on to do my O-Levels, A-Levels, a Bachelor and Master's degree as well as a professional qualification in accountancy.

Play, an important part of child development, sadly disappeared. A whole generation of young people were wiped out, so there was no one to play with, and others who had lost children frowned on play. I had nightmares for many years, flashbacks of what happened on that day. The girl's face on my shoulder; fear of noise, particularly thunder; the fear of crowds; a sense of guilt as to why I had survived and others had died. These issues tormented me for many years, engulfing my whole person and sending me into the depths of despair and depression. I found, over the years, I've been able to talk about it more easily without getting upset. Indeed, talking about it has helped me, and it's surprising how often facts have emerged from my subconscious. However, events can trigger off flashbacks and deep depression. For example, the recent earthquakes in Italy brought back a sense of being there and an immense empathy for those involved. The depression can be quite crippling, and takes the form of totally immobilising me. I can't even pick up a razor to shave, unable to look in a mirror. I question my own existence. It becomes so intense that I have to go to bed for a couple of days and wait for it to pass. If you haven't experienced that deep depression, it's difficult to understand; however, if you have, you'll know what I mean and how useful it can be to help others who face the same predicament. Many however, have been unable to talk about their experiences at all and are still bottling up the anger and frustration that they have within themselves. My advice to anyone involved in traumatic incident is to speak about it.

The disaster had a devastating impact on the community of Aberfan. Every family who lived in the village was either directly or indirectly affected by the tragedy.

Some families had lost one child, others two. The children who survived had to come to terms with the loss of their friends and indeed, the scenes of carnage that they had witnessed. Parents had to deal with the children who were subjected to nightmares, bed-wetting, irrational behaviour. Teachers who survived, and rescuers, were also victims of the disaster and also witnessed the events of that day that would impact on their future lives. Indeed, anyone who has involved in the disaster and its aftermath would never be the same again. Such a life-changing experience is very difficult to manage and can become overwhelming, leading to deep depression, turning to drugs and alcohol to alleviate that stress, and even premature death. The guilt of why you had survived and others had not is a huge burden to carry, as is reliving that experience. Coming to terms with being involved in a major traumatic incident is not an easy journey. For some it has been easier than others. The reality, however, is that you will never come to terms with what happened to you but you will learn to live with it. In 1966, the support services for those involved in major incidents was very much in its infancy. Since then, the characteristic behaviours that emerge as a result of being involved in such major trauma, have been identified as post-traumatic stress disorder. In addressing the needs of those currently experienced PTSD, practitioners are keen to improve services and can learn from the experience of those that have been involved individually and collectively in disasters. People of Aberfan are uniquely placed in having that experience, and out of the tragedy has come a positive contribution to improving knowledge and experience, as well as improving services to victims and their families. It doesn't matter what part of the world I am in, when I say, 'I'm from Aberfan', they remember the disaster. And even today, we have visitors from all over the world coming to the village to visit the memorial gardens and cemetery and paying their respects.

Why then is Aberfan remembered 50 years after the event? Perhaps it was because of the number of children who were involved. Perhaps it was the first major event that was televised when televisions were becoming more popular, and Cliff Michelmore was beamed into people's living rooms from the chaotic scene. Perhaps it was Mel Parry's iconic photograph of Vic the policeman carrying Susan Maybank from the rubble. Perhaps it was the unprecedented media coverage at that time. Perhaps it was the way the Government and Charity Commission and the National Coal Board treated the community in respect of the disaster fund and the issue of tip removal. Perhaps it's the number of times the Queen has visited the community. Or is it simply human interest in an event that clutched the hearts of the nation and continues to do some 50 years later? It is surprising, following major incidents like Dunblane, Hillsborough, Hungerford, and more recently, the tsunami in Japan, how families from these places turn to us to see how we coped with disaster and its aftermath. I hope that our experience has been of use to them.

Aberfan today is a very different place than it was in 1966. It still lives with the legacy of the past, but a new generation of people have had to face another disaster since the demise of the traditional coal mining industry and the lack of employment opportunities for young people. Faced with the hopelessness of despair, many young people, like other South Wales valley communities, have turned to alcohol and drugs and crime to alleviate their boredom, and two publicly hung themselves, one from a tree in the village and the other from a fence at the hospital. This cannot be right. So I, with others, set up the Aberfan and

Merthyr Vale Youth and Community Project, a registered charity, in 1994, to tackle these issues and subsequently got involved as a councillor and council leader in leading community and physical regeneration in Merthyr Tydfil and tackling the social and economic inequalities and deprivation of our area. Time doesn't allow us to go into the community and regeneration work, but as part of that strategy, I believe that our young people should be given the best life chances to be active members of society and fulfilling their true potential as citizens, an opportunity that was taken from those young lives that were lost in Pantglas on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1966. In 2012, we built the new Ynysowen School. That was opened by the Queen. This was the first phase of Project Riverside, a regeneration scheme that would transform the former colliery site for the next generation that would be the future of the community.

On the first anniversary of the disaster in 1967, Cledwyn Hughes, the then Secretary of State for Wales, said in the House of Commons this: 'If the inhabitants are to find peace, they need a period away from the glare of publicity to which they have been exposed for so long. I appeal to everyone to give them quiet they need to bear the burden of grief and to rebuild their shattered lives.' This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disaster, and media interest has not diminished but continues to grow. For many in their community, that day is as raw now as it was 50 years ago, while the days, weeks, months, years, and decades have gone by, the memory of Aberfan has not faded but remains in the psychology of the nation and well commemorated by those who wish to pay their respects of the lost generation who sacrificed their lives. Thank you.

[Applause]

## Remembering – Elwyn Evans

Kevin Morgan: Many, many thanks Jeff. It's my great pleasure to welcome Elwyn Evans, who is a former BBC TV news editor, and Elwyn will speak about his own memories. But can I just say by way of introduction that as a matter of record, that this is the first time that Elwyn has ever spoken publicly about his experience of Aberfan, which is an illustration of what Jeff was saying earlier, that some people even to this day, haven't uttered a word. And we are very grateful, Elwyn, to you for breaking your silence with us today.

Elwyn Evans: Thank you very much. Good morning everyone. In view of what we've just heard from Jeff, I think it's worth maybe restating the obvious, which is that Aberfan truly was a terrible disaster, one that should never have happened and must never of course be forgotten. Unfortunately, as you've just heard, Aberfan was a bit of a disaster for me, and I've spent the last five decades or so trying to forget it, so I may find some of this a little bit difficult to recount, but I'll do my best. This is my very personal Aberfan story and I begin with another anniversary. Fifty years ago this week, I got my first job in journalism. I don't say it was my first job as a journalist, it was my first job in journalism. I wouldn't have called myself a journalist in those days, for reasons that will become apparent. I was only just 17, I'd left school a year earlier at 16 with absolutely no qualifications. I spent more time in detention and excluded than I did in the schoolroom trying to learn things. And my dad, who was a journalist here, got to the point where he was absolutely desperate to get me work, any work of any kind. So he arranged for me to go to the offices of the *Merthyr Express* and meet the editor, a man called Rhys Davies. I had no expectations at all of being given a job because I was, frankly, useless at everything. So I arrived on the morning of this week, 50 years ago, and went into the editor's office and sat down in front of him, and he asked me a couple of questions. He didn't ask about my qualifications, which was a good start. He asked me a couple of questions about current affairs of the day: 'Who is the prime minister? Who is the President of the United States?' I got through that okay, and then he gave me a spelling test [laughter] and would you believe, I remember those words to this day: harassed, embarrassed, accommodation. [Laughter] I did it! I got through that bit. And so he gave me what he called, 'Six weeks' summer holiday relief', which would end on Friday October 21<sup>st</sup> 1966.

As it turned out, I wasn't much relief to anybody on the *Merthyr Express*. This wasn't a training stint at all, by any stretch of the imagination. I was effectively sat in a corner of the *Merthyr Express* offices and given the opportunity occasionally to watch the journalists at work, and also occasionally to go out with them, but I spent most my time proofreading and making tea, which didn't even come up to scratch very often either. And it wasn't the fault of the journalists there that they didn't have a lot of time for me; they were busy. As I said, this wasn't a training exercise by any stretch of the imagination. So they didn't want to waste their time telling a kind of indifferent spotty youth how to find stories and how to write them. So, you know, this was not a journalist at all you're looking at. There was of course no training other than the on-the-job stuff. I did that proofreading, I made the tea and once or twice, probably in desperation, I was allowed out of the building. Bad mistake. Typical of the many cock-ups I did during those six weeks was I was sent to a place called Cyfarthfa Park. Don't forget, I'd never heard of Merthyr Tydfil, I'd never heard of Cyfarthfa Park. I went out to do a story about a tree disease, I think it was. I came back, I wrote the story, I was

quite proud of it. The news editor, Paul Bach, looked at the story and declared it actually not bad, and he put it in the paper. It was only when all the complaints started flooding in [laughter] that it was realised I'd messed up. I'd left the second 'f' of Cyfarthfa. You can imagine the number of 'f's that were thrown at me that day. And so it continued, until my very last day of my six-week stint on the *Merthyr Express* – Friday October 21<sup>st</sup> 1966. Because I was leaving, I was in no hurry to go into the office, so I'd packed my bags and I was in my digs in Cefn Coed overlooking Merthyr when my landlady called me out into the back garden and said, 'Elwyn, there seem to be a lot of ambulances and police cars going down the valley somewhere.' And so I rushed into the *Merthyr Express* offices by bus with my suitcase and my guitar in hand (I loved Paul Simon), to be met by Paul Bach, the news editor, a very worried look on his face. This was at about, I would think, I don't know... quarter past, half past ten in the morning. And he said... the words were something like, 'There is something going on at the school down in Aberfan, can you get there?' My immediate thought was, I don't know, dog hit by car. I had no idea of what it was.

And so I went down to the Aberfan disaster. I must have been there at about half-past ten, I don't know. I would guess it was certainly no more than an hour and a half after the disaster happened. People like to say that they were the first journalist on the scene, except I wasn't a journalist but I was there. I still hadn't got the first idea what I was doing, and here I was slap bang in the middle of one of the worst peacetime disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All around me, on this chilly Friday morning, were people. Mothers, shopkeepers, rescue services, miners, people everywhere. Frantic action, noise, then complete silence as a whistle was blown and you'd hear frantic efforts to try to free people from the rubble around them. I was with Mel Parry at that particular time; it was he who told me what was happening because I had no idea what was happening. The hours passed; again, this is very difficult to summarise all of this. If you can imagine a young man of 17 somewhere in there, stood there, facing the world, rather like a kind of *Where's Wally* figure, more a 'There's the Wally' figure than anything else, not having a clue what to do. For about eight hours, I stood frozen on the spot; almost literally frozen on the spot. I didn't move. Did I talk to anybody? No. Did I try to interview anybody? No. Did I have a note book? No. Did I have a pen? No. Did I have a pencil? No. Did I have anything? No. I had absolutely nothing at all with me, and not the nous to know what to do with it if I had had it. The hours went by, I felt shame. I felt deep, deep shame. I felt I had let people down, but here's the thing, I felt I wasn't failing the *Merthyr Express*, I wasn't failing Paul Bach, I wasn't failing the readers. I was failing as a journalist, but more than that, I was failing on the most basic human level to do anything to save anybody. Here I was, a young 17-year-old, incapable as a journalist but very young and very fit and very strong, and I didn't join in the human chain, trying to save lives. I just didn't know what to do or how to do it. And it was terribly difficult; if I couldn't be a journalist, why couldn't I be a rescuer? Why did I do absolutely nothing? To this day, I have no idea. So I'd failed twice over, I suppose, and there's no doubt that Aberfan had a terrible effect on me and in the immediate years, a terrible effect on the career that was ultimately to see me through the next four decades.

At the start, I had no idea I wanted to be a journalist. One of the positives, I suppose, that came out of the day was I did decide I probably might want to be a journalist. And after a few hiccups on various other local newspapers, all with more continued leg-ups from my poor, late now-departed dad, I did eventually end up as editor on some of the main news programmes at the BBC, and helped report on a number of

other major news stories along the way. One of them was the bomb at the Conservative party conference in the '80s, where I was in charge of the BBC's news output that day, and actually heard the bomb go off from the Metropole Hotel next door, where I was staying. Our coverage earned the BBC an RTS award that year, and I felt, as I felt ever since, and it's very hard to put this in words, but the Aberfan disaster had an effect on me in a lot of different ways. It helped me deal with situations like that, and I'll come to that in a couple of moments. On a personal level, I think the Aberfan disaster made me sensitive, sensitive to the suffering of others. You'll often hear people in this business say they stopped being hard-bitten hacks, if you like, the moment they had children. My 'compassion', in quotes, I think, surfaced when I was 17 during and after Aberfan. It's fair to say, I think that in October 1966, I was the wrong person in the wrong place – too unknowing. Aberfan taught me to think about the victims of awful disasters and horrible misfortune when we report on these things, as I do now when watching or reading about terrible events. I always now think to myself, 'Somebody's suffering here. Let's think about those people first.'

So to sum up, I shouldn't have been at Aberfan but I was. I was deeply traumatised by what I saw. On the one hand, it badly affected my confidence, I never ever felt throughout my career that I was good enough, and I'm sure I can put that down to the events of that day that happened so unexpectedly for me. On the other hand, I grew up very quickly – it's the kind of thing Jeff was talking about a few minutes ago – and I did, as I say, decide journalism was what I wanted to do. And I did okay at it, largely because, as I say, I think subconsciously I had blanked out the events of October 21<sup>st</sup> 1966. I understand there are no media or journalism students here today; had they been here today, I'd have said, 'Lucky you'. Get those courses done and learn the kind of things I was unable to learn from in October 1966. And finally, I do hope this short summary of my experience has been mildly interesting, and I've found it quite hard and a little bit cathartic in a way, to be able to say it. But the truth is, Aberfan is not about me. I survived. It's about the 28 adults and 116 children who didn't. Many of those children would now be parents or even grandparents. As we heard, a generation lost. We shouldn't forget them and we must never forget that. Thank you very much.

## 'Remembering' - Open Discussion

Kevin Morgan: Many, many thanks Elwyn. We've now got some time now for some questions, comments, discussion, whether of a personal nature or a political nature, whatever. There's no script, there's no protocol. People can say whatever they like, within reason of course. Please.

Q1: I'd like to say something.

Kevin Morgan: Please.

Q1: I'm a bit nervous about this actually, in front of all these people. My brother is sat on the side of me now, he was in the same class as Jeffrey. He's never spoken about it, like you mentioned earlier on. He's suffered greatly... The only difference with him is he never had any help off anyone, off... he's seeing a psychiatrist now, never had any help in that respect whatsoever. Although, I'll have to say first, we left... I was 20-year-old and I was stood possibly where you are on that day at ten o'clock in the morning. However, he's seeing someone now. Probably my family made a huge mistake by leaving Aberfan at the time. In fact, we were gone two months after the disaster and, therefore, we had no contact with what was going on at the time.

Q2: I can identify exactly what you were saying Jeff, 'cause, as I say, I was in the same class ... But it's only now I'm having psychological counselling to be honest, 50 years later ...

Jeff Edwards: And that's the thing, it was very much in its infancy in 1966. I remember going to a child psychologist and that child psychologist saying to me, 'Well when you think of that dead girl's head on your shoulder, think of happy things like birthday parties.' Well, when I thought of birthday parties, it was all those kids that lost their lives ... That lady rung me up 30 or 40 years later and she was quite upset and in her 80s then and she said to me, 'Well I was only trying to help you.' And I said, 'I appreciate you were trying to help me, but that psychological advice wasn't what I expected.' And that's why I got involved in development of the guidelines for post-traumatic stress disorder, because now they're trying to look at ways of helping people involved in major incidents ... And there are classic signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, irrespective of which disaster you've been involved in, whether it's ... Hungerford, Dunblane, et cetera, those characteristics are the same for everybody. But what's important is when is that help needed? Is that help needed straight away? And my advice there is, it isn't, because you don't know where you are in yourself. Everything's happening around you and you don't really know where you are. But that help may be required 20, 30, 40 years later. But the reality is the resources to help those people are no longer there. They pile the money at it in the beginning when the thing happened but that recovery line is different for different people and those interventions are required maybe 40, 50 years down the line as you...

Q2: 'Cause I still find to this day if I hear children's voices it freaks me out. You know. It makes me panic, I actually feel that panic and after all this time, you know. Just the sound of a child's voice. It just makes me really... well, as you say, post-traumatic

stress, I feel... I've been diagnosed with it. But just the sound of a child's voice and... sends me into a complete panic as my sister will tell you...

Kevin Morgan: Does the lady next to you want to say something?

Q3: Well, I was just the same age as the gentleman ... 17 year old, I worked in one of the shops in Aberfan ... so I was there within two or three minutes of the tip coming down. We pulled several children out before anybody else was there but we never had any counselling or anything at all. And I feel that point about growing up quickly, my brother is still the eight-and-a-half-year-old child he was then.

Q2: As Jeff was saying, guilt as well, you feel a lot of guilt. I do, anyway. About why did I survive, exactly what you said. So I can identify with that entirely.

Kevin Morgan: There we are Jeff, thank you.

Q4: I'd like to thank Jeff for speaking up like that because I'm here 50 years after the Aberfan disaster trying to get over PTSD. I was one of the first four police officers that got to Aberfan the moment it happened, all the others are dead now. I was very young at the time. I didn't speak about it until ... about it five years ago, and since then I've been trying to get rid of PTSD. I volunteer with St John Ambulance, I've got someone there now who is an ex-army medic and he specialises in PTSD so he's going to be working with me. What my involvement was, when we got there, it was chaos. Chains of people just carrying rubble out, and the first thing I was told, I'd been in civil defence before joining the police force, and there was a hole going through under the ground, and I was told to go through there by the civil defence people, because they knew me, and I was the only one small enough... smaller than them, to see if I could find anyone in there. I suffer from claustrophobia [laughs] but it didn't make any difference, I still went, you know. I didn't find anyone, came back out. I also had nursing experience, I was a nurse prior to the police force. And then I went round to the front of the school and again, the same people, the same person ... said to me, 'You're the only person small enough to get in through that window and that's where we need to go.' And he lifted me up and he threw me in, and I had to clear a way then for everyone else to get in. I spent the whole of my first day in Aberfan, up until about half-past eleven in the night, in that room, helping... [to Jeff Edwards] I probably passed you through on a stretcher as well, helping to pass people through on this stretcher out through the window to be taken off. I was also liaising with the district nurse, going to get materials for the people that needed them, more nursing materials, because the sick room, the hospital was in the classroom at the top of the school yard ... I can remember, I'd gone away from there, come back, and my inspector said to me, 'If anyone asks, the hospital room is up there and the mortuary is in the chapel there', and I laughed and thought, he's joking. You know, that's the effect it had of course. Apparently, that's the way people do react to these things. The following day, after going home at 12 o'clock in the night, going to the pub first, by the way, despite the fact that it was after hours, the Swan. I was back down there by nine o'clock the following morning and I was put to work with the mortician because of my nursing experience and the first thing he said to me was, and I'm telling you some of the horrors now, 'Come and see if you can tell me what colour this child's eyes are.' And I went, and I won't tell you what I saw, but I said, 'They're either blue, brown or green.' He said, 'You'll do.' He said, 'You're my assistant from now on.'

And I spent the rest of that day and the day after acting as mortician's assistant. We were kept drunk and that's the only word I could say, we were kept drunk. We were given brandy all day. We had bottles of brandy by the pulpit we were drinking from. If we got tired, we slept in coffins. You know, and that's part of the reality of what happened in Aberfan. To be honest, I've kept it shut away for 45 years, and you are the first people I've told about some of these incidents. That's why I'm here, I want to get it out of my system.

Kevin Morgan: Thank you, thank you [applause] thank you very much.

Jeff Edwards: I think in that regard, there was never any help for those came people who came to survivors and the parents, it's never been on the those who were the rescuers. And the trauma to the rescuers is as bad as those that were actually in it themselves. Thankfully now, you know, police, emergency services et cetera, whenever there's a major incident, all ways have a briefing straight after the event so those issues come out sooner because ... Lockerbie was one where that aeroplane fell in a rural community with, you know, community bobbies were basically picking bits of body up all over the place and that had a tremendous effect on those police officers who had never seen that type of incident and, as a consequence of this, they had family breakdowns, turning to alcohol, premature death as a result of that. As a consequence of that, the Home Office and the emergency services now have debriefing sessions to assist with that type of incident.

Kevin Morgan: Do you want to add anything?

Elwyn Evans: Just to add that in my particular case, what I didn't go on to say was I left Merthyr that day having gone back into the offices at the *Merthyr Express* where Paul Bach was busy putting together a special edition of the *Merthyr Express* which was to win awards around the world. Not a word of it was written by me of course, although I did discover afterwards that a syndicated article allegedly carrying my by-line was printed all around the UK. I didn't get any lineage for it which was entirely justified. But however for me was I left that afternoon and got the train back to my home, and I effectively went to bed for a week. And now, my memory is that my mum and dad said, 'This is par for the course, here he is, the lazy git hiding himself in the room again.' But I think it was some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. I have no idea. You can imagine, there was no trauma counselling for journalists or would-be journalists in those days, but it took me at least I would say a week, two weeks, and I don't know how long, to try to pick myself up and get going again. So, you know, these things do have an effect on everybody who is involved in them. And as much as journalists are often considered the pond life of human beings down there with estate agents and used car salesmen, a lot of us do have feelings which we do find terribly hard to deal with and to bring out again, as you were saying. I've found it difficult but enormously cathartic to be doing this today. I don't know what the situation is with trauma counselling for journalists now, maybe someone else can help, but certainly my memory and my experience was in those days, there was none.

Kevin Morgan: Any comments, please?

Q5: I worked with Paul Bach and I'd say Paul was one of the most gifted editors ever to work in South Wales. I think ... like Elwyn ... this is the first time I have spoken in fifty years and it's extremely difficult. I was up in Merthyr on that morning and I interviewed the director of education. I came down the steps after the interview and Mel Parry the photographer stopped outside with a car and he said, 'Sam', he said, 'We've... I've just been to the police. There are two incidents, one is a fire in Dowlais and the other, some toilets have collapsed at a school in Aberfan.' I said, 'Let's go to Aberfan. Kids always make a good story.' So we were there at twenty-five-to-ten when the slurry was still moving. [Stops speaking]

Kevin Morgan: We'll come back to you, to your memories in a while. I think we can all tell, can't we, that this is a profoundly moving morning for us all. There are no scripts and people have to say what they feel able to, when they feel able to. Please.

Q6: I'm a survivor of Aberfan. You can probably tell by my accent that I've not been living in South Wales for many years, and my family moved away in 1968 to Weston Super Mare, which seemed like a fantastic adventure at the time. We used to go there on holidays and one day, we went to Weston Super Mare and the holiday seemed to go on past the usual two weeks and then I realised, of course, we'd actually moved there. I've not spoken publicly in this sort of forum since that time. And I'm not really absolutely sure what I'm going to say but I'm trying to link with some of the things that our speakers have said this morning. Obviously, a lot of things resonate with me about what you say, Jeff, about how you felt, the reactions afterwards and so on. And I too have kind of... I've linked it with my professional life as well, I'm a teacher. But when growing up as a teenager, I found it really difficult to concentrate at school and left school at 16, like lots of people did then, and with a few CSEs did my apprenticeship as a gas fitter, very happy for a few years, got married and had children, my son's here today. Well, one of my sons is here today, and then later on, went back to college and trained, got a degree, teacher training and so on. And I teach religious studies, and as part of that... not that I have now any kind of, you know, belief, I would call myself an atheist. But as part of that, I've been very involved in work with holocaust studies. And I've met a lot of survivors and have taken school children to Auschwitz. And I've heard this morning people talking about, you know, the need to remember, and I think that's really important but I think it's how we remember which is important as well, and that I've seen in some cases the remembrance of the holocaust become a kind of industry. And that's difficult, even for a lot of survivors, to see that their story is being packaged and used and sold on, in a way. And I think the quality of remembering is really important, and passing on the story personally is important, I think. Also, I think this... as we're here as part of the school of journalism, when people do want to speak, how that is then reported is important. So for instance, on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, my parents hadn't spoken about it for years. In fact, their way of dealing with it was to not speak about it at all, you know. I actually grew up actually not knowing very much about it, even though I was there, obviously, on the day I was able to walk out, my sister, younger sister was able to walk home but my brother Chris was buried under the tip and had very serious injuries. But they... we never spoke about it, you know, it was never to be... that was the way of dealing with it. But eventually, then on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a production company was in touch with my mum and dad and they decided that they would speak, and... but that was personally for them, it was really difficult to be able to recall those memories, very difficult times. And then the programme wasn't shown.

Kevin Morgan: Why?

Q6: It was... well, Channel 4, who would initially, through the production company I think, said you know, 'We want this made...' they had decided not to... that was really diff... you know, their personal story had been kind of used and... but then not used. And so I think it's important that whenever people do speak that that's treated very seriously and [inaudible 00:20:55] no. I think this morning, I feel safe to be able to talk about this after, you know, so many years, so thank you. [applause]

Jeff Edwards: I think it is very difficult for people to speak about it and it's such an emotional experience for the individual, as well as the audiences that they're talking to, 'cause I hadn't spoke publicly about the disaster until I was doing some work [inaudible 00:21:28] inclusion unit [inaudible 00:21:30] office and a guy come along and said, 'Oh, Jeff, you're from Aberfan, we're [inaudible 00:21:35] disaster, go and speak at the [inaudible 00:21:39 – 00:21:40] meeting?' and I said, 'What?' So... and that was the first time I had sat down and actually wrote something down about my experience. But lots of people can't speak about it, and as time goes on, some people do come forward and we've been fortunate on this occasion, of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, parents particularly, who will probably have the last opportunity to give their views as far as the disaster's concerned, because many of the parents are now in their 80s and 90s and they felt the need, actually, to come forward and actually give their views for the very, very first time. And the view that we've taken with most of the journalists who have come during this period is that it shouldn't be the same people doing it over like me and Gaynor, 'cause quite frankly, we're fed up of it; but if they can't find anybody else, it does fall back to us. And I think on this occasion, trying to broaden it as well in terms of people who were the rescuers coming forward and actually giving their views, a different perspective of what happened on that day, but it is a very, very difficult thing to do. But it is cathartic, you are able to release those feelings inside you, because they can screw you up big time. And I have found that talking about it has actually helped that process. I remember one lady who did give an interview and it was shown but she said, 'Jeff, I wanted to do it and having done it, it opened up so many wounds that I felt raped by the fact that it *had begun*.' And although the journalists are really nice and came along and supported them. Once they'd had their interview, they went, but left that person totally open and vulnerable to those anxious anxieties within themselves, that was like a genie come out of a box and as a consequence of it she was very ill after having given that interview. But it's not an easy thing to do. I was quite emotional this morning, I was trying to keep it down, but it does hit you.

Kevin Morgan: Please...

Q7: Yes, can I say that I've got a different sort of guilt from everybody else because I wasn't there. Up 'til six weeks before the disaster, I was the Merthyr district reporter for the *Western Mail and Echo*. But when the disaster happened, I had been sent away on a course to Harlow in Essex. It probably saved my *career* in that the house my mother was born in was actually taken away in the disaster, and I did subsequently cover some of the inquiry. But there's one... I think a nice story that comes out of it and a lot of people who knew journalists in Merthyr would

know this chap. Mel Parry shot off a roll of film, and I discovered only recently that the person who carried that film back to the offices in Cardiff was Alun Michael, now the police commissioner. And they printed off the film and took the pictures to the news desk where Clive Pullman, a Merthyr chap was sitting there waiting. And he saw these pictures, they'd been done very wide angle, and he said, 'Crop it,' and that was when he cropped that picture and focused on the police officer carrying the child, and that was how the picture came to be.

Kevin Morgan: Marvellous. Because... and that is the picture of course, that went viral.

Q7: Absolutely. It's iconic.

Kevin Morgan: It fixes people's... as Jeff said. It fixes people around the world, their memory of that...

Jeff Edwards: And it also inspired people as well, [inaudible 00:26:00 – 00:26:01] who's now chief constable of South Wales in his office, on his wall, is that picture. And it was that image that actually got Peter into the police service.

Steve Humphreys: I'd just like to say thank you for... I'm Steve Humphreys, I've made a documentary for the BBC on surviving Aberfan, on memories of people like Jeff. I'd just like to say, it was made possible by Jeff, who introduced us to members of the community. And I've spent my life interviewing people on really difficult, intimate, emotional issues. This was the most difficult thing I've ever done in my life. It took us three to six months to get people to talk and to remember, but I'm so pleased that we did it, because our experience reflected what people have been saying here. It was good in the end to talk about it. People hadn't spoken about it for 50 years so we were able to get people so we were able to get people who hadn't told their story before to come out and tell it. It's very interesting, the comment about the story not being used in a programme. We actually filmed 27 people in the end and we knew we couldn't use them all, we only used 11 in the documentary, so we've created an archive and produced a book that we're self-publishing to give to the people of Aberfan. I just want to say, if anybody wants a copy of that book when it comes out who is here, a survivor or anyone interested, we'll give it to them so I really think it will help you. There's a lot of people in that book talking about it very intimately, some for the first time. And I think you'll relate to their experiences very closely.

Kevin Morgan: Thank you very much for that very kind gesture. Please?

Q8: Yes, I was born and brought up in Aberfan. I was 17 at the time of the disaster. I was a member of civil defence which was very big in Merthyr at that time. We were trained in the event of an emergency, we should report to somebody in authority, which is what I did. And we spent our time going around the local shops and asking for bread and milk, things to put in sandwiches, because so many people had come to help and they needed sustenance, so there were practicalities. I think on reflection, being involved in some practicalities like that helped me to... you know, helped me to sort of switch off, really, from the horror of the day because I had something practical to focus on. So many of the things that have been said today, you know, resonate. You know, what Jeff said about the feelings of... Elwyn said in

particular. All of my life, I have not really spoken about Aberfan. All of my life, I have never felt good enough, I have never felt that I did enough. I think that's a common theme, really, but I think it's a good thing this year because the focus, this year for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, is enabling us to speak for the first time, and it is... it's very therapeutic. And I thank you, personally, for that opportunity, which is important.

Kevin Morgan: Thank you very much for that. Please?

Q9: I was at Aberfan by about half past ten, I was there by accident. Because of my interest in the fire service, I had acquired a high VHF portable radio, and I was tuned into the fire service channels. And I picked up a message from Merthyr fire service at that time, calling for an emergency tender. You know, an emergency tender is not normally called to ordinary situations, so I realised there was something going on, and by continuing to listen I realised there was something happening in Aberfan. No idea what it was; it could have been a rail crash, a de-rail, anything. Could have been anything... goodness knows what. I drove into Aberfan and I walked up to the school; I saw *certain* fire appliances. The tip was still moving, there was a silence. It was quite incredible. With all this chaos, it was quiet. And I walked... managed to walk right around the extreme of the tip slide, and it was still moving, I could hear it creeping through houses, obviously doing a lot of damage. I got around to the other side and there was a line of people moving bricks and all sorts of debris. I got into that line and I spent about 20, 30 minutes while I was there, helping, again, not realising what was going on. Lorries were arriving – open backed lorries, full of miners, with shovels, and they were jumping off... they got into this line and I realised that, you know, as totally inexperienced, I was going to be a pest. I was just going to be in the way. These were professionals who knew what they were doing. So I withdrew and I drove back to my aunt's house in Pontypridd, and you could believe this or believe it not. It was not until I listened to the one o'clock news that I realised where I'd been and how disastrous the situation was. And it took me many, many days to recover from that situation.

Kevin Morgan: That's a very instructive story because sometimes, if you're totally inexperienced, as you say, you could be a pest in a line of very experienced men, so that will help you to deal with your own guilt, Elwyn, about these things. Please?

Q10: I was thirteen, and I was in the Grammar School down the valley and you know, and suddenly we could hear sirens and if you looked to the main road, we could see army vehicles and ambulances and then the word got around that if you came from Aberfan, you should go home. I don't remember how I got home, how I came to that because ... I just froze, and then somebody said, 'Do you... you need to go home?' All of this I don't remember, but basically, I have that guilt and the post-traumatic stress because three of us went to school and only I came home, and the guilt came back that I know that my parents never really wanted to be in Aberfan. They were going to move and they stayed in Aberfan so that I would get a place in grammar school. And so the guilt of that, and no counselling, you know. I fully understand the stress.

Kevin Morgan: So we're slowly coming up to our tea and coffee break now. Yeah... but before we do so, can I just make a couple of points about...

- Q11: Just a question if I could? I was just going to ask Steve Humphreys, what did you say to the people you were interviewing in terms of whether they would be used in the programme or not? I'm just quite interested in what they... what the understanding was.
- Steve Humphreys: We began by saying that we were going to create an archive; we were also making a television programme as well, so they understood that they were doing it because this is a major anniversary and their stories would be there forever and would be kept in some form. Then I thought, an archive on digital media is quite difficult for the older generation to access and that we should probably try and put it in a book form because it's sort of more accessible. So that was the main thought that led to the book, and also that not everybody would be included.
- Q12: Sorry, can I ask Steve (Q6). Sorry Steve, when you heard... when your mum and dad were told that the footage wasn't going to be used, did the company offer to give them footage? How was that?
- Q6: Yeah, right. And you know, the production company were really good. I think they were very sensitive; you know, I know my mum and dad say very highly of the two producers who they got to know very well. It was just that... I don't know whether the coverage couldn't be fitted into the time slot at the time or whatever...
- Q12: But at least they got the footage, so they got that...
- Q6 : And it did involve the rest of the family as well, but it... you know, it's hard for them to be able to talk about that and be...
- Q12: Sure...
- Q6: That's the kind of point I wanted to make about that people need to feel secure when they're telling their stories.
- Q12: But at least it was handled sensitively [inaudible 00:37:45].
- Q6: Yeah.
- Kevin Morgan: Okay, can I just make two quick points, just reflecting on this morning before we break now for coffee or tea. I mean the first thing is a point that emerged from your presentation, your talk, when you used the phrase 'pleased to be here to speak in a safe place,' you said. This is very, very important, you know. Often times, a university space can be a space... a *convening* space to bring people from outside the university together, where together they can have the confidence or the security to speak as we've done this morning. It's been a profoundly humbling experience for me, personally, to be involved in this, to hear people speaking for the first time in 50 years. I can't think of anything more humbling or a privilege to be here, to hear that. And I thank you all profoundly for feeling secure and safe to speak together. So the role of the university as a safe space is very important. And the second thing that I think is very important for universities, especially for public or civic universities, those universities that really do try to engage with their local communities, and the key word for me is about respect, and it comes back to what I said, the way I read the tribunal report and the appalling lack of respect that runs

through every page of the coal board's behaviour. The arrogance, the lack of respect for a community that had given livelihoods and indeed lives. And it seems to me that this is important for the university going forward, because research in universities is changing. The models of research, the days when we worked *on* communities are gone, and we are desperately struggling to learn, to work *with* communities. And if we're doing that properly, it means not just talking, but it means listening. And to listen to others outside of the academy requires one thing above all: it requires the respect for their knowledge. It's not academic knowledge, it's hard-won knowledge, community knowledge, Jeff, or whatever. And universities haven't been good about listening to others because, fundamentally, they haven't had the respect for others. And that is vitally important, and we are... in Cardiff University, we are struggling, we are trying, to work with communities. It's taken us a long time, but this is a great example of an event, thanks to the School of Journalism, that we are trying to create a safe space to listen to others and within that safe space, we are trying to learn to respect other kinds of knowledge. And we're not there yet of course, but this is part of a chapter in that on-going story. So without further ado, can I sincerely thank everybody for coming this morning and above all, those people who have felt safe and secure enough to share their thoughts. Many people, including Elwyn, who haven't spoken a word about this publicly for 50 years. As I say, that is a profoundly privileging experience, and it's also a very humbling experience. So thank you all this morning and come and join us, and can we thank the speakers in the traditional... [applause]

[End of transcript]

## Stephen Jukes – Forgetting

Janet Harris: As Chris said, this section is going to have quite a difficult act to follow, the start of the conference. But this section is entitled 'Forgetting', but I think ... it's more a question of looking at how an event should be remembered, and something that came out this morning was that people tend to forget, but actually, that's not the best thing to do because if you forget, you lose a sense of justness, you lose a sense of what should be remembered. And this section is very much talking and thinking about how an event should be remembered. And I think Steve, you said something about it's the quality of the stories that are told and our speakers that we've got in this section are looking at the different ways and the different people who tell this... these events and this story. So what I'll do is I'll introduce each speaker before they start and then we'll have a discussion at the end. So our first speaker is Stephen Jukes, who is professor of journalism at Bournemouth University and was foreign correspondent and media executive covering news in Europe, Middle East and the United States for Reuters. He's now Director of the European Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma so obviously has a lot of stuff that's very relevant.

Stephen Jukes: So, thank you. I feel deeply inadequate after that last session and this will be very differently, obviously. I was a school boy in London and I remember two things about 1966: one was watching England win the World Cup with my dad in the living room, and the other was actually the newsreel on Aberfan, so it is somewhere in the back of my memory. And just before I start, briefly reflecting on the previous session, two things struck me. Firstly, the appalling, shocking lack of counselling at that time and I suspect to this day, I'm not quite sure. A lot of progress has been made in terms of first responders, the emergency services and journalists, and I'll talk about that. And secondly, what came across to me was this therapeutic nature of telling the story. But actually, how do we, the media, go about that, and that's problematic, as I think we began to tease out.

So what I'm trying to do is draw some lessons from covering traumatic news stories in the past; both myself as a working journalist - I worked for 20 years or so around the world for Reuters, a foreign news agency - and I've been working as an academic for the last 12 years, but also very much with the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma. And essentially there, we work with journalists who are covering traumatic news events. And we look at it through two perspectives, if you like. One is about awareness and self-awareness. If you're a journalist and you're covering these sorts of stories, what is it you need to know to tell the story better and to tell the story with a respect for the people you're interviewing and you're writing about? And the other side, the other perspective is what does it do to the journalist? Because what we sometimes forget is that the journalists who are covering these stories are also subject to a lot of distress, and that that can also influence the way they think, write and frame stories. And I'm going to draw, really, less on Aberfan and more on stories where I was involved, so Dunblane and Columbine. I was the editor of Reuters in America at the time of Columbine. And also some recent cases; a school shooting in Winnenden in Germany, south-west Germany in 2009, and the most recent shooting in Munich. And school shootings are different from Aberfan, I understand that, but there is... there are many, many common factors, not least the fact that children are involved and there is something deeply, deeply disturbing when children are involved. And of course, Aberfan was in a different age, it was in a pre-social media age, totally different. And we heard this morning how slowly the news trickled down into the

community. It wasn't tweeted in real time, it was very slow, and people who were even there, I think I heard this morning, didn't really know what was going on. But of course, there are also similarities, so Aberfan, Dunblane, Columbine, Hillsborough, you can make a very strong case to say media didn't do its job of investigating why it happened. All of those involved clashes between the media and the communities to one degree or another, including divided communities. And most importantly, I would maintain that the ethical issues for journalists were the same. The difference is the speed and the lack of time to make decisions today and how that changes the whole dynamic of news.

So the big cliché is that journalists write the first draft of history. As an agency journalist, I certainly was at many great breaking news stories, whether it be the 9/11, fall of the wall and what have you. But actually, you know what, journalists write the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth draft of history as well. Sometimes historians come in and they give it a different spin, they investigate, they re-write history. Perhaps they give a proper calibration of what really happened. But the point I want to make is that media frame the way we, in the public, perceive what's happened. And we do it in a way which is lasting. It's very difficult to break that cycle and that's not just because of what's written, it's because of the images and the sounds, and image and sound are hugely important. I've got a picture here of Cliff Michelmore. I'm old enough to remember Cliff Michelmore as a brilliant, distinguished journalist who I looked up to. But there's something about the way these figures frame our understanding. So when Kennedy was assassinated, Cronkite announced the news to the nation, he cried on air in America. We remember that. I remember Michelmore, Cliff Michelmore, and I'll show the clip of him at the very end of what I'm saying, but we... somehow, it's quite difficult to get away from this and then... there you get the tension, that's where the tension comes, perhaps, between the frame we have in our memory, which is so strong, and what the community, the survivors, the victims want, which is sometimes very different.

The first thing that happens – and I want to just look at the dynamics of how these stories develop – first thing that happens is most of the normative rules of journalism fly out of the window, very often. So Stuart Allan, Professor Stuart Allan who teaches here at Cardiff, Barbie Zelitzer, an academic, Michael Schutzen, a very famous American academic, have all looked at the way our ideas of impartiality, objectivity, detachment, come under threat at times of national tragedy or attack. So the classic case is 9/11 in America where, essentially, the American media sort of lost it and became very jingoistic, and didn't investigate what was really going on, and was quite happy to go along with George Bush's attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, to be frank, without questioning. What happens in this dynamic is that authorities leap into that vacuum and try to seize some form of control, and become much stronger in what they're trying to say, and then the media, sometimes, takes on this pastoral role. I mean in America, they call Cronkite 'Uncle' Walter. It's the sort of this... almost as the comforter of the nation at a time of tragedy. And it's quite often you see that in these big, big stories. And then we, the media, tend to get wrapped into a cycle, and that cycle says first of all, we're going to establish the facts – what happened - but as we do that, we also are engaging the audience emotionally. That's what it's about, actually, and we're establishing a sort of a zone of safety. So for instance, in the Munich shootings recently there was a lot of Twitter feeds going around; it appeared that there were two or three shooters on the loose in the centre of Munich. Well, actually, the media's job was to establish that there was one lone shooter, and he was

dead, and there was a zone of safety for the rest of Munich. And then we move to the next bit, which is really the mourning, which has a natural dynamic, because of funerals and because of what's happening, and blame. And sometimes, the question is whether journalists really get to the blame bit, and whether they investigate that properly. And then there is the... after the funerals, the media withdraws, they pack up, and life gets back to normal, but it's not normal, is it? It's a new normal. It's a different normal. It's not the same normal. And then we come on to the anniversary journalism. One year, five years, ten, 20, 30, 40, 50... and I'll come on to that a bit later. So what I want to do is really think about some of the lessons from all this.

So the first lesson is that people who have been caught up in these types of incidents – this is Columbine – or survivors, or their parents, are not always reliable witnesses. Certainly, not at the beginning; they're suffering from shock, trauma, stress. And what happens is, in the social media world, you have the added complication, which means things can go wrong and stories can go wrong very, very quickly. So for instance, in Columbine, one of the national US broadcasters put on air a witness on the phone and it seemed as though he was talking from a cell phone in the school while the shooting was going on. In fact, he was several hundred miles away, watching on CNN. So the pressure of the news cycle makes things much more difficult. And we do get into this sort of ritual performance these days, which I think probably started with Diana, the death of Diana, where we, the media know what the public are going to do in that cycle. So you get to the wreath laying, the candles, the vigils, and it really takes on a dynamic of its own. And so I really want to just sort of say how we do frame these things very, very clearly. And so as a journalist, and drawing on my experience from working with other journalists in Dart where we talk about... we talk with journalists who work on these stories, and we try to advise them on best practice, I think it's clearly about empathy and not sympathy. But then you have this difficult dynamic between on the one hand are we going to re-traumatise somebody by asking them to tell their story, or is there actually a cathartic, therapeutic element to do with that? And we heard, actually, that it's all very well, you know, doing an interview, but if you over-promise, and somebody expects they'll be on the nine o'clock news or ten o'clock news and what have you and they're not, the impact of that can be devastating, because the person is very, very vulnerable. And perhaps by telling their story, they're getting a bit more power back. If I've got time, I'll tell one anecdote from the shooting in Winnenden in 2009. The editor of the local newspaper there is a man called Frank Nipkau and Bild Zeitung, the national press, descended on this small town in Baden-Württemberg and was all over the (local) newspaper for pictures of the shooter, pictures of the victims, and he said, 'No. Not going to do that.' And they said, 'Well, we'll give you free advertising in the daily tabloid, all these incentives...' He said, 'No. No, not going to do it.' And he told his editorial not to write about the killer, the shooter, and he told them not to write... not to interview the parents of the children who had been shot. A year later in the supermarket, one of the parents confronted the editor, Frank Nipkau, at the checkout and said, 'What are you doing? Why haven't you come to talk to me? Why didn't you interview us? What's going on with you, aren't you a newspaper?' And so sometimes the expectations of a community and journalists are sort of out of synch. They go, sometimes they just go wrong.

One of the things we tend to do is we focus on the perpetrator, and today it's much easier because the perpetrators, especially in terms of shootings, leave behind all the evidence that the media wants. Diaries, videotapes, think of the ISIS suicide bombings and what have you. And of course that leads immediately to a backlash from

communities, and I have to say that in most of the cases where I've been involved, either by working with journalists through Dart or myself involved, there has always been tension with the community. This is Dunblane, of course. And that tension sometimes becomes quite organised, so a year ago in America, after the umpteenth school shooting, so two parents got together from various different shootings and said, 'Well you know what, we want to have a campaign.' And they called on the media not to glorify, if you like, the people carrying out these shootings, and there were deep cultural differences, so in Munich for instance, the British press, not just the tabloid but the 'quality press' in inverted commas, all had pictures, biographical details about the killer – his name was David Sonboly – whereas in Germany, there was nothing.

So I'm coming towards the end, and I want to talk about anniversaries. So an anniversary is where the journalists, quite often... quite often, what the news desk says, 'Well, you covered the story, go back. You, the same journalist.' And that can be deeply problematic. It's deeply problematic because during the coverage of the breaking news story, the journalist is basically on autopilot, the adrenaline is rushing, you're getting the story, you're doing the job, you're not thinking about what happens. It's only afterwards you start to think about it. A year on, you really have thought about it, and that's where journalists mostly come into areas of traumatic stress. Post traumatic stress disorder is clinically defined as having been in a period of stress for more than one month, in the UK or in Europe. So it's quite difficult for journalists, but then again, communities have organised, so in Columbine one year on they called a press conference and they said, 'Right, okay, you will remember the victims, you will not re-broadcast the footage, there's a PR agent, if you want interviews, you go through the PR agent, and by the way, you're not going to say who the shooters were.' Well of course, I mean the media's first reaction was, 'No!' you know, 'Go away, we're not going to play by these rules.' But I think it had one effect; it actually raised the issues and I think the broadcasters, when you talk to them about this, say, 'Well actually it brought those issues onto our radar.' And when you talk to the parents of Columbine children who died, they say the biggest criticism of the media was they didn't investigate.

This is my last slide and these are the... this is really a summary of what I want to say – the five lessons I've drawn from my experience in working through other journalists. The first one is: the way we frame tragedy has a lasting impact. Now, when you come to an anniversary – 40 years, 50 years – there's an opportunity to re-frame that. But these frames are very, very sticky. Witnesses can be in a state of trauma; they can be very unreliable. Mistakes and poor reporting often happens because of that. Journalists need to look after themselves. We heard today how first responders, emergency services are given proper training. Today, we give training on how journalists can look after themselves and how they can actually report better on these stories. There is also, I think, a temptation to try and move on to try and find a happy ending, a closure. I think it's in all of us, and life isn't like that. You know, a community, an individual, will not forget. It may move on – there may be a new normal, there may be a new form of life, a new normal – but as we heard this morning, people don't forget. And then the last point I wanted to make was that in my experience, so many of these stories have not... have really fallen down sometimes with the lack of investigation about the 'how' did this happen, 'why' did it happen, and I know that that's a raw nerve in terms of Aberfan. So that's what I wanted to say; I did want to actually just pull up the Cliff Michelmore thing, if that's possible, and just show you these 90 seconds of clip...

BBC Tonight  
1966:

*'Never in my life have I ever seen anything like this. I hope that I shall never ever see anything like it again. For years of course, the miners have been used to having roll calls whenever there's been a pit disaster. Today, for the first time in history, the roll call is called in the street, this is the miners' children. And even now, at this time of night, more than 12 hours after disaster first struck, little glimmers of hope still run down through the main street. Only minutes ago, someone came down with a faint hope, they said that they'd found a child and the child was underneath a blackboard. And they thought that the child was alive. Ten minutes before, they'd brought out a whole pile of bodies of 20 children where the whole of this muck had run straight through the whole of the classroom and literally buried them.'*

[End of transcript]

## Louise Walsh – Forgetting

Janet Harris: Our next speaker is Louise Walsh, who was born in Cardiff and studied archaeology at Cardiff University and she's the author of *Fighting Pretty* and has just published *Black River*, which follows Harry, a journalist from the *South Wales Echo*, as he attempts to prevent the national press from exploiting the Aberfan disaster while struggling with marital estrangement, local corruption and a bitter feud with a rival in the business. All of these are probably well known to journalists. Louise, thank you very much.

Louise Walsh: Thank you. So thanks for having me here. I too feel a bit sort of out of place; I'm not a journalist and I have no connection with Aberfan other than I think that sometimes stories find you, and I think that's what happened in this case. I began the research for *Black River* in 2012 and it is about a *South Wales Echo* journalist and it was humbling this morning to hear about the struggles of journalists during Aberfan because that's really what the novel's about. It's about a journalist who goes to Aberfan and is overwhelmed and doesn't report, is not able to report for various emotional reasons and struggles with that on the run up to the first anniversary of the disaster. And it's a privilege to share the research behind the book with you because normally in fiction, too much research in a novel reads as gratuitous. We have to leave most of it out, and we just keep the essential bit to give some truth to the story, but the rest of it is fictionalised. And the factual background that remained in *Black River* is a fraction of the material I've researched and investigated.

So what am I going to cover? I'm going to start where I began myself, in 2012. With the Welsh Office in 1967, their concerns about the press and their proposed solutions following the disaster and running up to the first anniversary. We'll then take a look at a story from *The Express* in 1967 and that will be followed by a similar look at a story in *The Telegraph* a few months later. If Leveson hadn't been so much in the news in 2012, I doubt this story would have come to my attention. I'd been reading generally around 1967 because I had a completely other story that I was writing, about an Irish community in Cardiff. And I was having trouble pulling this story together, and I was reading wider around 1966 and '67. And a sentence in a book about Aberfan intrigued me, that the Welsh Office were concerned about the behaviour of the press. And with Leveson on in the background, I thought, what kind of concerns? Are we talking about a Leveson kind of problem? And that prompted me to write to the National Archives and get the document sent to me. So... there we go: The Welsh Office in 1967. The information division was headed by Idris Evans and Mr Peter Marshall, and these gentlemen went through the clippings of the press every day, the local and the national, and the stories would be filed or in some cases they would be acted upon if they were in any way related to something to do with Wales. And the Welsh Office were already deeply concerned about the press behaviour in Aberfan and the kind of reporting, but there was nothing they could do about it. So... well, there was nothing they could do about it until a catalyst gave them an opportunity. On 18<sup>th</sup> August 1967, Peter Marshall and Idris Evans were forwarded a letter from Selwyn Jones, who was the town clerk for Merthyr Tydfil, who had appeal to the Secretary of State, and I think this was mentioned earlier, Cledwyn Hughes, to do all he could to restrict television and newspapers from continuing to bring publicity to Aberfan. And he ends: 'I'm sure that you will appreciate that

in the interests of the residents of Aberfan, that the glare of publicity should be taken away from them.’ So the town clerk’s letter confirmed the Welsh Office’s worst fears, as shown in this next extract from a series of memos exchanged between Welsh Office staff. ‘We have not been unmindful of the situation and have repeatedly spoken of the unscrupulous journalists who have moved into Aberfan. It is fairly common knowledge that there is at least one unscrupulous freelance journalist there, supplying national newspapers with totally unbalanced, and in some cases untrue stories.’ Now, this memo went on to state that some decent journalists had been refusing to handle potentially malicious stories, and that they’d been trying to prevent others from doing so as well, and the Welsh Office scrambled for ideas. During the first half of September 1967, they discussed and developed proposals. Then, on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1967, Peter Marshall considered the time had come. They were going to take this to the Labour prime minister, Harold Wilson, because surely he would help keep the press away from Aberfan?

So on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1967, Idris Evans drafted another memo to the Welsh Office staff entitled: ‘The Consequence of Uncontrolled Publicity’, and it was the contents of this memo that was essentially copied and pasted into a letter to Downing Street, suggesting the action that they could possibly take. And some of these examples were a restriction of anniversary coverage to something limited and dignified, an appeal to newspapers and television in the hope that they might exercise restraint during and after the anniversary, and Idris Evans must have known how this advice might be received in Downing Street because he makes an upbeat attempt to reassure: ‘This is not gagging the press, on the contrary, it would be a display of statesmanship likely to receive unqualified praise by the majority of editors.’ And another idea would be rota party coverage, where one or two journalists were to cover the anniversary of Aberfan and report back to the rest of the journalists, as they do with royal engagements. And Evans concluded in his letter: ‘Finally, it must be said that an enterprising newspaper could well do the whole of this job for us. Newspapers generally increased their sales at the time of the disaster of Aberfan. A single newspaper, e.g. *The Mirror*, might well increase its sales on a more lasting basis by starting a “Lay off Aberfan” campaign. We are confident that such a campaign would ultimately receive the support of newspapers and broadcasting organisations throughout the land.’ And it’s this quixotic idea which became the main plot of *Black River*, because I wanted to see how far a 1967 journalist, *South Wales Echo* journalist, who’d been traumatised by the disaster, would go along with the Welsh Office plan for a ‘Lay Off Aberfan’ campaign. And that’s the fictional side of it. So a week later, after that letter to Downing Street, Trevor Lloyd Hughes wrote... responded on behalf of the prime minister to say in layman’s terms that these ideas would never work, they were crazy, and in particular, the idea of the ‘Lay off Aberfan’ campaign was branded as a dangerous one. ‘If it became known that the government had tried to use one newspaper in this way, we would be faced with the wrath of all the rest. We would be accused of news management.’ So naturally, the Welsh Office was disheartened and, judging by some of the correspondence, a little embarrassed that their suggestions had gone down this way.

So at this point in my research, I needed to investigate further and find some specific examples of the reporting being complained about, and I obtained two articles which had drawn complaints. A story in the *Sunday Express* in June 1967

and a story in *The Telegraph* a few months later, in October. And if anyone's interested, I've brought along some copies of the *Express* story with me. If you want to see them afterwards I'll be out in the foyer or just grab me if you see me, and it's worth reading the entire story. But you'll get a flavour of the reporting from the complaint letter written by S O Davies, the MP for Merthyr, to the *Sunday Express* on 8<sup>th</sup> June 1967: 'A number of my bereaved constituents at Aberfan have expressed to me their anger, pain and disgust at the shocking and misleading article by your Sally Brompton in last Sunday's issue of the *Sunday Express*. I read the article and as someone who has lived with the people of Aberfan for 48 years, I must say how disgracefully removed from the truth the article was. In all the cruel travesties of fact that have appeared in some organisations of the press from the day of this terrible disaster, the *Sunday Express* has, on last Sunday, exceeded all of them in fabrication, distortion and irresponsible journalese. May I tell the *Sunday Express* readers that Aberfan parents do not "squabble and fight while their sons and daughters suffer", nor are these people so divided that they become "the most tragically exclusive in the world" - rhetorical filth. So is that children of Aberfan are guilty of being alive, alive in a village where 116 children died, and that they are victimised because they are there.' So you can see why I was so angry as the story developed and why this story became about journalism and a journalist with post-traumatic stress and Fleet Street journalism and the contrast between the two. Here are a couple of other quotes from Sally Brompton's piece. 'Once again, fear has come to this tormented Welsh mining village, and once again, the children are the victims... Half the children died, so the other half must pay.' And astonishingly, John Junor, the editor of the *Sunday Express* in his reply was unmoved: 'Miss Brompton was given a straightforward and simple commission. It was to ascertain the truth or otherwise of reports which had already appeared in other newspapers. I'm sure that what she wrote, she believed to be the truth.'

*The Telegraph* ran their equally sensational story in their magazine on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1967, and the language of John Summers' story and his comparison of Aberfan to a battleground, are noteworthy. The two Aberfan fathers that *The Telegraph* article placed most focus on were pictured underneath the photograph with the caption: 'Militant Aberfan Survivors'. And another man interviewed was described in the following terms: 'A short little Aberfan bereaved father with the inflamed face of an infuriated jockey.' The language is just terrible and it's almost played for laughs. We are told three times in one sentence that the father is short. 'He's short', 'he's little', 'he's like a jockey', and twice we are told he is angry, inflamed and infuriated. And only once is it mentioned that the gentleman's lost a child in the last year. And the theme of the article itself is about a conflict regarding control and apportionment of the disaster fund. And the village is summarised as a place where 'hysteria is always in the air'. Selywn Jones, Merthyr's town clerk, wrote immediately to complain to the editor at *The Telegraph* about John Summers' reporting, and he highlighted each inaccuracy in turn. A reply from the editor of *The Telegraph* on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 1967 stated that he'd checked into the matter: 'I still do not see that the article in the magazine overstepped the boundaries of propriety or that it failed to consider the feelings of individuals involved. I really cannot find anything in your letter, however, which contradicts any of the factual statements made therein.'

So we've seen that the Welsh Office were deeply concerned about the press, and that the press were printing stories which would have undoubtedly hurt the villagers of Aberfan. But there was still a piece missing from the jigsaw. The Welsh Office approach of Downing Street seemed disproportionate to the amount of concrete evidence offered, and by that, I mean I had no specific examples of press behaviour in the village at the time. Why couldn't I find any recorded examples of journalists openly targeting and harassing the residents of Aberfan, and where were the scuffles between journalists and the villagers, or even freelance journalists and local journalists predicted by the Welsh Office? So how many journalists were cited as harassing the villagers? 'At least one unscrupulous freelance.' So there was a disconnect there. Given the horror of Aberfan and the global attention it received, one unscrupulous journalist didn't seem to warrant that appeal to Downing Street or explain the amount of sensational stories being published. And it took me a while to figure out where the journalists were getting their stories, and when I did, I realised it actually went a little way, only a little way, to explain the reporting of Fleet Street journalists. The clue was once again found in the Welsh Office correspondence. On 15<sup>th</sup> September 1967, Peter Marshall candidly admitted that the Welsh Office were getting things wrong with the press. And a few days later, he sent another update to his colleagues: 'Journalists were loath to cover last night's meeting between Gerald Davies and mothers of injured children, but were overjoyed to be able to report that no further immediate action was to be taken.' So journalists were given full access to public meetings for those affected by the disaster, and the language Peter Marshall uses seems almost a little bit like wishful thinking or PR spin because it's hard to believe that the journalists were uncomfortable being present at the public meetings and overjoyed when there was nothing to report, especially given that Sally Brompton's piece in the *Sunday Express*, only a few months earlier, paints an entirely different picture: 'The mothers of the survivors have formed their own committee, to clean up the name of Aberfan. But at meetings, they air their complaints about the bereaved. They would do better to discuss what might be done to help their own children survive.' Let's have a look at John Summer's take on what's actually happening in these meetings: 'The myths and the paper talk that news-angled stories of stricken Aberfan are all blowing away like smoke after a battle, and the reality of Aberfan as a new battlefield of human emotions, is being revealed.' The reality of Aberfan as a new battleground of human emotions is being revealed to the press in meetings where grieving parents are attempting painfully and publicly to negotiate the release of interim payments from the disaster fund, and it's been revealed by the Welsh Office, Merthyr's town clerk and the MP for Merthyr, giving access to the press, because they trusted the press would never forget. And they allowed journalists the very access which would start to facilitate unmarked change in public sympathy. Just shy of a year after the disaster, John Summers is ultimately saying that it's the emotional impact of the tragedy itself which is blowing away like smoke after a battle, and it's being replaced with a new drama, as journalists and their readers got ring-side seats to judge whether the parents' demands were appropriate or inappropriate, whether they're dignified or undignified. In realising that the journalists are not door-stopping parents, the picture is somewhat altered. Given the access that journalists clearly had, while the reporting is sometimes highly sensational in tone and language, it's hard to say they weren't being objective. These days, if a similar tragedy were to happen, you wouldn't get the victims gathered together in a community hall to discuss the raw trauma and consequences in front of the press.

Today, the law would handle everything and litigation, negotiation and mediation would all happen behind closed doors and the press would know nothing. This was the first time a disaster like this had been televised but with the whole world watching, local politicians and staff at the newly created Welsh Office were running to catch up, unaware of the further heavy price those villagers would pay for any naïvety on their part when it came to the media. When journalists forgot stricken Aberfan, so did their readers. As publication of such stories about Aberfan continued, S O Davies began to receive correspondence from readers of national newspapers, criticising the people of Aberfan for their behaviour, and some commenting they wish they'd never donated to the disaster fund in the first place, and the process of forgetting had begun. Thank you.

[End of transcript]

## Chris Morris – Forgetting

Janet Harris: We will take questions afterwards but I think when Stephen was talking about investigation and finding out the truth, I think it obviously takes a fiction writer to do that far better than most journalists seem to have done. So thank you for that. Chris Morris is an award-winning documentary film maker, looking at another way of telling and remembering stories such as this. In 2006, he directed 'An American in Aberfan', charting the creation of an artwork to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Aberfan disaster. The film won best documentary in the 2007 Celtic Media Festival. He was head of Newport film school, which turned out some of the best documentary directors in the country, if not internationally. And as a documentary maker myself, Chris is somebody to very much admire and look up to. He's now the director of the school of film and television at Falmouth.

Chris Morris: In my research for the film that I'm going to talk about, I came across a piece written in '67 by Laurie Lee, which is called 'The Village that Lost its Children', and I would encourage you to read it, if you can. I think that's a beautiful and incredible piece of writing, considering the time in which it was written. So what I'm going to talk about today is the film I made from the filmmaker's point of view, really. In 2001, I'd made a film called 'The Hallelujah Kids', which was an hour-long, fifty-minute, can't remember, film about a child... an American child evangelist. And for me as a filmmaker, it was one of the turning points of my career, it got critical success and it was lauded and all this sort of things. It was also a turning point for me as a filmmaker, because during the filming, it emerged that the subject of my film and the nineteen-year-old evangelist preacher, Shaun Walters, had been diagnosed with autism, and this emerged during the filming, and that his deteriorating emotional state and his ministry was consumed by demons, devils and hell, was slowly consuming him. The delicate ethical and moral balancing act that is weighed by the documentary filmmaker, the access to the story and the telling and the framing of that story dipped in that film towards a resolution that left me uncomfortable with my craft. The film was a truthful telling of what I had witnessed for sure, but I was left wondering what Shaun got out of the process. So I moved deliberately my practice away from 2000 onwards, away from the intimate and the personal and I did other things and made other work, which was great.

Some time later, I left BBC and went to teach at Newport film school. But in 2003, I was approached by BBC Wales' producer, Dai Williams to consider directing a documentary about Aberfan on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. My first instinct was no. An anniversary requires one word to recall it; what more could there be to say? That was my instinct. But the producer convinced me and I'll tell you why. He was a local lad, he was from Merthyr, just up the road. I'd known him really well and worked with him for a couple of years, so I trusted him, and Dai's approach was centred on listening to the village. So three years before the disaster anniversary, in 2003, we went to the village. Dai went first and I came on a couple of trips afterwards, and we began to talk to various people – older inhabitants, incomers, parent groups, charities, regeneration initiatives, charities working within the village – about their attitudes to the media, their portrayal, their worries about the impending 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary; and we asked in what ways could we improve the way that we mark something. Because come what may, the BBC and other outlets have to do these things. You can't get away from that, so the question was how

best could we do it. Many people... some ideas began to emerge. Many people, especially those who experienced the disaster or had lost relatives and children, said to us that they were sick of the continual regurgitation of the black and white archive, and some of the villagers said to us that they had not watched a single Aberfan programme... anniversary programme ever because of that. They also didn't want to be portrayed as victims; they wanted some portrayal of Aberfan now, not a singular time capsule of the disaster and they wanted to be active in the process. They also wanted a legacy, but they had a garden and memorials, so they wanted something much more like an active project.

So Dai Williams had come across the work of American artist Shimon Attie. And he proposed to the village regeneration committee that Shimon should meet them with the idea of creating an artwork. This is one of his pieces from Berlin, where he projected images of Jewish residents back onto the buildings in which they lived prior to the war. Shimon's practice is concerned with memory and community and the villagers saw this work and they liked the sensitive way it seemed to deal with a very difficult subject, and in fact, it was exactly because he was an outsider they thought he might be able to say something. Shimon was initially sceptical, he'd never heard of Aberfan, but he agreed to visit and BBC Wales funded a speculative visit. Shimon came over, he walked the streets, he talked to people, he ate lots of fish and chips, and he was definitely won over by the people he met in Aberfan, and eventually, he said yes. When he said yes, I said yes, because suddenly, I realised that I had a film which would be a contemporary film to tell. 2003-6, Dai spent the time getting the money from the Arts Council to pay for Shimon and BBC Wales, and in 2006, in May, six months before the anniversary, Shimon moved into the village. He lived in the village. He had no idea what his art would be, but what emerged was through interaction with the contemporary inhabitants of Aberfan, was to film and photograph members of the community on a revolving stage, in a totally black environment, isolating them from the past and the present, creating images of an iconic Welsh village, reimagining Aberfan as one Welsh village amongst other Welsh villages. This would be realised as a film, installation and a series of stills to make a book, and the artwork would make no distinction between those who were there in the disaster and those who might have been... just moved into the village that year.

By the summer of 2006, other TV companies arrived in the village, and I think I counted around seventeen different production companies doing stuff at that time. Everybody looking for stories. And so I came up with a manifesto which I felt would allow me to make my film in a way that would keep the balance of intrusion somehow in a respectable balance for me. So our film would use no black and white archive at all. The restriction of not using our archive when telling a story about Aberfan, proved to be a creative handcuff, forcing me to find new ways to tell the story. I also, in my research, I decided not to watch any previous television documentaries about Aberfan, so I didn't. I actually looked at Chuck Rapoport's photographs and I read Laurie Lee and I did other things. We preferred to make our presence felt in the village via the artwork, so I let people meet Shimon and engage with the art project. When they felt comfortable with that, I would approach them... we were in there anyway, filming, and I'd just say, 'We're making a documentary about this artwork, would you like to come on board?' Some said yes immediately and were very happy to give us an interview; some said no, and not all these people had been in the village during the disaster. So we also had...

and actually, going back to what somebody was saying earlier about rescuers, one of the people we had was a rescuer but we also had the current headmaster, who was interviewed in the film, who wasn't even in the village at the time. So we tried to find a range of voices that would come through the shooting. But others chose not to engage, or they would engage with the artwork and let us film the artwork going on, but they wouldn't then tell us anything else, and that was absolutely fine. Or they decided that they didn't want to, you know, we weren't allowed to film them, being filmed in the archive as well, and that was also fine. Oh, I'll come back to that. We structured the budget to give us 30 days of shooting, which is unheard of within a BBC film. All the money that I would have spent on the archive, I shoved into the shoot, and we included students... I was teaching at Newport film school, so we had lots of young filmmakers us with us as part of the crew, and we were very visible in the village for a long period of time.

The first day of filming was chosen purposefully; the day of the annual Aberfan Carnival. All the village were out for a fun day, and we, the BBC were visible for the first time. People had heard we were coming to make a film and heard about Shimon and it was all a bit weird and, 'Who... what was this going to go on?' But the first time they saw us, we weren't interviewing people in the cemetery or the garden of remembrance, but filming a joyous event. This set the tone for the whole production, and once the art project was underway, the sort of good vibes about Shimon and this strange thing happening under the Methodist chapel, began to emanate through the village. My DoP, my Director of Photography, was Matt Grey, a brilliant cameraman who went on to shoot things like Broadchurch. He mostly works in drama; Matt and I spoke about the kinds of visual approaches we'd take with the interviews, and we were both obsessed and loved Gus Wiley's work in the Hebrides, which he has done over a series of years. There was something about the wide, non-intrusive, very structured images that really began to resonate with me and... so what we did was when we were filming the interviews, we would shoot a big wide shot like this and then we would show it to the interviewee and say this is our... this is our frame. We are not zooming in. if you get upset, I'm turning the camera off. And those were the rules under which the interviews were conducted. Really important, we would not try to elicit detail of the actual event. Many people said to me that with the passing years, TV companies had been increasingly wanting more detail and were lingering on that detail. One person told me she had ... been asked to describe the smell of the mud that filled the school room. Perhaps with the increasing passage of time and the increasing demands to capture an audience, media outlets feel more liberated to elicit detail in this way that maybe would have been too raw in the early days, maybe not. Or maybe it's just the increasingly invasive television culture we have, but I was unhappy with that approach. My strategy became to ask the interviewee to sum up the day in one word. I think the prolonged pause whilst they tried to capture the terrible events of that day in the single word, said more about the day than either the word they came up with eventually or any detail that they gave us afterwards. And some did give us detail afterwards, some chose not to. Some villagers talked to Shimon quite openly in the studio about the events of that day, and we observed that conversation, and there were others who volunteered more detail about the day, but crucially, we didn't ask. It was a question of it coming out of a conversation.

One other important issue was the portrayal of the cemetery. My initial thought was to not include any images of the cemetery at all, as it was a staple of every Aberfan report in film. However, when I visited Aberfan for the first time and I went to the cemetery, I found it an incredibly moving place. And because I wasn't using any archive, when you put the statistic at the beginning about the amount of people who were killed, the film unfolds... I felt very strongly that people needed to be reminded. I could not use archive, so the cemetery became an important point. So my solution, we applied to the graves committee to do one shot. And what we did was we put a 100-foot track down the entire length of the graves, and we did one shot, which goes on for about a minute and a half, and I put it into the middle of the film with no commentary. So at the clip I'm going to show you at the end, when Sheila has finished talking, it goes into this shot which is a long pan along the graves. We shot it at dusk with the sun behind it, so what this meant was it was a wide shot, and it meant you could not read any of the names on the graves, there was no close-ups of the graves – 'cause again, people had said to us, we don't want to see the names of the children. So we shot it in such a way as it all in silhouettes so we could go along. And there was no commentary. And actually, by television standards, the whole film has very little voiceover in it. I used some at the initial setup and at the end regarding the artwork itself, but the film in the middle has very little narration, and the choice of narration, I really... the reason for that was 'cause I wanted the people to tell their own stories. And the choice of the narrator was really important and I chose poet Gwyneth Lewis – a person who had never delivered a television narration before in her life – to voice the film. And from the outset, her quiet, empathetic delivery sets the tone for the film. She didn't know how to do a TV voiceover and I went, 'Great, that's just what we need!'

Finally, we promised the villagers at the outset that we would hold a special screening prior to the broadcast in Aberfan. We would not just breeze in, film and leave, we were quite willing to be held accountable for our film, so we held the screening, and it was a very powerful moment. I sat outside the screening with one resident who even though it had no archive, still felt she couldn't watch it. The film went out on the actual anniversary day, 21<sup>st</sup> October, after every other film had gone out, and I felt quite happy about this because although people try to get them in early to get the biggest viewing figures, my film was about saying, 'Is it time to stop doing this?' One of the strong themes that came through was that people were getting increasingly fed up with the media, the way that people were coming and the build up to these big anniversaries. So after each interview, I asked them to turn their chair around and I filmed their back for 60 seconds while I asked them this question around media intrusion and we had a number of replies. This woman: 'We've said all there is to say, what more can we say now?' So for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Dai and I suggested to the BBC that we re-screen this film and we put a new end on, because when I made the film in 2006, Shimon hadn't finished the artwork. It's only just been shown now, this year, for the first time at the National Museum in the form that the artist wanted it to be filmed. So we said, 'Let's do an update, I'll film this thing, it means we don't have to go to the village, we don't have to interview anybody, shove my film out again with a new end'; but it fell on deaf ears. Having said that, the Green Hollow that is being made with Owen Sheers, I think is going to be a stunner. I think it's going to be a beautiful, beautiful film, so I think we are in safe hands I hope in that way. I filmed the artwork anyway, Shimon's artwork. I've shot it, I haven't cut it yet, but I'll

make sure that people can have access to that footage, 'cause if you didn't see the artwork at the museum, it was absolutely brilliant. So I'm going to end by... there is the artwork. I'm going to end by just showing a four-minute clip from the film. Thank you.

*Interviewee:* [music plays] Aberfan has grown a lot in forty years. They've grown through the first pain and anger and despair. They've grown through them all, and some people have come through it easier than others.

*Producer:* In a moment, we're going to start recording, you're going to go around five times, imagining yourself just captured in this moment.

*Interviewee:* I'm saying my prayers.

*Producer:* Okay, good.

*Interviewee:* [music plays] Sharon was nine years old, looking forward to being ten years old. She was bright, full of the joys of spring. Great big lamps of eyes and rosy cheeks, and a voice you would be able to hear in Cardiff. A full voice, and a strong character. Not an easy one, but fantastic. Very loving, very loyal to her family and her friends. She was vital. If she was in the house, you would know it. She filled the house. That was Sharon. [music plays] Grief has a pattern, but it took me about five years before I recognised the pattern of it. I would start in September by not being able to sleep properly, and I didn't really have an appetite. By the time I was into October, I was very tired and very susceptible to the emotional time that was coming. But once the day was gone, the actual 21<sup>st</sup> October, those feelings would recede and life would start going on again as it should.

[End of transcript]

## 'Forgetting' – Open Discussion

Janet Harris: Thank you very much Chris, thank you. Do we want... the speakers want to come up so we can have any questions?

Q1: I wonder whether I could ask Stephen Jukes? You listed a number of terrible incidents and the aftermath of those. A lot of the incidents that you listed were perpetrated by individuals. What other incidents have you come across other than Aberfan where there is actually a corporate problem rather than... it's a corporate perpetrator rather than an individual perpetrator, and do you think there the story played out in a different way?

Stephen Jukes: Not ones in which I've personally been so involved but one that comes to mind is Bhopal of course, and some of the class lawsuit actions against American Tobacco, which have also been stories of the way the media has investigated and, in some cases, been very successful and in other cases, failed. So I think what I was trying to talk about was that there are incidences, there are stories we cover which we know are deeply moving and deeply traumatic, and I think there is an analogy between those shootings, and Aberfan in that it is something about children, for me, which is deeply moving. And the dynamic of the story I was trying to say was the same. I haven't really thought through the answer to the question; I think it has a different... it's a longer dynamic I think probably. Do you... can you think of any? I mean one I think is Bhopal.

Q1: I mean the one thing which does strike me about the immediate aftermath is that with some disasters journalists have a time, there's a long time period when people are trying to find out actually what happened. What struck me in reading about Aberfan is the speed with which the inquiry was... speed with which the government said the inquiry would happen, and that it did take place and started, I think, probably about... within about a month or so of the event itself. So to some extent, journalists may have been diverted with the coverage of the inquiry rather than making their own inquiries ...

Stephen Jukes: And that changes the dynamic. I mean one of the things I didn't talk about was this sort of pack instinct and herd instinct and I'll come around to the back end of your question but, traditionally, what happens is that local journalists are first on the scene, and we heard that. And local journalists know the community, they often know the people who are involved, and so it's deeply personal, and they also have an element of trust they might have built up during the period. What happens very quickly afterwards is that the nationals come in, so we heard that with your... with the way that the guys came in from Fleet Street or when Reuters covered Dunblane, we send people up from London on the first plane, that's the way it works. And then you get a completely different dynamic, because you have that pack that arrives, and my experience tells me that the local journalists build the long-term relationships with the people they're interviewing, and then they get the better stories over the long term as well. But I think what you're saying is that somehow, when you move very quickly into an inquiry it can change that dynamic because everyone focuses on that and I think in Aberfan, it was very quick, wasn't it?

Q1: Sorry, can I just come back on one thing, because you posed the difference between local journalists and the guys coming down from London and so on. In 1966, most of the London newspapers had their local correspondents. I can remember sort of, you know, covering political conferences and all sorts of stories in the '60s, and there were people there, you know, from *The Times* and *The Express* and *Telegraph* and so on. All of those local correspondents have now gone, so anybody coming in from the nationals is coming in from outside.

Stephen Jukes: And that's the big difference, isn't it? That is the big difference of that time. The press was much more deferential as well in those days, I think.

Q2: I just wanted to make the point that the national journalists have gone but also the local journalists have disappeared. There is no office in Merthyr Tydfil now, either for the *Merthyr Express* or for the *South Wales Echo* and *Western Mail*. You have to get in touch via Cardiff. The number of errors there are in simple things like spelling Cyfarthfa, that happen because they don't know [laughter] and they don't know the people and they don't know the area, and every week something jumps out at you that says, if only they'd had somebody in the area. When I first started on the *Merthyr Express* in 1964, we were not allowed to have coffee in the building. We all had to go out at around about 11 o'clock, round the corner to the Queens Café and everybody had to bring a story back [laughter] and that's the way that... unfortunately, the centralisation of journalism has actually meant that there is a divorce between the people and the papers and the fact that the *Merthyr Express* is now selling fewer and fewer copies, and somebody has come in to fill that gap on a monthly basis at the moment, but he's taking the advertising, he's obviously taking the news.

Stephen Jukes: Well, you've described very eloquently the hollowing out of journalism over the past twenty to thirty years.

Janet Harris: Do you want to say something about community journalism?

Richard Sambrook: Sorry, Janet is just inviting me to say something about community journalism. We do quite a lot of work here in the university on trying to support communities to report themselves, as it were, and I think that is something that's growing and increasing, certainly here in South Wales and other parts of the country as well but the problem is how sustainable it is. If you have a passionate group of volunteers, then actually it can provide the service a community needs, but there's a big question about whether it's sustainable in the long term. But that is, at the moment, the only thing that's filling in behind this hollowing out of local media that's going on.

While I'm standing up, if I could just pick up on something else. A lot of what the speakers have been saying and indeed what we've just been discussing is about the empathy that's necessary between the media and a community in order to do the job properly and let me just give you two examples from my experience. One against myself, I was at the time of Dunblane, the BBC's news editor in London, and this was clearly an enormous tragedy and a terrible story. So we did what Stephen has described, we sent out most experienced and most senior correspondent, Kate Adie, to Dunblane... And within 24 hours, we had to withdraw her and pull her back because the community in Dunblane, with

hindsight understandably, reacted to someone of that profile who was associated with wars and war zones and terrible international incidents, being... reporting their community and therefore their community being associated with that kind of scale of event. And we have quickly learned and understood that actually, it was the local reporters, BBC Scotland correspondents, who had to work with the community in order to be able to report. So that was a very big lesson which the BBC, I hope, learned quite quickly and I hope has still learned, but you never know. Contrast that with a... we had, very briefly, last year Spencer Feeney who was the editor of the *South Wales Evening Post*, but before that he was editor of the newspaper in Gloucester during the trial of Fred and Rosemary West, the serial killers in Gloucester. And of course, the paper had had a year of the most appalling reports of that trial, the details of what had happened had come out, and the Gloucester community had been traumatised by what had been uncovered that had been going on in their midst. And at the end of the trial, this team on the newspaper said, 'Right, we must do a big special edition that goes back over the history of it and, you know, absolutely goes with it,' not least driven commercially because they knew a sort of special edition would sell lots of copies and all the rest of it. Spencer, to his credit, said, 'No, that's the exact opposite of what we're going to do. We will have more pages in the next edition, but we're not going to mention Fred or Rosemary West. We will mention all the great things about Gloucester, all the positive reasons for living here,' and he made the decision because he understood the community and what it needed at that time in terms of actually shifting gear and looking forwards rather than looking at the horror that they had to read about and experience. And I think that's another example of understanding the community, empathising with it and being able to work with that, which has come through as a very clear message I think from both sessions so far.

Janet Harris: Gentleman over there.

Q3: Can I just go back on the point about the tribunal, which... tribunals and public inquiries have fallen into deep disrepute after Chilcot and the Hatfield Report and a few others. But Cledwyn Hughes signed the notice for the tribunal four days after Aberfan, and obviously Aberfan was on a Friday. I think he signed the order on the Monday and the tribunal involved a lot of research, preparation of documents, witness statements, and he had to have it, I believe, reported in nine months. So whilst obviously, Kevin (Morgan) rightly reflected on the behaviour of the NCB, it happened to embody a lot of the leading legal minds, including Sir Alun Talfan Davies, Tasker Watkins, Geoffrey Howe, a load of people who were either eminent or became eminent. The actual detail that that inquiry went into is absolutely staggering, and the findings and everything are admirable. It's, I think, one of the standout reactions to a tragedy and a disaster.

Q4: Can I just ask how the press reported at the time, does anybody know? The day... was it reported live like that on the daily tribunal?

Janet Harris: Karin, you might be able to... could you explain what you were doing?

Karin

Wahl-Jorgensen: First of all, thanks to all the panellists for very interesting and also moving talks. I'm Karin Wahl-Jorgensen from Cardiff University. We did a research project

where we looked at the coverage of Aberfan in the immediate aftermath in a number of daily newspapers and the coverage over a longer period of time so we could follow a series of disasters and also in the *South Wales Echo*. And actually what we found in the first two weeks is quite different to this pattern of sensationalism because what we found was that the Aberfan disaster was actually reported in a very distinctive way compared to a series of other disasters, in particular, it was covered very extensively and it was also covered in a way that enabled victims or survivors of the disaster to actually give voice to their anger and their grief. And a lot of that had to do with the fact that, in this case, as earlier discussion alluded to, there was actually a clear target for the anger, which was the coal board, which was very clearly seen as being responsible for the disaster. But the pattern that we saw was that perhaps more than any other major disaster, Aberfan and the media coverage of it actually enabled the survivors to raise real political questions about accountability. And also what we found, in the case of the *South Wales Echo* was that this became a hugely dominant story and there was more coverage of Aberfan than there was of a series of other disasters that we looked at in other local newspapers, so comparatively speaking this was an absolutely enormous story and what the *Echo* did was that it played a key role in terms of actually enabling the community to discuss their feelings but also ask for financial and practical, logistical assistance so that in the immediate aftermath, there was some evidence in our research of what was actually quite responsible coverage. Now, how that looks in the longer term is obviously more problematic precisely because of what our panellists have talked about in terms of both the sensationalism that might have occurred and also, as Stephen (Jukes) alluded to, the difficulties with journalists themselves in coming back to the scene and reporting on it responsibly.

Louise Walsh: I have to say, the *South Wales Echo* did cover almost every word. In the book, I mentioned that there was hardly an area of white space left in the paper while the tribunal was going on and they really did... So it's more after the event. I think after the sort of summer of 1967, I think the tone changes but certainly the *South Wales Echo* was really, you know, everything was Aberfan and very respectful reporting I think.

Janet Harris: Yes, the gentleman back there.

Q5: It's on the point about media misrepresentation and poor reporting and for my sins I've been involved in two tragedies where that's been the case. One was Hillsborough and the second one was the Bridgend suicides and for those who aren't aware of that, there was a spate of young people who killed themselves in the county borough of Bridgend and of course, the media world-wide descended on Bridgend and misreported that. And the South Wales police force asked the Press Complaints Commission to come along and hold a public meeting and the police were very critical of the media's reporting of that, and as Louise (Walsh) pointed out, the connections with Aberfan and how the Welsh office tried to deal with it. So South Wales police tried to deal with it with the Press Complaints Commission and really annoyed the national papers as they would do, in trying to sort that out. And in the end, the national papers got their revenge on the chief constable who was fairly new at the time. He'd given an interview to a trade magazine about becoming a chief constable and had mentioned he no longer was able to go to the local Tesco to get his sandwich, and the national headlines for

that was that he was too scared to, he was too grand. He could no longer get his own lunch. So, there was a way of traducing somebody who tried to deal with misreporting. Of course, with Hillsborough and misreporting, and in particular *The Sun*, the way the community dealt with it was through their pockets. They refused to buy *The Sun*, and that's now been quite a long-standing thing, hasn't it. And in a sense, that probably is the best way of dealing with newspapers who traduce a community.

Janet Harris: Yes, one over here.

Q6: I'm so glad that they mentioned the difference between the approach by the local journalists and the pack. I was one of the local journalists at that time and I believe we had total integrity and respect for Aberfan. Later, as Features Editor of the *Western Mail*, there was an unwritten rule that we never did anniversaries in regard to Aberfan. The editor... editors passed it down from one to the other. It does no good at all for the village to remember this. They will remember it in their way, and as I say, as a journalist who went in the second day of Aberfan and later, as an editor, that we abided by those rules, we had the utmost respect for the people of Aberfan. We were probably more affected by the incident itself than most people and it hasn't gone from our minds.

Janet Harris: Thank you. I think if there are no more questions ...

Q7: Can I just say one thing? I think that the local coverage of the Aberfan wasn't about an incident. I think the local reporters would have had an insight and long appreciation of Welsh history where the mining industry has been treated with such contempt. And I think Aberfan is seen as symptomatic of that. It wasn't one incident, it was part of a history.

Janet Harris: Very interesting. Sorry, the gentleman up there?

Q8: If I could just comment a little further on that. I was in school on that day and was sent down to Aberfan, I was in sixth form in Quakers Yard. But part of the loss of innocence that I felt in that period was my parents had a bed and breakfast place in the next village in Troedyrhiw. And because we were fairly close to Aberfan then, the journalist pack landed in our bed and breakfast place. And part of the loss of innocence in that period was, I've never read newspapers since then without reading between the lines and taking a pinch of salt because you could see the pack not understanding... I don't know what it was really, whether it was a panic or an insensitivity on their part or whatever it was. We were aware that there were reports coming out that were not reflective of what I was aware of as the truth and I have... I've got examples of very unscrupulous activities going on by some of the pack at that time. And I would say just again, to add to what you're saying, when you look at the... looking back at the clips of the reporters of the period, there's a... and I'm not referring to Cliff Michelmore ... but there's an insensitivity or a panic on the part of some of the outside reporters of how they're asking, or some were asking, 'How long are you going to stay there?' to a mother of a child under the tip, et cetera. You compare that then with the sensitivity of someone like Owen Edwards, who was there on the same day on the Welsh language media, and it's a stark contrast.

Janet Harris: Sorry, question here.

Q9: Thank you. Picking up on something that Stephen Jukes said, and that was the reporting of Columbine where somebody faked a witness, and I'm not... I'm just going to throw some things out, really. We've got this security now that each one of us carries a camera, a recording device. Nobody can get away with anything, can they? But, if this conference is about the mediation of truth, mediation of events, then there's a dilemma there that in an age of 24-hour news, where the media wants news, is desperate, is ravenous for news, and everybody has a camera, everybody has a recording device, everyone has a mobile phone, who is mediating in a situation like Columbine where they're so desperate to have a witness, they'll take someone who later turns out to be 200 miles away?

Stephen Jukes: I mean that's about feeding the beast, isn't it? I think that's where I'm trying to say, that social media and 24-hour news has increased that pressure. So if you think about the killing in Woolwich, for instance, Drummer Rigby, so ITV stuck a producer in a car, they went down, they bought some footage and from somebody... a passer-by, one of the killers with the blood-stained machete in his hand, and they played it out on the 6.30 news. Now, that's pretty instantaneous, and those are editorial decisions which are not referred somewhere because they're made, you know, under pressure. But what I think, and some of the things we talk about with other journalists is, you can't start to think what the answers are when you're doing it, it's too late. You've got to try and prepare yourself for those things beforehand and understand what the ethical issues are. And a lot of that could be referred to Ofcom, Ofcom actually gave ITV a clean bill of health on it, but there are lots and lots of warnings on there.

Q10: The second thing, I wasn't in 9/11 but a postgrad of mine was. He'd been moved over to Wall Street and he'd just moved there with his wife and child, moved to Queens, and he was in 9/11. He had a phone, lots of people took footage, there was lots of amateur public footage of what was going on. But in contrast to Aberfan, which was, you know, an obscure Welsh mining village, in the centre of... the beating heart of capitalism, there was utter confusion, all kinds of misreporting, bad editing, misinterpretation. And that postgrad of mine actually took eight hours to walk home to his wife and child in Queens who did not know that he was not involved, who did not know that he had survived for those eight hours. So there's two aspects, really. In one sense, we feel secure about the ubiquitous witness, if you like. But when you can't get a signal, in the middle of Manhattan, then we're back to '66 really.

Stephen Jukes: In a sense, but... if I can just, very quickly... because what we do today is we loop the footage continually on 24-hour news. So if you were watching 9/11 at the time, you would have seen that second plane going into the tower time and time again over a period of 24-hours. Well actually, if you take out the technology and you think back to Aberfan, do we not always have the same pictures? And that's what I was trying to talk about about framing, that we frame 9/11 in perhaps our memory of live television and the loop of that plane going into the tower. But we also have those iconic ... to use a bad word... images from Aberfan. And it's just with a different technology, still photographs. But we still think of them in terms of that frame.

Janet Harris: We'll talk about photography later on and think about pictures. Sorry, there's one question up at the back here?

Q11: I just wanted to raise a point about... there is a point about doing anniversaries. You have to do it differently and you said investigation is way, way down there. Well, actually that's a... that's what we should be doing on anniversaries, I think, because you said down the front what are the corporate things, you know, Herald of Free Enterprise, Piper Alpha, there's a whole lot of stuff ... which has got deep roots in how the system operates and we should be going back... going back to that. It isn't always just looking at the poor victims, trying to get to some of the roots of the stuff and an anniversary... is a very, very good way to do that.

Janet Harris: I think we'll finish on that. I think absolutely when I said at the beginning about justice, you know, not forgetting so that these things can come out.

## Moving On

Richard  
Sambrook:

Okay, good afternoon everybody. Thank you very much for coming back this afternoon. We have two, I think, completely fascinating, very strong sessions for you this afternoon. My first job in journalism was as a trainee reporter on the *Merthyr Express* a very long time ago, where I worked alongside and was taken under the wing of Melanie Doel, who was by far the most able reporter on the paper at the time in my view, and of course, went on to great things. So it's a great pleasure to be able to introduce Melanie to chair the next session.

Melanie Doel:

Thank you, Richard. What he doesn't say is there were only two of us, actually, so [laughter]. Ah, thank you very much. Well, after 'Remembering and Forgetting' this morning, this afternoon's session is called 'Moving On' and after the emotional, powerful things we heard this morning, it really is hard to stand here. But I think 'Moving On' is going to probably bring up some even more controversial and soul-searching questions this afternoon. Fifty years on, is it time for Aberfan to move on? Indeed, will the community ever be allowed by the media to move on and if... even bigger and perhaps more controversial question, should Aberfan actually be allowed to move on? Is it its fate to stay locked in this sort of time of half a century ago so that the world never forgets? All questions I hope that we'll explore this afternoon. I doubt if we'll get a full answer to any of them. Thanks for the introduction; yes, it's lovely to look around this room and see so many... I'm not going to say the world 'old' [laughter], former, *Merthyr Express* reporters. And that was one of the things today, it's so lovely to see people who were so involved and have been involved and touched by this tragedy. And it's so great now to hear from those reporters as well, because they were so important. And like Elwyn, I had a bit of an indignant start at the *Merthyr Express* as well. I wasn't asked to spell things, but I caught the train up to Merthyr and I suppose I must have looked very vulnerable. I was only 18, and my indignancy was... I felt I was going to be this big hot shot reporter arriving in Merthyr Tydfil, hot bed of industry. And the guard on the train, the conductor actually came up and said, 'What are you doing, love?' I said I was starting my first day on the *Merthyr Express*, and he said, 'Oh, you can't go on your own!' and took me across town hand by hand [laughter], took me into the *Merthyr Express* office and delivered me with his cap on and his whistle to the editor [laughter]. So that was my start of my career.

I was just ten when the disaster happened, and in those days, a little grocery van used to come to our village. I don't know if any of you remember them? And they used to come around with fruit and veg, but more important for my mum, they used to come around with ciggies. So she was buying ten Woodbine that day, I'm not sure if it was ten, it might have even been five if I'm honest. I was off school poorly and my other

brothers and sisters, four of them, were all at school. And it came over on the radio in the van that this had happened in Aberfan, and I can remember my mum just dropping her ciggies, grabbing hold of me and saying, 'Come on on.' And that was it. Elwyn said earlier, or somebody said earlier, that the streets went empty around South Wales, and that's exactly what happened in our little street in Cardiff, in Splott. Everybody just hid behind their doors because it was no longer safe for children to be out there. Mums and dads tucked them in. So I was ten then and I... it couldn't have been in my imagination that ten years later, as a patch reporter, I would actually be going to Aberfan as a broadcaster later for the BBC, but I would spend four decades actually... well, I can't believe really, having these people letting me into their homes and their hearts to tell me their stories. And because it was my patch, the BBC basically said, if anything happens, or if any stories come out of Aberfan, you're going to be doing it. And for me, that was quite difficult because I would have an editor maybe sending me out and saying, 'Go get this story in Aberfan, it's great.' And I would sometimes have to sit back and reflect, and think, actually, no this isn't great. Why am I going to Aberfan? Is it for me, is it for the BBC, or is it for the people of Aberfan? And very often, it wasn't for the people of Aberfan and it was quite hard. I was that sort of local reporter with that knowledge so acted as a mediator and used to often say, 'No.' But as a young reporter, that was quite difficult.

But over those 40 years, I sort of covered all of the hurdles as Aberfan truly did move on. Reporting, in fact breaking the news, of the day they got their money back from the fund, and the joy, the pure joy at the beginning, and then them realising they hadn't got the full amount that they wanted because it wasn't paid back with interest, so the anger of it. And Jeff, you raised something again with me today, which we always do. Jeff, Gaynor, who you're going to meet later, have become real friends of mine and lots of families in the village are now real friends. And Jeff was talking earlier about how he couldn't look in a mirror because he didn't like what he saw. And ten years ago, yes, I was one of the media doing the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary then, and I can remember Jeff telling me this, about looking into a mirror and feeling unworthy and how he felt guilt. And I suddenly felt guilt for making him tell me. I went home and cried for days. Never told you that Jeff, but that's the responsibility and burden that a reporter can often carry. I suspect that the press who arrive in their hundreds nowadays, as the anniversaries come around, often go home disappointed. I think they come along wanting to still see a village trapped in a time warp of misery, and sometimes I think they see the sadness but they're disappointed that they actually see a vibrant community, not constantly looking back, but looking forward and trying to face the challenges that they meet. And now, as this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary comes upon us again, the media have been swarming through Aberfan, and Gaynor and I are going to talk about this a bit later, for the last year. They flocked back to Aberfan, very many of them in the most respectable and responsible way. But what is hard to

understand is that for the villagers, just because a year, an anniversary has a nought after it, doesn't really make any difference. The pain is the same every day, and the media have to remember that when they go in there. And we saw Sheila, didn't we, in the piece earlier, in that lovely piece from Chris saying... and that was ten years ago, 'What more have we got to say?' And they're still saying to me, 'Well now what more have we got to say, now the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary has come around?' And a question I think it'll be really interesting to ask today is when should those anniversaries, the *media* anniversaries finish? When does it stop? When does this media flurry stop? Questions I hope that we'll explore with all three speakers this afternoon.

In a moment, we're going to hear from Gaynor Madgwick, who's just published *Aberfan, A Story of Survival, Love and Community* – her own personal attempt to move on, and it is for sale at the back if anybody wants to get it. I promised I'd tell you that... say that for Gaynor. We'll be having a reading from the renowned poet Tony Curtis, who's kindly agreed to give a personal reading of his extraordinary poem called *Aberfan Voices*, which clears up, again, some things that weren't known in the past and we've even cleared up some of those arguments today. And that poem's going to accompany an exhibition due to open in Merthyr in October, to show the work of Chuck Rapoport. And he's going to be our first speaker this afternoon. Now Chuck photographed many famous people in his life – Fidel Castro, Marilyn Monroe, filmmaker François Truffaut – he's met some really great people – JFK and your iconic, if I can use that word again, picture of Jackie Kennedy was used worldwide when he was killed. Chuck arrived in Aberfan from Manhattan after most of the world's press had already left, so he was a different type of journalist, and he arrived with cameras. He arrived, in the words of one villager, after the rest of the press had acted like a barbarian horde, 'like wild animals pillaging our souls'. Quite a task for somebody to come in at that time. Now, I know Chuck, you spent six weeks, I think, embedding yourself into daily life of this community and you ate with them, you drank in the pub with them and you were even challenged to a fight at one point, so you really did become a good valleys fella there [laughter]. And you captured the heart of the village by trying to move on in their life as they tried to move on in their lives without their children. Chuck's work went deeper than those who simply came and went. He captured the very first signs of hope and life in the village. The first child that was born and we thought the first wedding; we may explore that later, but certainly an early wedding in the village. So I think, bittersweet moments that really showed that even from the first days, Aberfan *had* to move on. So Chuck, I think you've got a fascinating lots of... exhibition to show us today, thank you. [applause]

Chuck Rapoport: Well, it's been a long 50 years, and sometimes hard for me to believe that the time has gone by so quickly. Aberfan has turned out to be the most important photo essay of my life. And strangely and oddly, I sort of felt that

that was happening at the time. But let me go back. I've always been an artist and I chose photography as an art because somehow and unconsciously I knew that to provide my art, I had to be in the actual places where the art could be made, as opposed to thinking it up and going into a studio and painting, or sitting at a typewriter and writing. I had to actually go places; and that was my calling. I struggled for a while, as a young photographer, just out of Ohio University. I was in a class in Ohio University that turned out to be rather unique; the colleagues of mine in school were all 35mm camera photographers as opposed to the rest of the crew there who used bigger cameras. We also all were enamoured of W Eugene Smith, who turns out now to be one of the greatest photographers of our time. His use of camera in light, black and white photography was outstanding. One of my friends from school become his master printer, which was pretty good because Smith himself was a man who wouldn't let anybody print his pictures, and so when he found James Coralis, we were all amazed. Before I go any further, I want to talk about what photography means to me and how important it is in a situation like a tragedy like Aberfan, where many people feel, 'Leave us alone, don't take our picture, go away.' This is the words of W Eugene Smith that I live by as a photographer: 'Each time I press the shutter release, it was a shouted condemnation hurled with the hope that the picture might survive through the years, with the hope that they might echo through the minds of men in the future, causing them caution and remembrance and realisation.' When I read this quote rather recently and realised it was my idol, Gene Smith, I knew that I had been onto something all my life, and that's what brought me to Aberfan.

I was 29 years old, and married. I had a five-month-old son, I was living in New York. Freelance photographer. I had just started getting assignments from *Life Magazine*, they trusted me with an important assignment on Times Square to shoot the crime on Times Square; that was supposed to be a two-day assignment, I turned it into a month, which of course was lucrative. But it showed them that I had... there was more to my work than just going out and shooting pictures, that I was thinking... thinking about the story, thinking about what was possible. The day that I saw the film about the Aberfan disaster, I was sitting with my five-month-old son on my lap, and it so impacted on me that I knew I had to do something about it. Gene Smith had been here in Wales just ten years earlier, and I don't know if...? Some of you may know his work and may know that he did this incredible set of pictures of Welsh miners in the valleys, and of course, I remembered that. And so when I saw this, it was visceral, it meant something. I took myself down to *Life Magazine*, I went to see the managing editor, and I asked his assistant if I could get in to see him, and she said, 'You'll have to wait.' And I waited an hour and a half in his outer office until finally she said, you can go in there. And I went in and Ralph Graves was sitting there; he knew who I was but not too well. And he said, 'What is it? What's so important, Chuck?' So I said, 'Aberfan'. And he said, 'Oh, Chuck. We're doing a cover story right now.' Cover, inside, you know,

made it seem as though I was really off-base and was wasting my time. And I said, 'Ralph, I want to go there now, I want to go there after everybody leaves. I want to photograph what it's like to be in a town without children.' Well, when I said that, he rocked back in his chair, put his hands behind his head and he closed his eyes, and I could see that he was visualising the potential story that I had just conjured up. And he called the editor of the Humanities Department of *Life Magazine* who would be responsible for a story of this type, and he... the editor came in and he said, 'You know Chuck?' 'Yes I do'. He said, 'Chuck wants to go to Aberfan and he wants to do a story of a town without children.' And he said, 'That works for me.' And he turned around and left, and I just sat at the edge of my chair. And Ralph said, 'Chuck, go.' And so I went. So I flew to London, I met the bureau chief of *Life Magazine*, Jim Hicks, who eventually would write the story. Later, when you go outside, on the wall, you'll see the whole story that was printed: my photos and Jim Hicks' story. And then, we got in Jim's car and he drove us to Aberfan. We drove into the village on October 29<sup>th</sup>. Well, I can't tell you what an impression it made on me at the time. One thinks of Welsh mining villages as grimy and dirty and... all that. And that's exactly what I saw. I saw a town that was dirty, slurry all over the place. It was so depressing I thought I could second-guess myself and say, 'What the hell am I doing here?' And then we went looking around, stopped someone on the street, and say, 'Is there a hotel in this town?' and they said, 'Yeah, go down to the Mac, the Mackintosh.' And so we did. I bring this picture up first because my photographer buddies here would appreciate it. This is an accidental photograph, but it's really a special picture. Just look at this kid, he's a survivor. Why is it accidental? You know, when you have a camera, I'm going to step aside for a second... when you have a camera and you load the film in the camera, you pound off several frames to make sure you get onto a raw piece of film that wasn't exposed while loading. And this was a frame that came accidentally as I was winding my film, loading my camera. I discovered it years later, this little boy is watching me do this. But this set the tone for what I was about to see.

Okay. Alright, this is the Mackintosh. It says Mackintosh Hotel, but this was a misnomer, actually [laughter]. When I went in, we wound up getting a room upstairs. That's the room at the top, the garret. Ironically, those windows faced out on the disaster site. That's Stanley. He was the owner, a publican. I took his picture right away before he got the chance to tell me, 'Stop' [laughter]. Well, I have to tell you something, we've all heard about the photographers and reporters who came into Aberfan doing the story, and what a bad taste some of them left, well he had this bad taste. And basically, his attitude was, what the hell are you doing here? Get out. We asked him where we could stay, he was sending us up to Merthyr Tydfil. But fortunately, his wife Pearl, she stopped and she said, 'Wait a minute – these guys are yanks. [laughter] We have a place upstairs if you want to sleep, we've got two beds, there's no heat, but it's yours if you want it,'

and so we did. That's Jim Hicks, right there. He turned out to be a really good buddy. He's passed on now, I wish he was around so that I could tell him about this. Now, here I am in that room. We went up to Merthyr and we bought boots. And we bought over-jackets and wools, this had no... we bought three heaters, electric heaters. We plugged them all in and blew the fuses in the whole place [laughter]. Looking out the window, this is on a snowy day in December, you could see the... That's the senior school. That's Moy Road, looking straight up toward the disaster site. And you can't see the tips because they're sort of in the fog. That's what the senior school looked like after the slide came down. So there I am in the room. Jim Hicks went back to London and left me alone. I sat there trying to figure out what kind of story I really wanted to do.

I had just seen one child. Like, in three days, I didn't see any kids. And I started to think, wait, maybe I wasn't making up a story. Maybe this really was a village without children. Look at this here... That's my little desk with my wife and my baby. I smoke, that's my ashtray. That's one of my cameras; that's another camera, here. There I am in the bathroom of the Mackintosh, all dressed up ready to go work. So I wandered around; this is my first view of the disaster site. People just kept coming. There was parades of people just coming to look. That's the senior school, some guy looking in there. You know what I like about this picture best of all? It's this barrel over here, see that? I know it seems weird but it sort of stands out and it's crushed. It has a meaning. Lookie Lous, people coming from out of the village, checking out what happened. There's my first little kid I saw, standing there looking at where the school was, like wow, there's the school. This was a coal delivery truck. I found out that the miners, each were permitted one bag of coal every week, and so this was the guy who did it. Here he is loading up the coal, carrying... then I got up on the truck, and lo and behold, this little guy comes along [laughter]. That was a perfect picture for me. He had white hair and a white airplane, and.... turns out, that's Jeffrey Edwards, sitting right here. [Laughter] I didn't know it at the time, but he was the first survivor I photographed. To me, it was just a kid on the street. I don't know why I'm looking up there, I have a picture right here [laughter]. This is Moy Road, right across the street from the Mackintosh. This little girl was standing there and, to me, it's a very symbolic picture. Little girl survivor, Moy Road, senior school, tips. I tried to get the tips in as many pictures as I could. This turned out to be a grab shot; I walked past this playground and suddenly realised, there's only one kid playing in this playground, all by himself! Look at him. I mean, that's like the saddest picture I've got.

This is Ronnie Davies. So I meet this kid, walking his dog. He's very nice. I talked to him about what had happened, where he was. He told me he got out, he was rescued or got out, I don't... I think he was in senior school. He lost his brother, and took me to where his house had been. So he's standing here in the side of his house. He and his family were living in a caravan up

on the side of the hill by the cemetery. So here he is; I took his picture. This is pretty emotional to me, this whole thing. He had tremendous guilt. He wanted to know why his brother died and not him. He must have asked me that three or four times. I had to give him an answer so I said, 'Look, maybe God has a plan for you here on earth. You were saved. So what you have to do now, you have to live a really good life. Your brother would want that.' Well, I didn't see Ronnie Davies for 40 years, and when I saw him 40 years later, I went into his house in Aberfan. His wife was there, and she came to me, she put her arms around. She said, 'Ronnie Davies never talks about the disaster but he talks about you.' You know, every family we photographed we visited on Christmas day. And Jim and I, and my wife Mary, and his fiancée, delivered Christmas presents to all these families from *Life Magazine*: thank yous. We gave Ronnie Davies a table-top soccer game. To tell you the truth, 40 years later, I didn't remember ever having given him that. But do you know that he went in the back room of his house and he came out with this game, almost perfect condition. And he opened it up, and he said that, 'I never forget you...', he said, ... 'what you said.. you told me to live a good life and I have.' You know, this story had a tremendous effect on me.

This is Sheryl Needs, this little girl, is standing outside the temporary school where they set up so the kids could go to school and play and start to get back into life normally. She refused to go in. Every day, she stood outside and cried, so finally I decided to talk to her mother and asked if I could come and visit, and she said, 'Okay', so I went. And I met her dad. She would not leave her father's side. She was just devastated; she lost her brother and she almost died herself. Here she is on Christmas day though, with this... what we call the Vitrola, we got her a little record player. Kids are all running home from temporary school in Nixonville and that's David Davies. So I followed him home; I met his dad, whose name was Llew Davies, was Llew Davies, who turned out to be sort of one of the first guys on the scene of the disaster, was digging, looking for his kid. In fact, according to the story I heard now, he approached Jeffrey, who was trapped, and he said, 'Did you see David?' and Jeffrey said, 'He ran out.' And so he went out looking for him and he couldn't find him. It turned out that David didn't run out, David was trapped in the slurry just like the others, and when he was dug out, they thought he was dead. He wasn't breathing, he was covered completely with mud and grime, and they carried him out and laid him down with the bodies, and a nurse came by with a doctor and they looked at him and they said, 'This boy's alive!' And they picked him up and rushed him to the hospital. So here I was with him and that's his mom, asking him to get dressed. For me, I mean, you know, street... play clothes. There he is [laughter].

Melanie Doel: He's still the same.

Chuck Rapoport: His family owned a farm just outside of Aberfan and so David took me on a tour of the farm. Here he is sitting there on this big tree and in the field, looking up towards the tip that almost killed him. And there he is, eleven years ago in Aberystwyth when I had the exhibition. I was happy I found these pictures so that I can connect some of these people today from then. This is Sheila Lewis, this is the woman you saw in that film clip up here, who talked about her daughter. So I'm wandering down the street, same street that I photographed David on, Nixonville, and these kids are coming back. She was looking for her son, Gwyn. That's him, that's him right there. Right there, that little kid. I thought it was a really poignant photo. I took this picture and then I'd started to talk to her and we went inside the house, and she said her daughter, Sharon, had died and that she had written a poem. Sharon had gone to school because it was the last day of school for that term; she left her work book home so she had her work book, and she wrote a poem. I'm going to read you the poem that she wrote. Bear with me a second. So she's holding this book and she looks at me, and she says, 'Grief it seems, may be all a lot, grief at times seems all we've got, I must not die and join her yet, my husband needs me, my children would fret.' It's a simple poem, but it's meaningful. What I found meaningful was: 'I must not die and join her yet', because this was the feeling that a lot of these people had, a lot of these mothers, especially, like they wanted to throw themselves into the grave with their kids. There's Sheila Lewis up at Aberystwyth eleven years ago, looking at these photographs.

Then I went up in the meadows above the cemetery. The cemetery was a very special place and I hesitated to go to the cemetery because I knew that it was sacred ground and that it was a place I may not be welcome. So about a month after I was there, I went up in this meadow and saw these boys playing, and you could see people in the cemetery, visiting, alone. I decided, finally, to go into the cemetery. I met a grave digger and his assistant. When I saw this picture, in the rain, the mother visiting the grave, with the tips in the background, this little girl coming down the hill, this family. They buried her child in a separate place, not in the mass grave with the others. And then there were these very, very poignant photos of moms all coming up and visiting the graves. These high school girls came up, I don't know where they came from but they... looks like they had uniforms on. Now this woman, I saw her maybe four, five times. She came every day. She told me she came actually twice a day, and she would mess around with the flowers, and then she looked at me one day and she said, 'It's like I'm brushing her hair every morning,' she said, 'every day.' That's her sister right there with her two babies.

This is probably one of the most tragic stories of all. John Collins, this man was working in Cardiff the day of the disaster, got a phone call to come back, 'Terrible things have happened.' So he came back up to Aberfan only to find that his house was demolished, disappeared. And he looked around for his family and then eventually found out that his whole family were

disappeared as well. His oldest son, who was a high school boy, in senior school, was sitting on a wall with a couple of friends when this avalanche of mud and rock came roaring down the hill, and the other two ran toward the school, but his son ran toward home. He wanted to warn his mom, but he got caught up in it and killed, and his mom was there in the house, and the house was destroyed and she was killed. And his little brother was in Pantglas school, and he was killed. We went to see John Collins. I kept my camera hidden under my coat as we interviewed him. When I brought my camera out and I looked at him, 'cause I was really afraid to take his picture. And finally, he nodded to me, and I said, 'Do you mind if I photograph you?' and he said, 'Oh, do your job', he said. He was terrific. This is in his father's house, so John says, 'I've got nothing left. No clothes, no pictures, nothing. It's like my life never existed.' But you know, you know the old saying, life goes on? It does. So 2010, I got an email from a woman named Bernice Collins and she says, 'Mr Rapoport, you don't know me but I'm John Collins' daughter from his second wife.' I wrote back, I said, 'Wow, this is incredible. I didn't know he got married.' She goes, 'Yeah.' She said, 'But you know, the really wonderful thing about it is that my mom, who's American, my mom saw your picture of John Collins in *Life Magazine* and decided to go and see him!' [laughter]. My picture of John Collins turned this guy's life around! And it's all because he said, 'do your job'! That's the power of photography. It's the power of journalism when it's really done right.

Okay, I have to admit, I lived over a pub [laughter]. There wasn't much to do, you know, and so I came down every night and joined these guys. So I had several interesting experiences. First of all, the young miners, they thought I was an exotic guy from the Bronx, and so they befriended me. They taught me to play darts, they took my money [laughter], but after a while, I got well enough to take theirs, and that turned out to be very interesting because the last day I was in Aberfan, on Christmas day, I went to the pub to say goodbye to all my buddies, and they presented me with a set of darts and a handmade case so that I could go home and continue. And they asked me to come back, 'cause they wanted to get their money back [laughter]. But I digress, because look at this. Wherever I looked in the bar, there was always somebody who had what is referred to like the thousand-yard stare or, you know, they just would suddenly fall into some sort of grieving moment that just would be fleeting, it may only last two seconds or five seconds. Something happened to them, flashbacks or a thought. And it would change their whole visage.

This is interesting, these guys are not happy with me being there. This was before I made friends with everybody, so it's like, 'What the hell is he doing here?' This was the scariest part of my trip to Aberfan. I took this picture of these guys, and the guy in the middle of that picture was looking at me, he's not really smiling. He's not really happy to see me. His name is Dai George, Dai George from Merthyr. Interesting story, Dai George worked on

a road crew for the... what are they called, the council, the county? They were fixing the road right out in front of the Mack when the slide happened. They literally, the crew, these guys, were literally the first people on the scene. They dug out somebody immediately who had come down in the slide and just their arm was sticking out. That was Dai George, and I have a picture of the... one of the crew that he was with later, you'll see. Anyway, he's looking at me here. Moments after I took this picture, a few of my young miner friends came over to me and they said, 'Chuck, you'd better get out of here.' And I said 'What, what's the matter?' and they said, 'Dai George over there wants to punch you out.' I said 'Why?' He said 'I don't know,' he said, 'I wouldn't stop to ask,' he said, 'Just get out. He's the toughest guy in the valley.' So he took me into the parlour next door, and they told me, they said, 'You know, every year, a carnival comes to the area, and in the carnival is a boxing ring and the boxer has a promoter and there is this guy who's a boxer and he challenges anybody to last one round with this guy. And you get ten pounds if he can last one round. Dai George has beaten that guy up every time [laughter] that the promoter won't let him in the ring anymore!' [Laughter] Well, this is where I became the most courageous Chuck Rapoport of my life, because I said to them, 'You know, I can't leave, I can't run, it's going to stop everything that I'm doing, and I'll lose faith with everybody in the bar. I'll have to go and make friends with him.' And so I went back out, I brought him over a pint and I sat the pint down. He wouldn't... I wanted to sit down on a chair and he wouldn't allow me. And he cursed me out with every curse word in the book, and again, told me to leave. And I told him that I was not what he thought I was. I said, 'I'm not a reporter, I'm not here for doing a story like other guys did. I said, I'm a poet with a camera.' Well, he looked at me, he said, 'You hear him? He's a fuckin' poet!' He said, 'What do you know about poetry?' and then another guy said, 'You know, this is the land of poets!' So I said, 'I know.' I said, 'I know it is.' 'Well, if you know poetry, say something in... say some poetry for us.' Well, thank God for Ohio University English course [laughter], Dylan Thomas [laughter]. So I looked at them and I said, 'Now, as I was young and easy under the apple bough about the lilted house and happy as the grass was green, the night above the dingle starry...' suddenly another guy in the bar finished what I'm saying [laughter]. That was it, that's all it took. So Dai George told me to sit down. We drank, and then he looked at me and he said, 'Chuck, if anybody gives you any trouble....' [laughter], '...you tell them Dai George is your body guard.' And that was my Dai George story. Dai George was nice enough to take me up to Merthyr to a dance. He said, 'You're going to love this dance.' So we go up there, I walk into a room, and there are 25 women sitting on one side of the room, [laughter], 25 men sitting on the other, and they're all getting drunk, and I'm sitting there saying, 'Why doesn't anybody dance?' [laughter]. He said, 'They will, later.' Well I told him, 'You'd better take me back.'

So this is... I think his name is John Davies. John Davies' son Paul was killed in the school. So it was his only son, and according to what I found out, Paul would come from school, pick up his dad and take him home, every day, from school. Now, no Paul. So John just sat there until closing time. It was pretty sad.

These are my buddies. What I loved about some of these guys is they got dressed up to come to the pub. Now, this was the other man in Dai George's crew. So he worked all day on the pile. I was told that he and Dai George dug and dug and dug and then more people came and the miners came and the trucks came and the firemen came, but these guys were there from the moment the slide happened until they could no longer lift their arms. And this man, unlike Dai George, who was able to sit, drink and communicate, this man got drunk every night, and he got up and he danced. You know what he's dancing to here, I can tell you. [Sings] 'It's not unusual to be sad for anyone' – Tom Jones! You know, about ten times I was told by these guys, 'You know, Tom Jones, he comes from Pontypridd, right down the road here. He used to come here to the Conservative Club and sing all the time.' Also, this guy, he got drunk, he took off his shirt. I brought a copy of *Life Magazine* with me, the one that Ralph Graves said that they were putting together, and I showed it to the men and they really liked it.

This was a great picture, I love this picture. Because the pub looked out on the disaster site, these guys would go up to the window and stare out there. Look at this guy's face. He's an old miner, retired. While he's looking out there, he's saying to me, 'I dug that slur... what do they call it, waste, you know. I dug it', he said. 'I put it up there. I did.' Talk about guilt. These miners had a lot of guilt. That's that thousand-yard stare I talk about. Then they started to want me to take their picture. 'Take my picture, Chuck', he said. 'Take my picture'. You can see they had a few drinks. Life started to change. I was there six weeks, by the sixth week... That's the publican and Pearl, Stan and Pearl, dancing.

Then we went out, decided to go over to the mine and check out the miners. Here they are coming up. One mile deep, they were. Jim Hicks and I went down. That was the scariest time of my... I'll tell you. You can't take pictures when you're down there, it's like pitch black. Then I went and visited the site again, I decided to go up to the top of tip number seven, so here I am with the guys who were there when it happened. See the rail here, this rail was broken. This is exactly the place where the tip separated and fell. And this guy was telling me how he was there with a group of people and they actually saw the tip break away and fall down, they saw it going down. They never thought it would reach the village, but it did. That's what it looked like from... give you some perspective. That's the Mack, right there, the hotel. That's my room up there.

This, I thought, was the first bride after the disaster. I've subsequently learned that there was another wedding a day after the disaster, which we won't talk about because it's so weird. But this is Denise Hughes, or Denny. So I got permission to photograph the wedding, which was a good deal for them, because *Life Magazine* gave them a beautiful photo album of my pictures. When I went to the house when she was getting ready, look at this picture of this woman sitting there, contemplating the happiest day of her life, just a month and a half after the disaster. This is Reverend Hayes, Ken Hayes. He turned out to be a hero, 'cause he went up to the disaster site and it was chaotic. And it turned out that he took over, took charge. Somebody had to take charge, he took charge. He lost his son too, when this all was going on. And here he is conducting the wedding, a small wedding in this church. Actually, it wasn't the church of these people, because their church was... had been messed up by the mortuary business. You know, you've got to take a look at this woman's face which had this bride looking at her [laughs]. I don't know if you can see it, but it's almost like she's saying, 'Yeah, you're going to be good, forever, right?' [Laughter] Here they are out there, ready to go on their honeymoon. This is a really good shot, I got everything I needed, including the tips. There they are, forty years later. Unfortunately, the husband died a couple of years ago. Gerwyn is his name. And I'm going to see Denny, Denise, I'm going to see her on Monday.

Then we had the first child born in Aberfan after the disaster, I asked around a pub and I said, 'Does anybody know of any babies that are being born?' and they put me onto these people, which was one of the greatest coincidences of a photographer's life. Why? Because they lived on Cottrell street, and Cottrell street was parallel to Aberfan Road and parallel to the road that looks up on the disaster. Now, they lived on the outside street, so there would be buildings across the way from them that would block the view of the tips. But this one house, where this child was born, was on the street that faced another street, so you could actually look up the street. There, you see? You can look... look through the curtain window and you can see the street that goes all the way up to the tips. You'll see this in the *Life Magazine* spread, they said, 'in the shadow of the tips, new life is born'. That's the street, and there's the boy. I think his name is Phil Rhys, he's playing by himself. That's one of the things I noticed when I was there; kids playing by themselves. This is kind of like the pay-off, but life goes on. These are the kids outside the temporary school. They saw I was taking pictures so they all rushed me to get their picture taken, and I obliged.

That's me in Aberfan, 29 years old. In some ways, not knowing what the hell I was doing, but somehow my photographic skills saw me through. There are times now, I even said to my wife the other day, 'I don't know how I had the guts to do this, and the courage, you know, to go and do this and not think that I would fail'; 'cause I very easily could have failed but I didn't. *Life Magazine* was really happy with what I did. So that's the end of

the pictures, but I just want to say to finish this off, my philosophical takeaway from having asked for this assignment and having been sent into that emotional turmoil and the utter feeling of grief and hopelessness, I did not return to Aberfan until 2003, and the village looked entirely different. Mary and I drove in. I rented a car and we drove in. It was all green, and there were flowers and flower pots outside every window. The town looked like a beautiful little town, nothing like I had imagined or remembered. But I'm going to leave you with one quote from Marty Rubin: 'Morning will come, it has no choice.' Thank you. [applause]

Melanie Doel: Well, in all my forty years of covering stories from Aberfan, I've never come across anything so extraordinary, so thank you Chuck. Thank you for sharing what's such an emotional journey, and thank God you did go there, because we wouldn't have had that. It's a fitting tribute that this exhibition, these photos and Chuck's lovely story, will now be going back to the Merthyr valley for everybody to see. It is going to be emotional, those memories are going to be quite hard for people to take, but today we heard that emotion pouring out this morning from people who'd never talked about their experiences before today, and I'm sure, Chuck, this adventure, this experience, will be just as cathartic for them too, so thank you so much.

Chuck Rapoport: I think the people should know. I had an exhibition in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, eleven years ago, and I let them know that all these photos and the negatives are going to be donated to them on my death, because they belong to the people of Wales.

Mel: Thank you, I hope you were able to hear [applause].

[End of transcript]

## Suzanne Grover & Tony Curtis

Melanie

Doel: I'd now like to introduce Suzanne Grover, who is from Aberfan, and has been putting together the exhibition and in fact, organising for some extraordinary poems to be read too at Merthyr.

Suzanne

Grover: I'm just going to talk very, very briefly about Chuck's forthcoming exhibition at Red House in Merthyr. As Melanie said, I was born and brought up in Aberfan. I attended Pantglas school before going on to Quaker's Yard Grammar School. My memories of the disaster are, as a 17-year-old, very vivid, and everlasting, as lots of other people have said today. In 2005, I went up to Aberystwyth to see Chuck's exhibition at the National Library and I found it profoundly moving. But not only that, it also transported me back to another time, because Chuck's work is also a remarkable social and historical record of life at that time.

In April this year, a couple of Chuck's Aberfan photographs appeared on a Facebook page, and I wrote a comment. I said, 'Wouldn't it be good if we could get Chuck's photographs exhibited in South Wales for the anniversary.' And to my surprise, Chuck replied, saying, 'I'd like to do this. Is there any way you can help to make it happen?' Well, I think about 200 conversations and emails later between Chuck and I, and five months later, we have a new exhibition, a new digital exhibition which includes not only Chuck's original photographs, but also many previously unseen images. It has Chuck's narration, it has music, and as today, it is Chuck's personal and very emotive story of six weeks in a community of survivors. I feel very privileged to have

been given the opportunity to work with Chuck and to make this exhibition happen. We hope that the creation of a digital exhibition will enable new audiences and generations to learn about the disaster and its impact, and also to acknowledge the strength of the community in the face of this dreadful event. We also hope that it will provide meaningful opportunities for remembrance and for reflection.

The flyers are outside on the table for the exhibition, with the dates. It will run from 13<sup>th</sup> September until 29<sup>th</sup> October. We also have two special events: next Monday 12<sup>th</sup> September, we have the opening event in the Red House Theatre, which will feature a large screen showing of Chuck's new presentation, and we're privileged to have Chuck with us to launch the opening of the exhibition. Our second event is a bilingual poetry event, with a second opportunity to see Chuck's presentation on the large screen, and we have two Welsh poets, Tony Curtis, who is with us, and Grahame Davies, who will read the poems that they have written especially in response to the photographs for this exhibition. And I'm going to hand over now to Tony, who is going to read one of his poems and say a little bit about the poetry component.

Tony Curtis: I'm here really because of two people, and they're both present. Suzanne, with vision and enthusiasm, approached me. We've known each other for a number of years. We live in Barry and are involved in some arts support work there, and she introduced me to Chuck's work. It seemed to me that that was asking to be written about, in a way. I'm one of those poets who has gone through the whole confessional thing and, you know, family members dying, all that stuff that you're

supposed to write, and come out the other side. And what I do now, in a... almost a... it's not solely what I do, but what I do is perform that kind of bardic role in a way. And I think my fellow poet, Welsh language poet Grahame Davies, would say the same, that in Wales, you know, we're the only country that's got a national anthem that doesn't talk about guns. It talks about songs and poetry. I don't think... correct me, I don't think there's another actual anthem that does that. And if you're a poet in Wales, you don't just look at your navel, you look around you. Don't just voice your own issues, your own confessional concerns, you try and voice things for your wider community, for your family, for your wider community, and for your nation. I think both Grahame and I would feel that we wanted to do that.

I'm from West Wales and didn't think I knew much about coal, until of course I discovered that one of my family was a miner, at least one was a miner, in the Pembrokeshire coalfield. And on another occasion, I would want to remind people that the coalfield goes under Carmarthen Bay and goes out as far as Newgale in Pembrokeshire. So in a sense, anywhere in South Wales, you are in touch with coal, with the stuff as well as its legacy. In '97, I did an anthology for Seren called *Coal*, a mining anthology for... the whole mining experience in Britain, which Tony Benn did a foreword for. Grahame Davies and I worked on three projects; we worked on a project four years ago called *Common Sense*, and the 'common' in the 'Common Sense' was 'Gelligaer' and if you don't know Gelligaer common, there is part of a Welsh legacy that goes from prehistory through the Romans down to post-industrial. And the clanking of coal trucks, that one still hears from Gelligaer common are the coal trucks that clank not far away from

Suzanne's house in Barry on their way to the power station. Coal hasn't gone, it's still there. It performs a different function and is mined in a different way, but it's still part of who we are. We're still breathing it in.

I've done a number of poems about the major events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Holocaust, the Second World War – neither of which I was part of. I was born in '46, but again, I think that's something that... I think we need to discuss that through the rest of the afternoon, really. To what extent can you come to an event which you're not actually involved in and pay homage to that event, be truthful about that event, without just being a disaster tourist, without taking advantage of that event? What Grahame and I have done, what we'll present, and I hope what will be a video installation, both at the University of Wales and other places, and hopefully in California, with Chuck's kind permission, is called *Aberfan Voices*. We're trying to voice the experience of others and we try to be truthful about that. I have a poem which deals with the little boy holding the aeroplane, and I am completely nonplussed by the fact that the little boy is sitting in front of me [laughter], and so I'm not going to read that one [laughter]. This is 'Where I Was'.

Where were you when the old king died?  
Walking to the pithead with my butties.  
Where were you for 'peace in our time'?  
In the parlour with Delyth and her mother's new  
wireless.  
Where were you when the bombers came?  
Holding the hand of a Bevin boy in the shivering dark.  
Where were you when the war ended?

In the bath before our fire, hearing the church bells.  
Where were you for the coronation?  
A mile underneath her kingdom.  
Where were you when they put a dog in space?  
Down here.  
What about the missiles in Cuba?  
We was well out of reach in the Merthyr Vale, already  
buried.  
Where were you when the president was shot?  
Checking my lamp and opening my snap.  
Where were you when you heard about Aberfan?  
Mid-shift, working at the face, blinded with dust that the  
tears began to wash, and the mandrel dropped as my  
fists clenched, and I heard the distant howls of men.

Thank you. [applause]

## Moving On - Gaynor Madgwick

Melanie

Doel: Okay, well I'd like to invite Gaynor up onto the stage now. We're going to try and do this sitting down without mics. If you can't hear us at the back, tell us and we'll come over here, but...

Gaynor

Madgwick: By the way, I am nervous, so forgive me. I'm not normally, but I am.

Melanie

Doel: She'll be fine. When I first started covering stories in Aberfan, I came across a remarkable woman about the same age as me. She'll tell you all. She's two years younger. But Gaynor Madgwick had survived the disaster while two of her siblings did not, sadly. We soon struck up a friendship that has survived decades and I suppose it's evolved. We've both moved on as we've had families and our families have got to know each other, and quite frankly, if I don't get invited to a family party of Gaynor's, I get quite upset. And a few years ago, she came to me and just said, 'I've got this germ of an idea for a book. Can we sit down and talk about it? And from that germ of an idea, sort of hatched in our cars, and around my kitchen table, and in your lounge. She's now published *Aberfan – A story of Survival, Love and Community*. And it's true to say, I think, Gaynor, when we did those early interviews, one of which was in the palatial lounge of Lord Snowdon's Mayfair home, where we sat there just in awe of everything, since we've started... we did some of the interviews together. We've laughed and cried, probably in equal proportions. But the thing that made me most angry about this book, and if you get a chance, it is on sale here. We went to interview the former Welsh secretary, Ron Davies, at his

home. And one of the questions we really, really wanted to ask was how difficult it was to get the fund back to Aberfan, because people were still really angry and felt really bereaved and grief-stricken that the money had been given away and they'd never been able to get it back. And we asked Ron Davies, so... 'You know, when he went into office...' and he had to approach the prime minister then to get the money back, Tony Blair, I think it was, gave it back. And we said, 'How difficult was it was it to persuade them to give our money back after all those years?' And he went, 'It wasn't at all – I just asked and they gave it back.' And that made me more angry than anything at the time. But Gaynor, I'd like to start by asking you, why did you have to write this book? What was in you that had to come out?

Gaynor

Madgwick: I think for me, anyone that knows my previous story, obviously surviving Aberfan, living in a household where you've lost siblings, being a survivor yourself and going through the years. Again, we've touched on it, there's no counselling or anything. And as a young child, I started to write a journal, and that journal became a diary that I kept in my family. I never shared it with anyone, not even my family, and I didn't realise then in hindsight that journal would have come a book in 50 years' time. But people then, it wasn't until Melanie came around the doors for her little book called *Is it Raining in Aberfan*, there was only a small section put from that book into her book, and following that, the people from everywhere were asking me, could they read my diary because they wanted to know what actually happened that day, because no-one spoke. No-one spoke about what happened that day. So I decided then to publish that as a community book, again, at where I was then, I was 35 years of age, so there was

quite a distance travelled from when I was a child. So I looked back 35 years of age at where I've travelled on that journey as a child, looking back what I'd written, and where I'd actually travelled. And again, I had aspirations and ambitions. And that community booklet went out; it wasn't marketed in the right way, it wasn't... well, it was a bit of a disaster in the marketing and it's only sold out... the publishers lost their template that it was on, so I just let it go. People were still asking me 'til... oh God, right up to this day, where can I get hold of that other book. They sell them on Amazon, £60, which is a ridiculous price. So as years go on, I realise that my story was... I have moved on, I have moved on, and I needed to finish the story because for me, having grandchildren of my own, five, and I wanted to share the stories of myself, my family, but twist the story on its head, so instead of me, I wanted to ask everybody that was on my journey with me how *they* felt at the time, how they perceived myself at the time, and how they were in general feeling, and that was anything from the bereaved to my siblings, to my mother, to my father. And again, I asked the permission of my family, 'Could I finish it?' Because without their support, I would have never finished that book. If they didn't think it was appropriate to finish, although I wanted to do it, I would have said no. So it was important to me to finish that book, to get that closure, to ask those questions and to share that with everybody else that wanted to read the story in full. And it didn't become too apparent 'til my dad was very ill, and he nearly lost his life on several occasions in hospital, and then sadly, he's passed on a year and gone now. But it drove me to finish that book in his memory. I needed his voice in that book because he was chairman of the Memorial Committee, he's... I lived in a home where there was politics, politics,

fighting, fighting, and it had a detrimental impact on myself, on my family and everyone else in the village. So I seen a first-hand account from both elements, and I captured that in the book. Dad's voice is right throughout the book and I'm so, so glad that I finished it and, God love him, he knows all about it. And publishing it now, the feedback has been absolutely overwhelming, the community have been so supportive.

Melanie

Doel:

So Gaynor, you've mentioned your dad, otherwise I wouldn't have brought this up, because it's been so painful. You managed to get your dad's story down just before he died, I know. And I suppose the one thing that remembering the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary means is that people like your dad will not be here to tell that story and to tell the world what happened in the future. So as each anniversary comes, I suppose we're *losing* the story of what happened.

Gaynor

Madgwick:

Yes. Like I say, we have all moved on and lots of people in this room have got personal accounts. We've all moved on physically. Mentally, we don't move on, because times like the 50<sup>th</sup>, wounds are opened, scars and opened, and the emotion, you cannot not show that emotion 50 years on. For many in the village, it's every day, they live it every day. Because I'm very much community and I'm always in the community chatting to elderly, to youngsters, you know, only yesterday I spoke to two elderly people in Moy Road, you know. For them, it's still very, very painful. They are dreading the 50<sup>th</sup>, they are dreading it, because we are all here because of the 50<sup>th</sup> and from Aberfan, each and every one of them has a story linked to Aberfan to get their story out. And

that lead-up, right, there are people at the moment, one person in particular has actually seen a psychiatrist every week because she cannot face the 50<sup>th</sup>, because she knows that it's going to open up so many wounds, she doesn't know how to deal with it. I had to literally counsel that girl two weeks ago, broken-hearted on the phone. She don't know how she's going to cope, you know. And stories have to be told, but it's very difficult for those in the community when it's going to be there in your face.

Melanie

Doel:

So Gaynor, without the media, it's quite clear from what we've heard today of course, nobody would have really truly known what happened, who was to blame, what went wrong and the agonies you went through. So there's obviously a place for the media to keep the story of Aberfan alive, but you've touched on how difficult people are facing that anniversary. How does the media impact on that, and the fact that you've had so many media there in the last... not just weeks and months, really the last year?

Gaynor

Madgwick:

The last year. Media coverage, obviously, you have to have your stories, you are doing your job. I've heard that so many times today, you're doing your job. And, you know, even some of the young journalists coming through the ranks, they have to prove that they are worthy a journalist, so they... some of them I've found, personally, haven't got that skill, they haven't got that empathy. One journalist asked me about Aberfan, he actually had the wrong date, so for me, that was just recently, mind, you know. 'Oh, I remember that day, I've been reading about it, it was so-and-so, so-and-so...' In fact, it was the wrong date, wrong week. And [laughs], that, for me, I thought, well. I just can't believe this. You

haven't done your homework, you're young and you're asking me to tell and share my story, even though you had the wrong information to start with, you know. So the empathy is very important, Melanie's been very fortunate because she's been there in the community, she's been there, she's been... for our family, you know. She's very much in the family. People trust Melanie. It's very difficult to say what you want to say; I've been the other end where I've seen editing of documentaries, radio and everything. They're always, and I shouldn't say this, there's... 80 percent of that story is negative. It's always on the pictures, it's always on about the anniversary. I would love to see a programme just on Aberfan, on moving on. No pictures... no pictures from that day. I don't know of anybody that's done that, and I think that would be so welcoming in for people in the community to see something very, very positive.

Melanie

Doel: Thank you, Gaynor, those are really strong messages to the people who are listening today. Moving on a little bit now to Aberfan, and you've used the word 'Moving On' a lot yourself. How do you think the community itself is moving on – how do you see it as different over the last few years?

Gaynor

Madgwick: The community have moved on, and I always say, we are a community. Jeff will back this up. We are such a small-knit community, we are a family. You know, everybody knows everybody, you know. You know, your siblings, your aunties, your uncles. But moving on, physically, everyone's *had* to move on. They've not had a choice, you know. They've had to bear all the scars, move on. There was so much grief in the village that no one was singled out, so everybody was in the same boat, whether they'd lost a sibling, an aunt or an uncle. So

there was so much support emotionally, and this is from inside intelligence, from quite a lot of bereaved parents, emotionally, they have struggled to move on. Those who've kept silent, who still today do not want to talk about it, you have to respect that. But the anniversaries come around and those scars and wounds are opened. But, emotionally, I don't think you can hundred per cent move on because of the constant reminders, and you know, there are certain points in your life where you cannot forget, because it's there, it's there, it's to remind us all the time.

Melanie

Doel: And I know in my experience of programme making and news covering that many people, and some... many people in this room that I've interviewed today, want to keep telling that story. They need it to be told.

Gaynor

Madgwick: Yes, they need it to be told. And it's... for me, personally, it's been a very difficult journey 'cause I've always been a very vocal person and I want people to remember. I want people to tell their stories. Since the book, people have come on to me and said, 'Oh, is it too late? Can I have my story told?' And I could write another book, because so many people have told me their personal accounts. There's some horrific accounts since the book; I could write another book on just those stories alone. So it has encouraged people more to talk. And because people are now in their '70s, '80s, some in their '90s still alive, they want to tell their story because they know there's... an end is coming. You know, there's an end coming for me. It has to be told, it has to be remembered, but remembered appropriately in many years to come. We don't want people to forget. We don't want the graves to end up all rubble and no one

looking after them. People need to remember, you know, they do.

Melanie

Doel: Having looked at some of the content of the programmes that will come out of the next few weeks, it does seem that producers have taken great care to be fresh and to do something different, which I'm sure helps. What do you think should happen after the 50<sup>th</sup>?

Gaynor

Madgwick: After the 50<sup>th</sup>, I think the lead up to the 50<sup>th</sup> again is starting to open a lot of wounds already. People locally have become very apprehensive of programmes, and I can tell... and I won't say who, but there are a few people who have taken part in documentaries at the moment are regretting what they've done. That's... that's personal information have come to me from people. They are regretting what they've done, they have a fear of the unknown, they don't know what that documentary is going to consist of, how they are going to show that on TV, and they are very, very apprehensive. And they are sorry that they've said yes to TV programmes. And I think after the build-up, and after the actual anniversary, which is going to be traumatic, because there's something on every weekend, I think it'll be time for people to go back to their normal, everyday living and that memory, the physical things will remain but the memory will always be there.

Melanie

Doel: Let's hope that their experience will be good and I'm sure a lot of work has been put into it to make sure that it is, and let's hope that comes through. So for you, Gaynor, instead of relying on... somebody like me, I have to say, every time I came to interview you or Jeff or people in this room, I often thought, you know, why am

I doing this? Why am I telling this story second hand? Can I possibly understand what these people are and have gone through? So for you to have written the book yourself, has that helped... how has that helped you?

Gaynor

Madgwick: It's helped me enormously. There were a lot of questions that, for me, in the back of my subconscious mind, I needed to know, especially from my family's perspective, because there were a lot of things brought to my attention I didn't even know, you know, and I needed to have that closure, to have some answers. You know, how were my family, how were my mother feeling? What were their perceptions of me as a child, and, you know, have I changed? How different was I, you know, what was I like before the disaster, what was I like after the disaster? You know, and the hurdles that my mam and dad had to come over, and my siblings as well, because no one talked. The same year, no one talked about it, not even our family. I was brought home from hospital, and that was it. You know, no one asked me how I was feeling, you know, and writing that book, I found out so many answers. It has helped me move on, definitely.

Melanie

Doel: It's hard to imagine what Aberfan would have been if this hadn't happened. Can you imagine what it would...?

Gaynor

Madgwick: Oh, it's a very difficult question because I've always said, personally, I would have loved to have had a twin, exactly like myself where I could have had that comparison of what would I have been like, you know, what life would have been like, you know, how would things have been different for me in my life. And then I could have had that comparison of, did I really, really change that much? How much did it really affect me?

Unfortunately, that's... you know, that's just something we can wish for. But, you know, Jeff will know and others will know in here, whatever, you have to move on physically. You have to deal with things. Lots of survivors, lots of bereaved, couldn't deal... they weren't strong enough. They died young, they died of a broken heart. You know, people were in psychiatric hospitals, people drank themselves to death, you know, that went on. But it takes courage to move on and I think the village on the whole, together, has had an awful lot of courage to get through every day.

Melanie

Doel:

Including yourself, Gaynor, and the people here. Finally, because I'd really like to ask some questions, I knew there would be plenty. What needs to be done for Aberfan now to help it move on? I know there have been a lot of schemes I've covered in stories – things that Jeff has instigated and lots of community schemes that have gone on. What needs to happen in Aberfan for you to get a move on?

Gaynor

Madgwick:

Oh, for me, I just think for me, it's just to continue being who I am. I've... like Jeff and many others, been involved in a lot of work which has helped me, you know. I've always looked after people going into work. I work for Barnardos. So I instil what was missing in my life into others. And I... if somebody asks me to tell them the story, I will tell them. You know, whether it's an old person or a young person. It's history, unfortunately, it's there, it has to be taught in schools. Local children who are coming through now, three, four, five years of age, they need to be told and they need to be told about their heritage. You know, 'Do not forget what happened here all those years ago.' It's respect, it's respect and I think that goes like for Jeff with all the work he's done

as well in projects, you know, and don't forget, we have the choir. You know, moving on is about the choir. It's in their voices. They've done charity work, 'cause they evolved from the disaster. The young wives. Well, young wives in heart, they're in their '80s. You know, they're still doing lots of work and charity work and promoting that they can move on. And I think you've got the football clubs coming through the ranks, you know. They're always struggling for funding, so, you know, I've been helping out now getting kits for them like goals and things like that 'cause they're struggling for funding, so those are our generations that we need to be looking after, because we will unfortunately all be gone. We won't be able to tell our stories no more.

Melanie

Doel: Gaynor, thank you so much, and I'm always inspired when I speak to you.

[End of transcript]

## 'Moving On' – Open Discussion

Melanie Doel: Can we just ask Chuck and can we ask Tony to come back on the stage and ask if there are any questions for any of them or for all of them, or indeed any comments as we end this session?

Q1: One of my interests is the *Titanic* disaster and just having listened to the people here today, there are an awful lot of parallels with that. The *Titanic* sailed from Southampton and there were 724 crew from Southampton, 529 of those died. So it's a bit what Jeff was talking about earlier this morning with why do we remember. It's something I'm studying in university, and it's that impact on a... concentrated impact, if you like, on specific local communities. When you have instances like war, death in those situations are almost expected. It's when you have something that's unexpected and it impacts so intensely on quite a small area or quite a small population, it's then that you have that, and then in the *Titanic*, there was a lot of sense of injustice depending on what class you were in. If you were a first-class passenger you were more likely to survive than a third-class child. Thirty-one percent of third-class children survived. So there's an awful lot of parallels there, and the idea of these cyclical anniversaries, it's something that's very prevalent in *Titanic*. It's had its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012 and I have to be careful in how I say this, but as the number of living survivors dwindles, I don't think the media as it is at the moment allows that community to sort of move on because as the anniversary got close to the centenary of the *Titanic*, there was more interest. Obviously, when the last survivor of the *Titanic* was alive there was intense interest in that lady and her stories. So, I don't think the state of the media is going to necessarily allow the community to move on in the way that they want.

Melanie Doel: Very... an interesting point, Gaynor.

Gaynor

Madgwick: It is an interesting point and you are right about there's not that many people who will tell their story to the media. And Jeff and I were promoting others and giving other contact details out to journalists to say, 'You know, this person may want to talk, this

person may want to talk,' because previously they didn't want to talk and we do know to date that quite a lot of people in the community have spoken for the first time, and that's encouraging for Jeff and I to hear, because you know, it's not a comp.... you will find, when you live in a community, you have to... what's the word.... face the media. But you also have to face people in the community. If they see your face on television, on the radio, on the newspaper, right, you know what it's like. They'll pick it up and say, 'Oh God, it's her again', you know. Or, 'It's him again', you know. But, we've encouraged lots of people to talk and it's... they've got to respect what we want to do, and this is why I... I respect them for not wanting to talk. But give them the opportunity to talk. But again, I think the media, it is difficult to move on with all this coverage that's coming up, it's going to be papers, newspaper, radio and everything like that. And some people will find that very offensive.

Melanie Doel: Thank you Gaynor. Another question?

Q2: We've said a lot earlier about local reporters being well placed to talk about stories. There's also been Shimon Attie coming in and then yourself, Chuck. I want to know why you think someone from the outside coming in can create successful work and portray a story and how you think you can make a difference to someone who's locally placed in the area?

Melanie Doel: It's a pity we didn't have that question earlier, because that would have been very interesting to focus.... Do you want to answer that, Chuck? What's the value of somebody from outside coming in, like yourself, like Shimon ten years ago, does it add value, does it... is it important, compared with the local coverage?

Chuck

Rapport: No, it's difficult for me, actually. First of all, I only can answer it from my own point of view. If another photographer had come from New York, it may have been a totally different sensibility. I pride myself on being an extremely sensitive person. Aberfan is not my only story. I've made many, many photo essay stories. I always empathise with the people, I'm always interested in my

subject. I don't come in as a pompous, you know, photographer for *Life Magazine*, you know. I work with this, a recorder... I think the advantage I had of coming to Aberfan was that I was dropped into a culture that I knew nothing about it and so my learning curve was incredibly steep, and so every moment, every day, hour, every minute, was so impactful on my soul that it drove me to take pictures. The camera became part of me and everything was new. Now, if I was a Welsh photographer from a mining valley, there were things that I may not have even have seen, just as I don't see things in Los Angeles where I live, where others would come and say, 'Oh, did you see... look at this!' you know. So I think that, yes, it's important that somebody could come in like that. I'm not saying that it should happen all the time, I'm just saying that there is an advantage to a stranger arriving and if their work is to observe and record, they have... they have... the whole world is open to them.

Melanie Doel: Thank you Chuck...

Tony Curtis: It's interesting.... I mean I was an undergraduate, my second year when Aberfan happened. Grahame Davies, my fellow poet, was a kid. Although he worked in Merthyr as a cub reporter for the 20<sup>th</sup> (anniversary) I think, yes. Neither of us wrote about that at the time, and in a way, Chuck's work needs no justification. You've seen how moving, how remarkable that is. But... [laughter] this is a love-in! They do that in Los Angeles. [Laughter]. But the photographs will inspire other people and have inspired us. I'm glad, as a starting out, you know, sproggy, wannabe poet in Swansea University in 1966 I didn't try and write about this. Jeff was saying that he still gets... over the years, he's got loads of people sending him poems. Thank goodness I didn't. Most of those will be awful. Maybe you think these are awful, but I mean... I think you need a certain distance from things, and like it or not, I don't think... moving on from this year is going to be interesting. But I think people are still going to revisit Aberfan, because you've got to accept, it's got a meaning greater than what happened there. And that always means a kind of mediation. You know, Karl Jenkins, doing the oratorio. People writing poems, Owen Sheers is doing a programme. I recorded this for Dai Smith, a radio programme.

And as an aside, when Dai and I were up at the cemetery a couple of weeks ago doing a recording with a radio producer, we could hear this noise of someone cutting grass or something. Well as you know, the children's graves don't have grass, they've got AstroTurf. And what it was was a drone being flown over Karl Jenkins and the camera crew over the graves. And our colleague up there was saying it was making a documentary and doing a panning shot. And unfortunately, dealing with Aberfan, dealing with the emotions at first hand or at second hand does require some mechanical intervention. And it must be awful for you to balance those two things.

Melanie Doel: Thank you. That's something I hadn't come across: the thought of the new technology being used and a drone going over the cemetery and something... something completely new. And things will change and develop and evolve. We've got room for one more question I think?

Q3: This problem of how catastrophe starts off as personal experience, personal trauma, moves on into memory and then maybe into myth, the whole processes of remembering and forgetting and who even denial that take place. And I've been speaking as a historian of genocide, I wonder if this perception also applies in your experience in Aberfan, but the critical linkage that not only sustains memory but also retains ownership of it is transmission from generation to generation and that, in particular, when you have had a history of *not* talking about immediate trauma, it can sometimes be not the children who ask their parents but the grandchildren who ask their grandparents.

Melanie Doel: That's a fascinating question for Gaynor, because five grandchildren now?

Gaynor

Madgwick: I've got five grandchildren now, yes. And again, it's a strange thing, you know. I've never really sat down and told my children or my grandchildren 'til I wrote this book and my youngest

grandchild now, it's being taught in school and they've had discussions in school, and she's just eleven years of age. And it's only this first year, now, that she actually is aware of actually what went on and she can understand it. So she's been asking me questions which is documented in the book as well, and I answered her truthfully. But for the great great, grandchildren, you are right. And I think documentation today, internet, everything, is vital. It's history, it's taught. It's in universities, you know. I think people will know and understand, but it'll only ever be on hearsay then, what's documented, because they've got no one else to speak to then 'cause we'll all be gone, you know.

Tony Curtis: Somebody said after Auschwitz, there can be no poetry. I think after Auschwitz, there's *got* to be poetry. And my dear friend and mentor Danny Abse famously said, 'Auschwitz made me more a Jew than ever Moses did.'

Melanie Doel: I think we're just going to take one more question, sorry.

Kevin Morgan: It was a quick question for you Mel. I was struck that, just to prepare for today and last week, I had a conversation about this with Ron Davies because I wanted to be clear about the details of when he compensated the village for the money that was taken off them from the disaster fund, Gaynor.

Gaynor

Madgwick: Yes, that's right, my dad, yeah.

Kevin Morgan: £150,000.

Gaynor

Madgwick: That's right, yes.

Kevin Morgan: And he reminded me that he scrapped the Welsh Office civil service diary for the day and he took a cheque, and I think he gave it to your father, 'cause your father's chair of the memorial.

Gaynor

Madgwick: Yes, yeah. Very poignant moment, that was.

Kevin Morgan: So he confirmed all that and he said he just dried up. He had a speech to give to your father and he just completely dried up. But I was shocked when Mel and you asked Ron Davies about the money, and why, 'cause he can tell you this. Why he had to ask Tony Blair for it, why couldn't the Welsh Office make that decision?

Melanie Doel: Yes. It was also very shocking when we asked Ron. He was so surprised, probably more surprised than even that question. But we said to him, 'You gave them money back but you didn't ever pay the interest that should have accrued, which would have made it a lot more and a lot more fair for the village.' And we interviewed him at his home, and he was totally shocked by the question, and said, 'But nobody ever asked me for that money, so I've never felt guilty. Should I have felt guilty?' And it was... you could see his face dropping and changing. And it was when he'd realised in the press that everybody had started criticising that he realised this was a much, much more complex question. But it is quite extraordinary that... who he had to ask for the money and how quickly it... the answer was, 'Oh yeah, if that's all it is, give it back to them.'

Gaynor

Madgwick: Give it back, yeah. 'The deed was done', his very words. 'The deed was done.' But it was a lot of controversy in the village following that again, because they weren't happy in the village with that amount. They thought, where's all this interest all these years, which would have taken it directly up to millions, you know.

Melanie Doel: I'm afraid we don't have time for any more questions. I would love to hear them, I knew this would happen, but sadly we do have to end this session because we have an extraordinary session coming up. Can I say thank you to both of you and I feel we haven't said thank you properly to Gaynor [applause].

[End of transcript]

Aberfan: History's judgement - a journalist's verdict

## INTRODUCTION

by

VINCENT KANE

At the Inquest into the deaths of 30 of the children killed at Aberfan in October 1966, as each child's name was read out there were shouts of "murderers". As one child's cause of death was given as asphyxia and multiple Injuries her father called out "No sir, buried alive by the National Coal Board." When the coroner remonstrated with him sympathetically, he persisted. "I want it recorded. Buried alive by the National Coal Board. That is what I want to see on the record. That is the feeling of those present. Those are the words we want to go on the certificates."

A few months later, after the Tribunal of Enquiry had found the Coal Board totally responsible for the Aberfan disaster and the deaths and destruction it caused, and had most severely criticized the Chairman of the Board Lord Robens, when the disgraced chairman offered his resignation to the Minister for Fuel and Power and through him to the Prime Minister the South Wales Miners along with their National Union petitioned the government to reject the resignation and keep Lord Robens in post.

How could that be? It still seems extraordinary at half a century's distance but I believe that the balance, or rather imbalance between these two conflicting points of view is the abiding conundrum of

Aberfan; the riddle at the heart of the disaster itself and the series of shameful betrayals which followed it. The tip slide robbed the village of half of its children; the manoeuvrings over the following years of the various organisations which might have and ought to have brought succour to the bereft community robbed them of natural justice.

The Tribunal report said there were no villains at Aberfan. Yes there was, there was one big villain. Coal. King Coal to which we all paid grateful homage in Wales for most of the twentieth century. It was coal and the determination to keep producing it at all costs which caused the tip slide, it was coal which killed the children and it was coal and the desperate fear of losing it which prompted the dereliction of duty before the disaster and the cover-ups and half-truths which followed. When Robens was appointed Chairman by Macmillan in 1960 he told the Prime Minister the state of NCB's finances made it next to impossible ever to make a genuine profit, but SuperMac was unflappable. "Don't worry, dear boy," he said. "Just blur the edges – just blur the edges." And that is what Robens set about doing. He was an able man, an iron will, a dominant personality and a natural leader; he quickly became known throughout the industry as Old King Coal.

One big problem for coal in the 60's was oil, which was plentiful and very cheap; you could fill the tank of your Austin Mini or Hillman Imp, or Ford Escort and have change for a pound note. More worryingly industry was wallowing in the stuff, too. Another big problem was that there were – in the view of both the Macmillan and Wilson governments - too many pits and too many of them especially in South Wales were ageing and creaking having been cut in the nineteenth century. But the third problem was the most politically sensitive of all –

the miners and their Union; the dreaded N.U.M., the most militant of them all. Start closing pits and they'd bite your hand off.

So Robens set about blurring the edges. He formed a close relationship – they called it a partnership - with Will Paynter communist miner's leader of the South Wales Miners, now newly elected leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, in which they agreed that the only long term hope of salvation for the coal industry was a drastic reduction in the number of pits and as a consequence the number of miners. That was the policy and Paynter, a senior officer in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, was totally committed to it. He carried the union executive with him including Will Whitehead another communist who had succeeded him as leader of the South Wales miners. The pits were to be closed one by one – doing good by stealth – rather than in one fell swoop which would surely have triggered a miner's revolt. As it was there was a spate of unofficial strikes; the 60's were plagued with them. As a young television reporter I cut my teeth reporting from various collieries in the coalfield brought to a standstill at a moment's notice. I recall one occasion when the producer told me with a funny look as I set off, that London wanted to use my piece in the six o'clock news but had asked could I “get some shots of miners singing as they emerged from the pit cages”. Tom Jones was already up and running; perhaps a few years later they might have obliged with 'Delilah'.

When Robens (and Paynter) took office there were 698 pits and 583,000 miners. When he left ten years later there were 292 pits and 283,000 miners. Job done? The government thought so, especially since productivity had increased by 70 % which had enabled them to stop subsidies to ailing pits.. Robens was a hands on chairman. He insisted

on getting out and about, in particular he visited collieries, he set a target of one colliery visit a week. He visited 350 pits in ten years; that's one every ten days. But he closed one every nine days; 400 in all. And nobody noticed. Except the miners in the pits which were closed. And crucially the miners who were fearful their pit might be next. Which leads us to Merthyr Vale colliery.

Merthyr Vale; with its seven tips, six of them pensioned off but number 7 still tipping full tilt, which circled the village of Aberfan like seven pillars of sombre un-wisdom. Four of them, including number 7, were perched on the sloping hillside; a policy described as unwise in what precious little national guidance there was on pit spoilage and tipping policy and they were all built on water, either on something called the Brithdir water line or in the case of No. 7 on two underground springs which were clearly shown on Ordnance maps. For thirty years or more the streets and homes of the village were flooded, often knee deep and angry letters flew between the Borough Council and the NCB. Flooding is one thing. Tip slides are another. There had been two of them at Aberfan prior to 1966, one in 1944 and one in 1963, both of them, like the disaster in 1966, resulting from 'the fundamental mistake of tipping over surface streams and springs or seepages from permeable strata forming the sloping hillsides without taking any preliminary drainage measures'. So the Tribunal was told. A soil mechanics expert told the hearing that with tipping, water is the source of all evil. It must not be allowed to get into the base of a tip. Failure to prevent that by proper drainage measures was the real explanation of the disaster.

The 1963 slide at the dormant No.4 tip was a serious one; in fact it was a dress rehearsal – almost an exact copy of the disastrous slide of No. 7 three years later. But the NCB, that is to say the ten area, group, and divisional engineers, colliery and production managers named, blamed, and shamed by the Tribunal refused to take it seriously; indeed some of them refused to recognize that it had happened at all for two years. Merthyr's Borough Engineer sent out a round robin letter at one point headed 'Danger from coal slurry being tipped at the rear of Pant Glas School', but it evoked little or no response. The appalling inaction, irresponsibility and failure to communicate still take one's breath away 50 years on.

Consider Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Mines and Quarries which had a divisional office in Cardiff. No inspector visited the Merthyr Vale Colliery tip complex at Aberfan for any purpose in the four years before the disaster, a period which included the big slide in '63. This next is unbelievable but true. The senior Inspector at the Cardiff Divisional office of the Inspectorate of Mines and Quarries who appeared before the Tribunal had been an inspector at the same Cardiff office 22 years earlier when the first big tip slide occurred at Aberfan in 1944. He confessed to the Tribunal that the first time he heard of it was in 1966. Twenty miles up the road! This inspector of mines and quarries must have driven past it umpteen times but he had not the faintest idea what had happened there.

Sir (later Lord) Edmund Davies who chaired the tribunal with consummate skill grasped the heart of the matter; I quote just three sentences which seem to contain all that posterity needs to know about Aberfan.

“The stark truth of the tragedy flowed from the fact that notwithstanding the lessons of the recent past, not for one fleeting moment did many otherwise conscientious and able men turn their minds to the problem of tip stability. The incidents preceding the disaster should have brought home vividly to any having interest in coal that tips placed on hillsides can and do slip and having started can move quickly and far, so it was necessary to formulate a system aimed at preventing such a happening – to issue instructions, disseminate information, train personnel, inspect frequently. There was ample time for all this to be reflected upon and realized and effective action taken, but the bitter truth is they were allowed to pass unheeded into the limbo of forgotten things.”

No chance of Lord Davies following unheeded into that limbo after such an epic judgment; of Denning like proportions! And yet, and yet. The question which arises at this distance of time is why. Why did these conscientious and able men act or fail to act individually and collectively in this calamitous fashion? The reasons he gave for the ten individuals he named and blamed were bungling ineptitude in tasks for which they were totally unfitted, failure to heed clear warnings, total lack of direction from the top. He said they were not villains but decent men led astray by foolishness or ignorance or both. That in all conscience, he said, is a burden heavy enough for them to have to bear, without the additional brand of villainy. The iron fist in the velvet glove? It looks that way. Notice that he has added another epithet to his description of them. Not just conscientious and able, but decent, conscientious and able.

Then how the hell did it happen? How did 144 people including 116 children come to lose their lives? Because, I believe, the learned judge

omitted one reason, one vice from the list he tabled and it was the most glaring vice of all. Cowardice. Moral cowardice. They failed to look, they failed to report, they failed to question – these decent, conscientious and able men – because they were afraid or half afraid of what they would see, of what they would hear, of what they might be required to do. They dare not even talk to each other about it because they knew intuitively that there was something wrong with tip 7. They were aware of the fears expressed time and again by the villagers, by the Borough Council. In January '64 the Merthyr Express reported a meeting of the Town Planning Committee quoting verbatim from the minutes, Councillor Mrs. Williams. "There are dangers from surface tipping. We had a lot of trouble from slurry causing flooding, but if the tip moved it could threaten the whole school." Some of the ten, even just one of them, must have read or been made aware of that newspaper report. So serious, so startling, so threatening would it have been for the NCB to be criticised in public in this way that somebody – anybody – would have been delegated to check it out in order to deny it.

But no. At the back of their minds lurked the fear that if they looked, or asked, the answer they might be given or the evidence they might see would compel them to set in motion a process that would inevitably lead to the cessation of tipping, which would lead to an immediate cessation of production, which could well lead to a rapid closure of the colliery. To act or not to act; that was the question. To act was to put the existence of the pit in peril, so it was better not to act; that was the answer. The pit depended on the tip. No tip, no pit. The colliery manager wrote to the council in an argument about the introduction of tipping 'Tailings', and in his letter he warned that any threat to tipping

at Merthyr Vale was a threat to the future of Merthyr Vale. In 1965 the N.C.B. applied to the council for planning permission to divert some overhead lines at the tipping facility at Merthyr Vale colliery. The senior coal board official who wrote the accompanying letter concluded with this ...."If consent is not granted the tipping life of the area will be curtailed with a possible similar reaction on the life of the colliery'.

The closure policy of Robens/Paynter was full speed ahead by the mid sixties. It was ruthless; once a colliery was identified as being un-productive or un-economic it was closed. No argument. In the Rhondda pits were dying like flies. So fast that the BBC commissioned me and producer Gethin Stoodley Thomas to make a television series that would capture something of the great coal tradition of the Rhondda, of the mines and the miners who made Rhondda a word that rang around the world, and to make it before it vanished completely, and we were only just in time. It was called The Long Street and these days it is regarded as something of a history book. The four programmes went out in the spring and early summer of 1966 and were well received. We liked to think at the time they generated a feeling of national pride in what had been the warm relationship between coal and, not just the Rhondda, but Wales and Welshness. Three months later Aberfan killed any such sentiment stone dead.

Uncertainty and insecurity was rife throughout the Welsh coalfield. Will we be next? Where and when will the axe fall? In 1963 Will Whitehead gave an assurance to the anxious miners and officials at Merthyr Vale that the colliery was not on the list for closure, but that was the first they knew that there was such a list and they must have wondered, given the problems facing the pit, how long it would be before they were added to it. As Alun Talfan Davies Q.C. told the tribunal "accepting

that in 1963 there was no intention to close Merthyr Vale two things need to be said. Without the tipping facilities available on Merthyr Mountain the future of the colliery was to some extent endangered or imperiled, and having regard to an accelerated process of closures in south Wales there might well be an over riding fear that disaster might descend upon the village.”

Coal Board witnesses appearing before the Tribunal faced a Catch 22 dilemma. If they gave even the slightest indication that they had been worried about the stability of the tip then they were condemned out of their own mouths; ‘you knew and you did nothing’. But if they denied any such knowledge they would be, as they were, criticized for ineptitude, foolishness, ignorance etc. Perhaps they had no choice because officially the policy of the NCB, initiated and stubbornly maintained by Lord Robens from the moment he first appeared at Aberfan (36 hours late) till he was summoned before the Tribunal on its 74<sup>th</sup> day, was to deny responsibility for what was a phenomenon of nature – a combination of heavy rain and unknown underground springs beyond human control. An Act of God? Well an Act of Robens, more likely and that was not quite the same thing. So the decent, conscientious, able managers and engineers all toe-ed the party line on the stand.

One witness, however, swam against the tide. One witness and one alone had the courage or the temerity to assert that he had thought the tip could slide, and that the slide could threaten life, but that he had taken no action. This was the member of Parliament for Merthyr Mr. S.O. Davies, known to all and sundry, far and wide, simply as S.O. Now S.O. was as old as Methuselah, as stubborn as a mule, and as tough as old boots. He was a ‘miners’ M.P. and had been for thirty years and

claimed he knew the local coalfield better than anybody, which I think was probably true. Nobody knew how old he actually was. When I interviewed him in his house I repaired to the kitchen with Mrs S.O for a cup of tea while he “put his collar on” for the cameras. I asked Mrs S.O how old S.O. was and she said “well I’m not exactly sure” and then as I was turning away she added “and I don’t think S.O. is exactly sure either”. A few years after the disaster the local Labour party dropped him as their candidate in the 1970 election because, they said, he was ‘too old’. So he stood as an Independent and was re-elected much to the delight of those of us who could tell a sure-fire winner when we saw one.

His testimony is important; crucial, I have come to believe, to a true understanding of what I have called the conundrum of Aberfan. The Tribunal Report records that “he thought tip 7 might not only slide but its sliding might reach the village, and that when he expressed this fear to miners in Aberfan they told him ‘You make a row about that and what will happen? They will close the blessed colliery’.” At this point Edmund Davies took over the questioning.

You thought the slide might reach the village with a risk to life. Is that right?

Yes, certainly.

If you entertained substantial fear of risk to life, what did it matter if people asked you not to take steps? Why not take them – if there was a risk to life?

If I had taken them I have more than a shrewd suspicion the colliery would be closed.

So you went through a tortured process of thought, of weighing one against the other. The risk to life on the one hand and the risk of colliery closure on the other. You came down on the side of taking no action which might risk colliery closure? Now think, before you answer Mr. Davies. You understand it is a question of considerable gravity?

Yes I have thought. But I had to consider the general feeling of the mass of the people in that ward. But if I had had any official approach made to me about the tip – I should not like to tell the enquiry that we could have stopped it, quite frankly – but if I had been asked to do so, I would have done it.

Thank you

Whatever the consequences for the colliery.

S.O.'s evidence was strongly challenged by counsel for – not the Coal Board – but, significantly the National Union of Mineworkers and it is worth hearing what he said. “If his account is truthful – and I am not suggesting that he is deliberately untruthful - then he bears one of the largest personal burdens of responsibility for the disaster. He readily assumed, more than any other individual in the case, a knowledge of danger and absolute inactivity in dealing with it.”

He urged the Tribunal not to accept S.O.'s evidence on the grounds that he didn't know what he was saying and remarkably that is what the Tribunal did. “He was the only witness to give such testimony and we doubt that he fully understood the grave implications of what he was saying. Were we convinced that he did – he could not escape censure.”

Take my word for it in 1967 S.O Davies was fully *compos mentis*. As he was when three years later, entirely on his own, he took on the official

labour candidate in one of the safest labour seats in the country, turned the vote around and beat him. The question that dances around the episode of S.O. Davies's testimony is not whether he understood the grave implications of what he was saying but whether they, the Tribunal understood the grave implications of what he was saying and if they did, is that why they closed their ears and refused to accept it? For the implication of what he was saying is not just that he knew the tip could slide and endanger life, but that they – the community of Aberfan knew that the tip might slide and endanger life; they knew because he told them – not just the miners but 'the mass of people in the ward', and that is pretty grave. Should they not bear – what was it the N.U.M.'s counsel said 'the largest burden of responsibility for the disaster, a knowledge of danger and absolute inactivity in dealing with it'? Not just inactivity, they positively urged him, pleaded with him not to do anything about it. It gets worse. He told the judge – who had just warned him it was a question of considerable gravity – that if he had had any official approach made to him about the tip he would have done it, i.e. taken steps. From what 'official' quarters might such an approach have come. Council officials? N.U.M. officials? It seems highly unlikely that information as momentous as that he passed on to the 'mass of people' in the Aberfan ward would not have leaked out eventually to reach official ears, in which case why did those officials whoever they were not make the approach, which they undoubtedly should have, in order to save endangered lives? If foreknowledge coupled with inactivity was indeed the cardinal sin, as the Tribunal believed, then that 'personal burden of responsibility' might have had to be shared round a lot more shoulders than those of the veteran M.P. More cosy perhaps to write him off as being off his chump.

They knew. They all knew. The Council. The Aberfan community, anybody who read the Merthyr Express, the school headmistress, the colliery employees who worked on top of the tip and who were still tipping until the tip started to go, and all the managers and engineers who were eventually pilloried by the Tribunal. They all knew that there was a question mark over the safety of tip no.7, but they preferred to look the other way, except those brave few like some of the councilors or the headmistress who did ask questions or raise complaints but who were fobbed off or ignored.

If it is true that it was fear; a fear that dare not speak its name which paralysed the possibility of action, what was it that they were afraid of? Pit closure, which would have meant that a serious unemployment problem might blight the area. The fear was based on the widespread assumption that if tipping stopped, then production would stop and Merthyr Vale colliery would be added to that National Coal Board list of pits for closure which they had heard about in 1963. Was that a reasonable assumption? Yes I think it was, or it must have seemed so at the time. The National Coal Board in partnership with the National Union of Mineworkers was actively looking for pits to close in their bid to make the coal industry viable. In ten years they closed two thirds of the collieries in Britain and in 1966 they were more than half way through that cull. The South Wales coalfield had suffered more than others. Why should a pit where production had stopped and there was no quick way to start it again be spared?

The reasons, the specific reasons why that tip slid down the hillside at Aberfan in 1966 were exactly those which the Tribunal so painstakingly

and scrupulously enumerated. But if with 50 years hindsight we look for the cause – the underlying cause, and if we look with uncluttered minds now that coal is dead and gone and all the scars and monstrosities it inflicted on the landscape, not just of Aberfan but of Wales have been cleaned and cleared, how can we fail to conclude that the underlying cause was the intense pressure brought to bear on a frightened coal mining community by the policy of widespread and rapid pit closures implemented by the National Coal Board supported by the National union of Mineworkers and two governments, Conservative followed by Labour with the objective of making coal viable. That support by the Trade union and by the Labour party in Wales and elsewhere persisted after the disaster. Read the Hansard report of the debate in the commons on the Tribunal report. One after the other Welsh Labour M.P.s in mining constituencies spoke in mitigation of the ‘wholly to blame’ Coal Board and urged that Robens who had submitted his resignation should remain in post. Leo Abse was the sole Labour exception. Emlyn Hooson (Liberal), Gwynfor Evans (Plaid Cymru) and David Gibson Watt (Conservative) wanted him to go but the Welsh Labour party wanted him to stay on, and the Trade Union wanted him to stay on and everybody else who petitioned the Prime Minister wanted him to stay on because – never mind Aberfan, in spite of Aberfan – he was doing a good job, doing what had to be done and he was the only man who could do it. I haven’t made that up, those are not my words, that was what they said. Documents published 30 years later showed that Robens orchestrated the campaign for Wilson to reject his resignation, didn’t send it until he knew it would be rejected and even made the Minister of Fuel and Power Richard Marsh remove a sentence from the letter he would send back rejecting the

resignation. Incidentally the best speech made in the debate came from the shadow minister for fuel and power who just happened to be one Margaret Thatcher, who with great forensic skill ripped the Coal Board and its chairman to pieces. She revealed one piece of chicanery which had escaped everybody's attention. At the time of the disaster the N.C.B.'s divisional chairman Mr. Kellet was attending a power conference in Japan. He was given instructions to stay there and did not come back in time to give evidence to the Tribunal. But part of the case advanced by counsel for the Board was that the absence of a tip policy should not be laid at the door of the Board but at the door of the division. Surely, said Mrs. Thatcher, if someone is going to advance that argument he must ensure that the head of the division is in the country so that he can be brought before the Tribunal to give evidence. Instead he had ensured that Mr. Kellet stayed out of the country.

The irony of all this is that both sides were proved to be wrong in the long run, the Coal Board and the Merthyr Vale community. Coal could not be made viable, no matter how many pits were closed. Dai Francis was in the 60's secretary of the Welsh miners union, grey and slow spoken like a wise old owl. He too was a communist but he was also a Methodist; four parts Marxist, he told me, and one part Methodist. Like a dry martini, shaken but not stirred. Certainly not stirred because he had the great gift (for a trade unionist) of never losing his temper on air. I remember one TV debate about the merits of expensive coal versus cheap oil which he concluded with a smile and a shake of the head and in that slow didactic manner with his strong, beguiling accent he said 'Vincent, the Arabs will not for ever live in tents.' Damn right they didn't. Not so many years later at about the time striking miners were winning the battle of Saltley Gates under the leadership of a

young Arthur Scargill, OPEC came on stream and the price of oil went up 250% in eighteen months throwing Western economies into a crisis which is still playing itself out. But even without cheap oil coal was not competitive. Throughout the seventies and up to and beyond the final and fatal miner's strike, coal from Poland and from far away Australia, even with the costs of transport thrown in was cheaper than British Coal. Robens had been right when he told the Prime Minister in 1960 that it was next to impossible for the Coal Board to make a profit. The illness he and Paynter diagnosed, despite their drastic surgery, was terminal.

And the Merthyr Vale community were wrong too. When tipping stopped the pit was not closed; in fact it lasted longer than the National Coal Board which was wound up in 1987. Merthyr Vale was one of the last Welsh pits to go when it closed in 1989, 23 years after the disaster.

About a dozen years after the Tribunal I made a profile of Lord Edmund Davies for Week In Week Out. He was retired, a widower, living 'over the shop' at Gray's Inn where we set up the cameras in his beautifully appointed rooms. Sadly, he had lost his vigour – he had been a tough cookie in his time; not long before the Tribunal he was the judge at the trial of the Great Train Robbers where he handed round thirty year sentences to all the principal villains, but now he was old and rather frail, fully understanding but somehow gentle. Nevertheless I reminded him of the men whom the report had named and blamed, 'not villains but decent men etc.' At the time I told him there had been much surprise and some anger that they had not been charged with manslaughter? He thought for a moment and then he said "But we thought they would be. We assumed they would be." And that was that. He wouldn't be drawn any further. He may, of course, have been

speaking with hindsight – there had been a considerable furore on the matter – but taking his words at face value what they mean is that this very senior and distinguished judge and his two expert lay colleagues having examined the whole matter in detail for nearly three months were of the view that there was enough prima facie evidence against certain of the witnesses to warrant a prosecution for manslaughter. Why was such a prosecution not initiated and who would have been responsible for the decision whether or not to initiate it? Who else but another Welsh Labour M.P. for a mining constituency the Attorney General Elwyn Jones who had muzzled the press before the Tribunal started and also given an assurance before it started that there would be no prosecutions and he officially ruled them out after the Tribunal 's report was to hand. We cannot say now that they were guilty of manslaughter nor could anybody at the time. Only a legal trial could establish that, but to deny such a trial was to deny the Aberfan community natural justice and that was a betrayal. The first betrayal of many as it turned out.

Lord Robens and the Coal Board betrayed the Aberfan community continuously. Robens fought tooth and nail to limit the cost of Aberfan to the NCB. The opening offer to each bereaved family was fifty pounds and it wasn't increased to five hundred pounds and paid out until 1970 when Robens ten year stretch was over. He seized on a doubtful report that the remaining six tips were safe, as grounds for refusing to remove them. Instead he offered to "contour" them and blend them into the slopes of the Merthyr mountain; perhaps he had some kind of theme park in mind! Eventually forced to remove the tips he persuaded the Prime Minister that the appeal fund should be raided for a contribution to the cost. The fund had reached 1.6 millions – about 28 millions today

- and “under intense pressure” the Trustees were forced to surrender 150,000 pounds (3 million today) which was 10% of the fund. This was outrageous and probably illegal but the Trustees who were generally fairly useless anyway just caved in. They should have threatened to resign en masse but they didn’t and that was a betrayal of the Aberfan community. The Charity Commission, which many years later formally apologised, just nodded the outrage through and that was a betrayal of the Aberfan community. Indeed the commission was hostile to the community from the start; at one stage they insisted that monies should be paid only to those parents of whom it could be established “that they had been close to the child or children”.

The bereft community might have looked to the government, a Labour government, for support but they didn’t find any when it mattered other than warm words of sympathy. In particular they might have looked for support to the Secretary of State for Wales, George Thomas who had taken over from Cledwyn Hughes. Wilson, the prime minister, was a pragmatist. Generally speaking he would do what he was able to do, what he could get away with. He would push at a door and if it gave he would go through it with his policy but if the door didn’t give, if there was resistance he would stand back and think of something else. Wilson was aware that the decision to take the money was highly contentious; he would certainly have discussed it with his Welsh Secretary of State. That was what the Welsh Secretary was for – a funnel through which Welsh matters and problems were channelled into the cabinet and the prime minister, and in reverse government decisions and policies were channelled out to Wales. He spoke for Wales, for heaven’s sake. Whether he demurred and argued with Wilson about it we do not know, but he accepted it and that was all the prime

minister needed. George was all hearts and flowers in south Wales but he was true steel rock solid behind the prime minister in London. I thought then and I am convinced now that if he, the secretary of state for Wales, had told Wilson that he would resign if this cruel and probably illegal policy went through, the prime minister would not have felt strong enough to do it. But he didn't, and from the Secretary of State for Wales that was a great betrayal of the Aberfan community. Thirty years later another, newly appointed Labour Secretary of State for Wales Ron Davies redeemed the reputation of the office and of the party when he insisted that the money should be repaid to the fund and in 2007 the Welsh Assembly paid another two million to bring it in line with inflation. For Ron Davies it was the honourable and – here's that word again – decent thing to do, and I salute him across the years.

But if I am scarily honest, in one sense the media betrayed the Aberfan community and I was of the media and in quite a prominent role. Somehow or another in that first five years after the disaster, as controversy followed controversy, though never directly articulated a general climate of opinion developed in which the surviving community were seen to be “the problem”. They were ‘awkward’ or ‘greedy and grasping’, there was talk of the appeal fund being the 2<sup>nd</sup> Aberfan Disaster, they were ‘troublemakers’, as I say they were “the problem”. While the journalists, the press and broadcasters, didn't say as much, didn't light this fire of rumour, we fanned the flames in so much as we didn't jump on it and smother it as robustly as we should. We didn't shout as loud as we could until Wales was deafened by our hammering home the simple truth that it was the trustees who were the problem, and the charity commission; it was the government and the politicians who were the problem, and most of all it was the National Coal Board

who were getting away with murder and especially Alf Robens who were the problem. The Aberfan community were the victims, not the problem and we were letting their tormentors, for such they were, off the hook. The press, the media, the fourth estate, has an abiding responsibility to probe and to penetrate. In the Aberfan period, perhaps Wales's darkest hour in the twentieth century we should have been passionate in pursuit of the truth. Instead we were pedestrian.

I have made no mention of the children. That is because I have found a special place for them which I urge you to share. I run a picture of them through my imagination laughing and chattering as they leave the assembly and settle in their classrooms, then I stop the picture at that moment; freeze it, do not proceed a second further, don't dare to go there. Freeze them in time like the young lovers on Keats Grecian Urn – "forever panting and forever young". Keats it was who said a thing of beauty is a joy forever and so they are; frozen in time at that moment, happy, innocent, and beautiful. Immortalise them like that and they will live for ever.

Like the children of Hamelin in Browning's Pied Piper who left our world behind as they....

"Tipping and skipping ran merrily after, the wonderful music with shouting and laughter

Then lo when they reached the mountainside, a wondrous portal opened wide

As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed, and the piper advanced and the children followed.

Did I say all? no, one was lame, and could not dance the whole of the way

And in after years if you would blame, his sadness he was used to say  
Its dull in our town since the children left. I can't forget that I'm bereft."

Just such a one is Gaynor Madgwick who at 8 years old was pulled injured from one of the classrooms where her friends died. She was left behind to live out her life. This is her story, sad, sweet, sentimental, and authentic. I commend it to you.