

Trauma journalism education: teaching merits, curricular challenges, and instructional approaches

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This study uses mixed methods to examine the state of trauma journalism education at journalism programmes. The survey of 623 faculty members from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC)-accredited institutions reveals a gap in training that leaves prospective journalists ill-prepared to cover domestic and international violence and disasters. An analysis of journalism curricula shows most universities, if they teach trauma journalism at all, do so only in an introductory manner while covering other subjects such as interviewing and ethics. Finally, qualitative interviews with journalism faculty and professional journalists who have covered trauma provide further context supporting the need for specific resources. The study offers recommendations for supporting trauma journalism education and introducing it to journalism curricula.

Keywords: journalism education, trauma journalism, news violence, war journalism.

In The Consequences of Modernity, Giddens (1990) depicts a runaway-juggernaut image of the contemporary world, in which “risk and danger...have become secularized along with most other aspects of social life” (p111).

He argues that existing in such risk society leads to being constantly conscious of the “inevitability of living with dangers”—life-threatening and remote from human control (p131). The appalling picture is not unrealistic. The Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters has recorded an increasing number of disasters worldwide. During the decade of the 1970s, 1,230 disasters were registered; the figure was 2,856 in the 1980s and 4,790 in the 1990s. There were more than 3,000 disasters reported between 2000 and 2003 (Vasterman, Yzermans & Dirkzwager 2005). In this risk society, journalists are among the groups directly confronting traumatic events, particularly in countries where the news industry ethos reflects the age-old media trope “if it bleeds, it leads.”

Tasked with detailing historically significant events, journalists are expected to transmit images and accounts of war, death, destruction, turmoil, and despair (Dworznic 2006; Ricchiardi 1999a, 1999b, 2001). But their role as arbiters of information across the world does not come without a price—these events can create experiences of vicarious trauma, for the journalists covering them, for the victims and relatives enduring the spotlight, and for the audiences following them. As instances of conflict, violence and destruction remain prevalent across the globe—from war, conflict and terrorism to violent crime, domestic violence and natural disasters, more and more of the news hole is filled with news about trauma, victims, and violence. In light of these circumstances, this study provides insight into whether and how aspiring journalists enrolled in US journalism programmes are prepared to cover instances of trauma and violence.

Recognizing that most journalists will cover domestic tragedy, international violence or natural disasters at some point in their careers, scholars now increasingly understand that “journalists bear an affective and psychological relation to the scenes and people they cover, counter to the professional ideologies of detachment and distanced observation” (Rentschler 2012, p448). This becomes more critical with the increased emphasis on spot news and “at the scene” coverage for higher ratings, which makes journalists report on more tragedy and violence than they did in the past (Schwanbeck, 2004).

Adopting the position of “first responder,” journalists are not only witnesses but also liaisons and representatives for traumatized victims and loved ones. As such, journalists must have an arsenal of coping methods that allow them to remain resilient (Buchanan & Keats 2011; see also Simpson & Cote 2006). This especially applies to fresh graduates and young reporters who often start out at small news organizations for which death and tragedy are big-time news (Park, 2007). In a study of journalism graduates, Johnson (1999) found that recent graduates were the most susceptible to strong emotional reactions when covering trauma. Habits of coping, which rookie journalists may not have been taught or have yet to develop, become either “helpful or a hindrance for journalists’ psychological and physical health” (p128). Health risks that result from such unhealthy coping mechanisms range from developing PTSD to abusing drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, but also include giving in to anger and anxiety, isolating themselves, becoming workaholics, desensitized, constantly crying, and so on (Feinstein 2004; Freinkel, Koopman & Spiegel 1994; Matloff 2004; Newman et al 2003; Nieman Reports 1999; Norwood, Walsh & Owen 2003; Simpson & Boggs 1999; Simpson & Cote 2006). Moreover, journalists with greater exposure to work-related traumatic events hold more negative views of their

job and the world (Pyeovich, Newman & Daleiden 2003).

Journalists are not the only ones who need protection in moments of violence or crisis. Studies have shown that how a journalist covers traumatic events can exacerbate harm or re-victimize those involved. Kay, Reilly, Connolly and Cohen (2010) studied the implications of media coverage in a Canadian community after the murder of a teenage girl. They found the media's coverage, intrusive presence, and perceived insensitivity made community members feel alienated, angry, and violated (2010). Even more telling, the authors found that "intense ill-considered media coverage can actually do harm to individuals and communities" (p430). As storytellers and witnesses, journalists must consider both their own and others' emotional well-being. There is also a flip side. When media coverage is sensitive to the community, it can be helpful for the survivors. Seeing one's experience reported in the news can help one to reconnect with her or his life and with the community (Sykes 2003). It can validate feelings of disempowerment and anger. In turn, it can help with the recovery process, both at an individual and community level (Kay et al 2010, p434).

Today, media outlets are increasingly aware of the need for trauma training. While still an afterthought for many outlets in the U.S., European news organizations such as AP, BBC, Reuters and ITC make hostile-environment training mandatory for foreign correspondents (Lyon 2006; Ricchiardi 2002). For US media who have instituted trauma training, the focus largely remains on preparing reporters for war zones, or, more recently, dealing with domestic terrorism. After the 9/11 attacks, which awakened journalists to the psychological hazards of their work (Feinstein 2004), New York's daily newspapers, along with the Washington Post, Reuters and the Associated Press, began offering counseling or providing support groups for staff members (Ricchiardi 1999b; Strupp & Cospers 2001). During the build-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the BBC prepared its war-bound correspondents with trauma training and pre/post-assignment assessments (Simpson 2004). In 2000, a Montreal reporter founded Newscoverage Unlimited aimed at training journalists to help each other with PTSD, depression or drug dependency (Sibbald 2002).

University-led training programmes that focus prominently on trauma coverage are rare, though programmes at the University of Washington and Michigan State University are relatively robust (Dufresne 2004; Dworzniak & Grubb 2007; Johnson 1999; Maxson 2000). Michigan State University's Victims and the Media programme introduces trauma in entry-level reporting classes, followed by interactions with victims and survivors in upper-level courses. At the University of Washington, the advanced reporting course spends two weeks exploring journalists' reactions to covering trauma (Maxson 2000). Here, instructors closely monitor role-playing sessions, and students discuss the effects of traumatic situations on them and on the victims. Despite the value of trauma training and rehearsals, the advantage of teaching trauma journalism has not been broadly recognized by most journalism schools, possibly due to the lack of information, time, and money (Johnson 1999).

Nevertheless, limited studies show trauma journalism training helps journalists prepare for and process covering trauma and violence. In 1998, the University of Washington interviewed 41 graduates who worked in journalism; only fourteen had participated in trauma training. Of those who reported participating in training, journalists commented that it not only helped prepare them psychologically, but some also reported the training helped them produce a better story because they were able to relate to victims and survivors (Maxson 2000). Still, on-the-scene reporting is only half the battle. When journalists write trauma, they are not merely documenting it for historical purposes—they are often

reliving it (Rentschler 2010). Trauma training, then, requires education on reporting, interacting with victims, and self-care after the event.

Considering that professional journalists are often unlikely to seek formal help for trauma-related distress (Greenberg et al 2009) and are likely—especially in the case of war journalists—to experience significant psychiatric difficulties (Feinstein et al 2002), proactive training and education to prepare journalists for the worst situations becomes paramount. In a study of 124 employees at an international news organization, Greenberg et al (2009) found that those who do seek to ameliorate negative effects associated with covering trauma most often turn to family or friends, placing “the burden of care on informal networks to manage distress” (p547). Best practice should utilize both training and debriefing to keep journalists field-ready and to protect news audiences, trauma victims, and the journalists who cover them.

Because research on trauma journalism education programmes has focused on a select few programmes, a comprehensive report on the scope and quality of trauma journalism education does not yet exist. This study seeks to fill this gap and highlight the importance of trauma journalism education by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How do accredited journalism programmes in the US teach trauma journalism?

RQ2: What are the obstacles that impede trauma journalism teaching?

RQ3: How do journalism professors and journalists view the merits of trauma journalism education?

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, curricular analysis and qualitative interviews, to provide a multilayered perspective on the state, approach and necessity of trauma journalism education. Surveys are the most effective way to assess the opinions and track the attitudinal trends among a large population (Shoemaker and McCombs 2003). “The survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population” (Creswell 2003, p153). The researchers chose a self-administered online survey approach because it saves time and expense, avoids interviewer biases, and offers respondents more privacy (Shoemaker and McCombs 2003). Qualitative phone interviews supplemented the quantitative surveys to add depth and texture and to better understand the experiences and worldviews of academics and journalists who teach and work in trauma journalism. Qualitative interviews offer a tool for “[v]erifying, validating, or commenting on information obtained from other sources” (Lindlof & Taylor 2011, p173). The surveys and interviews were further contextualized with an analysis of curricular documents, which offered comparison points for vetting the accuracy of opinions and attitudes against what is actually covered in journalism courses (Lindlof & Taylor 2011, p237).

To delineate the process, first, researchers surveyed 623 journalism faculty members from 103 of the 110 AEJMC-accredited journalism programmes in the US. These accredited programmes set the curricular standards for comprehensive journalism education and are recognized for setting trends in journalism education. Faculty members from these programmes responded to an online questionnaire of 59 closed- and open-ended questions relating to how they teach trauma journalism, in which courses, and with what resources. Second, researchers interviewed 22 journalism professors to gather more in-depth information about their approaches to teaching trauma journalism. The interviews

provided context and specific examples on what resources are available and what impediments exist to the advancement of trauma journalism education. Third, researchers collected and analyzed syllabi and curricular material submitted by the 22 interviewees to identify common as well as unique approaches to teaching how to deal with traumatic news. The curricular analysis offered insight into how educators viewed trauma journalism as a stand-alone topic, or part of a more general journalism course. Analyses of course descriptions, overviews, and mission statements revealed significant perspective on educators' approach and philosophy to teaching this topic. In addition, resources for the courses—texts, websites, organizations, etc.—were analyzed to highlight the primary and secondary resources used in teaching trauma coverage. Finally, researchers interviewed a convenience sample of 23 journalists who had covered various sorts of trauma events to capture their experiences and insight into how students can be better trained and prepared for such events. Participants were asked 10 open-ended questions dealing with their experience in covering trauma and violence; how it has affected them; how their academic or professional training prepared them; what their academic training could have done better; and the best ways trauma journalism training could help journalists in their work.

Results and Discussion

This section starts with an analysis of the faculty surveys and interviews to characterize the presence, scope, and approach to trauma journalism education at US universities. Next, the section presents findings of the curricular and syllabi analyses. Finally, the section characterizes the role of trauma journalism education as endorsed by professional journalists who have covered instances of tragedy.

The educators: trauma journalism overlooked and ill-supported

Most schools do not train journalists to cover trauma.

Survey data shows that universities are overwhelmingly lacking in trauma journalism education. When asked if there were any courses in their programmes dedicated to teaching trauma journalism, the vast majority (75 percent) of faculty said there were none, and only 16 percent responded positively. The rest had no answer or did not know. In addition, the majority of participants (56 percent) said the topic of covering trauma receives little attention in their programme, and six percent said it does not receive any attention at all. On the other hand, 33 percent said the topic receives some attention, and only four percent said it receives a lot of attention.

The majority (75 percent) of participants believed the topic of covering trauma should be taught across several courses rather than one dedicated course. Interview participants suggested including trauma journalism in some related courses, such as “crisis communication” and “journalism ethics.” For example, one participant explained that she did not cover issues of trauma in class because she had not taught ethics courses for years. However, even in such courses, eyewitness reporting of breaking news and interviewing victims with sensitivity were deemed the main purpose of the class design. In other words, there was a heavy emphasis on quality coverage and journalist integrity. As a respondent argued, the goal of journalism education is to create “ethical, competent professionals.” In contrast, journalist self-care was overlooked in those trauma-related courses. This finding confirmed previous studies and personal accounts from journalists who argue that there is

often a lack of awareness of journalists' emotional distress (Drummond 2004).

In fact, programmes that teach trauma journalism, either as modules within a course or as stand-alone courses do not always cover it comprehensively. According to survey responses, most programmes are less likely to cover issues such as dealing with post traumatic stress disorder, covering drug abuse/addiction and drug related violence, being a first responder to an accident or crime scene, dealing with trauma and stress reactions, covering child abuse, covering domestic violence, risks and self care for journalists, covering political violence and terrorism.

Although 43 percent of survey respondents said there were no impediments to teaching trauma journalism, those who agreed to the existence of such impediments mentioned time constraints (45 percent), lack of resources (14 percent), lack of student interest in the topic (13 percent), accreditation issues (5 percent), and lack of suitability of the topic for their courses (3 percent). Educators also listed the following challenges to teaching trauma journalism in their courses:

The topic is viewed as too specialized, too advanced and not appropriate for introductory classes.

There are too many other basic and more pressing topics/skills to cover.

It takes too much time to prepare lessons for this topic.

It is a difficult and touchy topic to teach, and faculty have little training to teach it and to handle possible consequences that may arise in class.

Many students are not interested in the topic and will most likely not cover trauma in the future.

The nature of trauma itself is too complicated and too abstract to teach in a classroom full of students not experienced in trauma coverage.

Faculty with Journalism experience expressed more interest and confidence in teaching trauma journalism

Correlational data revealed a marked and significant relationship between “number of years as journalist” and “how interested are you in teaching trauma journalism.”¹ The more experience faculty had as professional journalists, the more likely they were interested in teaching trauma journalism. There was an even stronger relationship between “number of years as journalist” and “how qualified are you to teach trauma journalism.”² The more experience as journalists, the more likely were the participants to consider themselves qualified to teach trauma journalism. Similarly, those who said they had experience covering trauma were more likely to be interested in teaching trauma journalism³ and feel qualified to do so.⁴ It is important to emphasize that these correlations do not necessarily suggest causation, but given that the first variable in each correlated pair (background as journalists, and experience covering trauma) occurred before the teaching, it is safe to assume that teachers with an extensive professional background in covering trauma news will most probably be interested in teaching trauma journalism and also see themselves qualified to do so. In other words, it would be a safe bet to target such characteristics when recruiting instructors to teach trauma journalism.

However, the study found no significant relationship between the number of years teach-

1 Spearman's rho=0.28, p<0.01

2 Spearman's rho=0.47, p<0.01

3 Spearman's rho=0.33, p<0.01

4 Spearman's rho=0.60, p<0.01

ing, and interest in trauma journalism (CV= .14, p= .32).

In addition, educators with backgrounds in different fields/disciplines differed in their views about how qualified they were to teach trauma journalism. The following are the majors/disciplines listed from most to the least qualified (the percentage represents participants who said they are somewhat or fully qualified to teach trauma journalism): History (96 percent), Law (77 percent), Journalism (73 percent), Political Science (73 percent), Education (69 percent), English/Literature (65 percent), Media Studies (54 percent), Mass Communication (52 percent), Public Relations/Marketing (50 percent), Communication (46 percent).

Many teaching materials remain inaccessible to educators

When asked how accessible are supplementary materials for teaching trauma journalism, educators listed various items. The most inaccessible materials were exercises and material for role play or for student projects, followed by access to trauma victims, sites relevant for field trips, and textbooks. The most accessible materials were online resources, other university departments, organizations, centers and associations, and professors and experts on trauma.

Surveyed and interviewed educators identified six main issues that can be addressed to help improve trauma journalism education:

Downloadable multimedia tools, sample course descriptions, web modules, and lesson plans.

Short education films or documentaries to use in class.

Textbooks on trauma journalism and/or chapters in reporting and writing textbooks.

Improved access to a network of experts, speakers, and trauma victims who can speak about trauma journalism education in person.

Pedagogical seminars, training sessions and workshops targeted at teachers of trauma journalism.

A campaign to raise awareness about the important of trauma journalism education at universities.

The curricula: scarce curricular materials and little focus on trauma journalism preparation

Most survey participants indicated a desire to submit curricular materials for analysis but noted they had no explicit and/or specific descriptions of the trauma journalism lessons used in their courses. Out of the 22 syllabi submitted, only five were syllabi of stand-alone trauma journalism courses, whereas the rest were modules about trauma as part of general courses.

Trauma emphasises global conflict and war and de-emphasises local domestic issues

Two common approaches emerged in the curricular analysis: a focus on the journalist, and a focus on the conflict. The syllabi, in general, used existing conflict zones to explore the role of the journalist in response to different types of trauma around the world. Surprisingly, very few responses mentioned anything about trauma as a local or domestic event, and few alluded to trauma outside of war or terrorism.

First, educators emphasized content that discussed covering trauma through the lens of the journalist as a fellow human being. These syllabi outlined the moral, ethical, and professional responsibilities of a journalist in covering trauma, and also the possible repercussions and long term effects of this reporting on the journalist, the victim, and the news outlet. Course topics included “modules on human rights,” “what the journalist will encounter,” and “challenges of reporting in traumatic settings,” and so on. One overview for a course on victims and the media stated:

[This course] is an intensive study of the interpersonal and psychological effects of trauma on journalists and the people whom they interview...Special interest is given to identifying the symptoms of post-traumatic-stress-disorder and its impact upon journalists and victims of disasters and other horrific events.

Another respondent included curricular materials for teaching crisis communication, which focuses intently on the role of the journalist in a traumatic situation. This educator defined crisis as that which “can be a car wreck, house fire, terrorist attack, weather disaster, etc. It is a situation in which people are responding to difficult situations without warning.” The syllabi, focusing primarily on the human aspects of the journalist, explored the emotional and psychological impacts of covering trauma events.

Alternatively, a number of respondents submitted syllabi that explored covering traumatic events through specific national and international conflicts. Their courses looked less at the emotional and psychological implications of the journalist’s reporting on trauma, but instead focused on conflict, national media systems, and the role of the journalist within these systems. Course modules in these syllabi included Challenges of Reporting in Totalitarian Societies, Immigration Issues, War Crimes, Reporting from Zones of Chaos, and Questions of Genocide.

Another syllabus approaches trauma journalism education by exploring media and crisis at different points across the globe:

Topics to be addressed include: The question of genocide - Political repression and transformation in Zimbabwe and South Africa, Leftists and drug lords in Venezuela and Mexico, China, Burma and North Korea – controlling the news, India and Pakistan – contrasts on the subcontinent, Islamic fundamentalists...

Emphasizing ethics and best practices for interviewing survivors.

Syllabi and course materials demonstrated a curricular emphasis on the ethics of covering trauma and the best practices for interviewing survivors. This reflects contemporary research that finds interviewing victims to be among the hardest tasks a journalist will face (Bryant 1987; Hallman 2005).

A majority of the submitted syllabi (77 percent) had modules or portions of course outlines devoted to journalism ethics around trauma. Ethics are a key component of all journalism education programmes, and their emphasis seen here reinforces the need for sound ethical approaches to reporting on traumatic events. One syllabus focusing on human rights describes in its overview: “Particular stress will be laid on the practical and ethical challenges facing reporters and investigators who cover human rights, in the United States and overseas.” Additionally, a course in media and global affairs devoted an entire section to journalism ethics, while a course about journalism and new media included a section on ethical considerations for reporting tragedies.

Still another course on victims asked: “What does it mean to be a victim?” and devoted one-third of its course to an exploration of photography and visual representation,

a highly relevant topic within trauma journalism and media scholarship (Fahmy & Wanta 2007). As digital media coverage increasingly relies on visual storytelling, journalists must understand how viewers receive and process photographs and other visuals while also considering the impact on the subjects themselves. However, photographs are not the only medium through which victims may feel re-traumatized, and courses that emphasize ethical approaches to interviewing victims can help journalists understand this dynamic. Maercker and Mehr (2006) found that the majority of victims who read reports of their cases responded negatively to the coverage, even more so if they perceived inaccuracies in the material.

In addition to ethics, most of the curricular materials under study included modules or sections devoted to interviewing techniques. Most of the syllabi devoted a portion of their course to teaching about the interview process and its effect on both the victim/survivor and the journalist. "I do a series of lectures on interviewing, and pages 8-12 deal with interviewing people under stress... especially people grieving," wrote one respondent who sent a syllabus and a 50-plus page document outlining the interview process, highlighting specifically effective methods for interviewing individuals in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic experience. One respondent wrote specifically about role play in the classroom

I've developed case studies that incorporate aspects of covering trauma; for instance, I take the students through exercises where I play a trauma victim, or the relative of someone who has been, as a way of schooling students on how to best interview someone in this condition.

Yet another respondent provided some examples of classroom practice in interviewing victims and survivors:

We went on a tour conducted by a woman who lost her son in the towers, and interviewed a firefighter...separately, we interviewed a male FBI agent via videoconferencing, who is a survivor of male sexual abuse...

Finally educators used a variety of resources and curricular material for their classes and few resources emerged as common. Table 1 (see opposite page) summarizes the curricular material educators reported using in trauma journalism courses and modules.

The journalists: trauma leaves its mark

Interviews with 23 journalists who had covered trauma at some point in their careers revealed some supporting information but also additional dimensions pertaining to the merits of teaching trauma journalism education.

Almost all of these journalists noted that their experiences covering trauma events negatively impacted their lives. Most saw the effect as cumulative and long term. One journalist said, "I see it as building bricks as you go along. Each one is laid in there, and you can either wall off your emotions or your emotions come crumbling down." A seasoned war correspondent said it took six months after leaving a battle zone to become re-accustomed to "normal life." "I was certainly not the most enjoyable person to be around within the first six months of my return." Sometimes, what is most traumatizing is not what a journalist covers but how he reacts to the situation," said one journalist who has made a career of war coverage. There are "things I haven't been proud of, like walking away from someone bleeding to death." He wondered if he could have saved that person had he put the camera down and essentially forfeited his position as a nonpartisan observer. "There are moral dilemmas you will face that you never expected to face," he explained.

Table 1: Curricular resources used in teaching trauma journalism, listed alphabetically.

<p>Books and Scholars:</p> <p>Barry Glassner, Culture of Fear Bill Silcock et al's Managing TV News Donna Ferrato's Living with the Enemy Edna Buchanan's The Corpse Had a Familiar Face Joan Deppa et al's The Media and Disasters: Pan Am 103 Julianne Newton's Burden of Visual Truth Ken Kobre's Photojournalism Kole Kleeman Maggie Steber's Dancing with Fire Philip Meyer's Ethical Journalism Roger Simpson and William Coté's Covering Violence Spike Lee's When the Levees Broke Susan Meiselas' Nicaragua Susan Moeller's Compassion Fatigue Susan Sontag's On Photography and Regarding the Pain of Others William Cote & Roger Simpson's Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting</p> <p>Organizations:</p> <p>American Red Cross Bellevue Hospital Center for Survivors of Torture Center for People and the Media UCO, Interviewing a Rape Victim Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma Doctors Without Borders FEMA's Web Site Human Rights Watch Information and speakers from Committee to Protect Journalists KODA Local AIDS groups National Center for Missing and Exploited Children National Press Photographers Association (nppa.org) National Victim Center Oasis Catolico Partners for a Prosperous Athens Poynter Institute Project Safe (local domestic violence organization) Reporters Without Borders</p>	<p>Media:</p> <p>American Journalism Review Columbia Journalism Review News U News Photographer magazine (from NPPA) Reuters editorial guidelines The Infinite Mind Radio Show Youtube</p> <p>Videos and Multimedia:</p> <p>Christian Science Monitor's multi-media package on the kidnapping of reporter Jill Carroll Dart Center's A Long Night's Journey Into Day, About Victims & Trauma History of Violence and Journalism John Van Beekum's slide show on grandfather's funeral Kyra Thompson's Dying to Tell The Story Michael Moore's Bowling for Columbine Meg Moritz's Covering Columbine by Terrence Smith's PBS Newshour piece on naming rape victims</p> <p>University departments:</p> <p>Campus security and campus police Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University Michigan State University's Victims and the Media Program, www.victims.jrn.msu.edu University of Kentucky Counseling Center</p>
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A journalist who had covered the September 11, 2001, attacks and said he suffered from nightmares and depression, as a result. “I wish I would have known going in that these sorts of things can come along during your career and have an impact on you... I didn’t even know where to turn.”

Academic training for covering trauma was inadequate or non-existent

Despite this consensus among the journalists about the negative effects of covering trauma, not a single journalist said he or she was taught specifically how to handle the professional and personal fallback of trauma journalism. While some said they were taught how to deal with sources in a sensitive manner, none had received training while in school about the potential emotional and physical ramifications of covering traumatic events, which tracks with the findings in the previous two sections. “Pretty much nothing at all” was how one journalist described trauma preparation in college. Another noted, “If there had been a program offered at the undergraduate or graduate level, I would have leaped at it. There was training by some of the finest journalists to walk the earth, and none of them mentioned it.” These sentiments support ongoing research that finds those considering the emotional impacts of trauma on witnesses often ignore the journalist’s experience (Himmelstein & Faithorn 2002).

Trauma training is essential, but journalism education cannot replace experience

Although most respondents expressed that training journalists on how to cover traumatic events is essential, some were skeptical about the effectiveness of such training in the current academic setting of journalism programmes. “I just think it’s vital,” said one participant. “For the kids coming through schools, I think they need to be prepared for what they will see,” another participant said. “Knowing what to expect helps journalists prepare, and it helps them realize their reactions are universal,” stated another participant. However, several participants expressed uncertainty about how some practical skills, such as approaching a crime victim, could be incorporated into a typical journalism curriculum. One journalist said, “Part of dealing with trauma is personal makeup—what you can deal with, and part of it is personal awareness of what you’re getting into.” The same participant said, while schools offer basic journalism skills, they do not offer practical experience for such situations. With the changing face of news, several respondents felt a more drastic change in journalism education is necessary, especially in regards to the traditional culture of the newsroom. Moreover, a few respondents dismissed the merit of trauma journalism education altogether. One respondent expressed reservations at the idea that trauma education was even necessary, saying, “Most of us can cope pretty well without it.” Another participant noted, “I’m not sure you can train someone to handle these situations. I think it may be a personality issue—either you have the callous ability to brush off what you are seeing... or you have an empathetic nature, and you will... always feel other people’s pain.” These journalists seemed mostly concerned with being taught how to properly approach subjects for interviews or photographs, not how to deal with the trauma on a personal level—a point that echoes the findings in the previous sections.

The best trauma journalism education brings professional journalists, survivors and students together

When it came to coping with trauma, the journalists’ most common technique was to talk with a coworker, attempt to “leave work at the office,” and in some cases to talk to a spouse or friend. Other techniques included keeping busy and not thinking about the trauma case or separating oneself from a consuming story “by taking breaks often.” One

journalist noted, “I think it is a matter of focusing your attention on other things and not dwelling on what you saw or heard.” Another journalist said, “Sometimes I get a bottle of wine and try to forget. I guess I would have tried a different profession if I had known all the negative impacts.” Yet another said she uses anti-depressants during bouts of depression brought on by a “really bad period” of covering tough stories: “sometimes it’s just really hard to disentangle yourself.” Others insisted there really is no way to cope with covering trauma. To them, it is simply a realization of the job. A few participants even brushed-off the “coping” mentality and attributed their attitude of apathy to excessive exposure or a “hardened heart,” which correlates with the images of bravery, volunteerism, and sacrifice that are often presented by the news media when covering the death of journalists (Carlson 2006). Nevertheless, these same journalists admitted that it is not easy to present a “stoic front” in the face of trauma. “We expect journalists to be hardboiled and get the story and go home to their wife and kids at night,” a participant said.

When it came to what type of preparation would best train journalists to cover trauma, several participants expressed doubt about this specific facet of trauma journalism education. Nevertheless, those who did believe in its merit suggested that the best training that targets coping with trauma includes, one-on-one discussions with professional reporters, guest speakers who were covered in the media, and presenting “real” examples and case studies. Most respondents urged seasoned journalists to share their stories with students. One journalist said the first lesson should be academic—teaching students how the brain handles trauma. Then, students should be exposed to victims, story subjects and reporters who can share experiences. “More experience with people who have actually worked in the profession... would do a lot more to prepare young journalists than any kind of textbook. Another journalists recommended role-playing—placing students in a situation in which a traumatic crime has been committed. Several journalists advocated education on the psychology and manifestations of PTSD. However, some of the journalists maintained that there are situations no amount of academic or on-the-job training will make easier. They maintained that experience is the best teacher, so long as the news organizations are equipped to provide resources, counseling, or perspective to balance that experience.

Conclusion

This study used a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the status of trauma journalism education at accredited journalism schools in the United States. The faculty survey revealed that most (75 percent) of journalism programmes do not teach stand-alone courses related to trauma journalism. In addition, more than half of the programmes (62 percent) provide little or no attention to covering trauma journalism in their courses. Significantly, prior journalism experience influences how likely professors are to teach students about covering trauma. Lack of time, resources, and interest were the main impediments to teaching trauma journalism, as well as accreditation issues. Faculty interviews revealed that covering trauma journalism is up to individual discretion, and skills for covering traumatic events often take a back seat to other basic journalism skills. The curricular analysis showed that materials for teaching trauma journalism are scarce, but for those who do teach the topic, ethics and best practices for interviewing survivors are emphasized. Finally, interviews with journalists confirmed that trauma journalism education is essential to aspiring journalists, especially when it comes to teaching students how to handle interviews and stories empathetically. Most journalists emphasized that trauma journalism education must include interaction with experienced journalists and survivors, and some

pointed to the merits of role play and understanding the science behind trauma-related disorders and effects. Still, some had doubts about the merit of trauma journalism education when it comes to helping the journalist cope with traumatic experiences, and some noted that classroom teaching and textbooks cannot substitute for real-world experience.

Based on these findings, the study offers three recommendations: First, journalism programmes must find a place and method for teaching trauma journalism coverage. Even when stand-alone courses cannot be offered, journalism education must place greater emphasis on the process of covering trauma, including best practices for approaching survivors and journalist self-care. This new focus on trauma journalism education must also include educator preparation that trains professors on how to effectively teach the subject. Second, since academics considered accreditation as an obstacle to the advancement of trauma journalism, convincing accreditation bodies to encourage trauma journalism education will potentially turn this obstacle into an incentive. ACEJMC (2012), for example, could include in its “professional values and competencies” language that encourages the trauma journalism courses and modules. Third, resources and curricular materials for teaching trauma journalism, especially hands-on exercises, must be made more readily available. Both journalism educators and practitioners expressed a desire for resources that emphasized role-playing and provided interactions with experienced journalists, survivors of trauma and counselors or therapists familiar with the effects of trauma. Finally, trauma journalism education must not overlook the importance of education for aspiring journalists on self-care, including the psychology and physical manifestations of post-traumatic stress disorder. Because the stoic culture of most newsrooms often keeps journalists from recognizing or admitting to the negative effects of covering trauma, trauma journalism education must empower journalists with enough information and skills to overcome the stigma.

This study has confirmed the strong support for teaching trauma journalism, both by educators and journalists, despite the lack of broad recognition of its value by journalism institutions, as evidenced by the rarity of its offering in journalism curricula. The study has also confirmed the belief that the main obstacles to teaching trauma journalism are lack of information, time, and money (Johnson, 1999), but has also shed light on other obstacles, such as accreditation policies and instructors’ lack of skills and knowledge of this area. In addition, the study has highlighted specifically which curricular resources are needed and which are most valued, and has recommended the most appropriate areas and instructors in which to invest. Further research in this area could focus on best practices in teaching and training aspiring journalists, as well as instructors, on trauma journalism, as well as reporting successful approaches to introducing trauma journalism curricula to universities and training programmes.

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