

Journalists at risk: looking beyond just physical safety

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Abstract

Hardly a day goes by when we are not reminded of the hazards of modern journalism. The already unacceptably high levels of intimidation, kidnapping and killing have escalated still further with the civil conflict in Iraq and Syria and the series of brutal beheadings carried out by ISIS. But while major news organisations have paid increasing attention to safeguarding the physical safety of their correspondents, and some limited support is now in place for freelancers, the issue of the mental health of journalists covering conflict is still too often an afterthought. This paper explores the emerging support mechanisms for journalists covering traumatic news events, whether that be full blown war, natural disaster, street crime or family violence. Based on the author's personal experience of working with the Dart Centre for Journalism & Trauma and on interviews with top journalists, the paper further explores new challenges emerging from social media as journalists seek to incorporate into their news reporting an increasing volume of often distressing "user generated content". The disturbingly graphic nature of this material, ranging from chemical weapons attacks in Syria to propaganda driven beheading videos, has prompted some news organisations to evolve guidelines to safeguard the mental health of often junior journalists now subjected to a daily flow of traumatic news footage on newsroom intake desks.

'Are you sure you want to see it?' an experienced correspondent in the capital, Khartoum, had asked. 'Famine shelters can mess up your hard drive.' Another advised, 'Do it on autopilot. All you need to think is: can I use this for my article?' – Joris Luyendijk.

Joris Luyendijk's account of his time as a young and inexperienced foreign correspondent in the Middle East¹ caused a minor sensation when it was first published in 2006 in his home country of the Netherlands. It wasn't so much what he wrote, a tale of everyday observation of war, violence and dictatorship from Iraq and Syria to Egypt and Sudan. Rather it was the way he told it, lifting the lid on the life of a foreign correspondent and, as The Guardian investigative journalist Nick Davies commented at the time², being so open about the tricks of a journalist's trade. That short quote from Luyendijk's book illustrates three key points that go to the heart of this paper: firstly, that it has been shown over the past 10 years that persistent exposure to traumatic news events can have serious consequences for the mental health of journalists; secondly, that most journalists develop a form of self-defence to be able to do the job (in this case going on "autopilot"); and thirdly, that it is actually rare for a journalist, in the heat of news gathering, to lose sight of the fact that somewhere in the background there is an impatient news editor demanding a good story on deadline.

This paper examines the risks to journalists' mental health that can all too easily be brushed aside or, as Luyendijk suggests, trivialised as mainstream news coverage becomes dominated by traumatic stories of war, terror attacks and natural disasters. On far too many occasions over the past decade the journalist has become the unwitting focus of these stories, with staffers and freelancers alike targeted, kidnapped and killed, from Syria to Mexico (think of Daniel Pearl, Marie Colvin, James Foley...). That has naturally put pressure on editors to provide what is now generally called hostile environment training. In the following sections, I review briefly how the threat to the physical safety of journalists has risen since the watershed attacks of September 11 in 2001 and how mainstream news organisations have sought to safeguard their staff from such risks. But my main focus is on how this increased threat level, combined with the torrent of graphic social media content now flowing into newsrooms, is having an impact on the mental wellbeing of journalists. The paper investigates the pressures facing those journalists reporting in the field, whether that be war, natural disaster or family violence, and their coping mechanisms. It then looks at the emerging risk to mental health posed by the increasing volume of distressing images being taken into news organisations on social media desks. Finally, the paper assesses evolving guidelines and best practice to safeguard the mental health of journalists. I have adopted a phenomenological approach based on interviews with journalists and my own experience, both as a foreign correspondent and editor with the international news agency Reuters and in my work over the past 10 years with the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma.³

¹ Hello Everybody! One Journalist's Search for Truth in the Middle East, see bibliography.

² His comments are included on the book jacket.

³ The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma was established in 2001. I chair the organisation's European operations. It provides training and resources for journalists covering traumatic news.

Journalists become the target

September 11 was in many ways a watershed, ushering in the “War on Terror” and a decade of attacks across the globe. It was also a watershed in terms of the physical threat to journalists and for some academics it marked the start of a trend in which countries, including the United States, have killed, injured and arrested journalists who are in a position to witness and report on violations of human rights and the rules of law (Paterson 2014, 1). Of course, the profession of journalist, and particularly that of the war correspondent, was always dangerous from the days of William Howard Russell and the Crimean War, through two world wars and Vietnam to the modern day conflicts in the Middle East. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 38 journalists have been killed in 2015 already, 25 of them targeted and murdered, while eight were caught in cross fire covering combat. Since 2001, a total of 785 journalists have been killed worldwide. While 38% of those had been covering wars, a further 20% were covering human rights abuses and a further 20% corruption stories. Syria has been the deadliest country for the past three years in a row, followed by Iraq and the Philippines. CPJ estimates 25 journalists are currently missing in Syria, presumed kidnapped, six of them from Western countries and Japan.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that this higher level of risk stems not just from an increase in global conflict but also from the technological ability of today’s media to report instantaneously from the battlefield. As the former BBC television journalist Nik Gowing (2003) observed:

The new insidious development is that because of the impact of our real time capability to bear witness immediately, we are being actively targeted by warriors, warlords, and forces of even the most highly developed governments who do not want us to see what they are doing.

The South African psychiatrist Dr Anthony Feinstein, who has pioneered studies into mental stress in journalists, sees the beheading of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl just five months after September 11 as a defining moment (2015):

Journalists are now firmly in the cross hairs of combatants and insurgents. The kidnapping and beheading of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl in 2002 sent this unmistakable, chilling message. Murdered because of who he was, an American and a Jew, it signalled to the Fifth Estate that their status on the frontlines of conflict had changed. They too had become targets.

This year the Pentagon provoked outrage by saying that war reporters may be held liable for “engaging in hostilities” or “spying, sabotage and similar acts behind enemy lines”. Press freedom groups and newspapers urged the Department of Defense to change its *Law of War Manual*, which, they argued, could provide ammunition for repressive regimes to censor and criminalize journalists.

Given this perception that journalists are now legitimate targets, major news organisations have invested heavily in hostile environment training⁴. That trend started in the 1990s as the Balkan wars took their toll and has gained impetus with the conflicts erupting throughout the Middle East since the onset of the Arab Spring.

⁴ Two of the most prominent companies in the UK, AKE and Centurion, were founded in 1991 and 1995 respectively by former British soldiers.

Courses tend to concentrate on training journalists from major news organisations such as Reuters, the Associated Press, the BBC, CNN, while charities such as the Rory Peck Trust⁵ try to cover the needs of freelancers who do not enjoy the same insurance protection as “staff” correspondents.

Putting the mental health of journalists on the map

While the concern over physical safety is, then, largely uncontested (Tumber 2002, 260), and has clear roots in the rising threat levels attached to journalism, the same cannot be said for mental health.

Bruce Shapiro, the executive director of the Dart Center in New York, maintains⁶ that despite progress, there is still a lot further to go to embed an awareness of mental health issues in the culture of journalism. There are, he says, still cases where newsrooms treat the mental wellbeing of journalists as a “tick box” afterthought in an environment that concentrates on physical safety. Studies by Feinstein since September 11 have started to challenge deeply ingrained attitudes of the macho newsroom. Feinstein’s first study, published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in 2002, was followed by research published in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* in 2005. Together, they exploded the myth that the profession of journalism is immune from psychological stress. His research shows that for correspondents who have covered five or more conflicts, 29% suffer from some form of traumatic stress.⁷ I will examine training in more detail later in this paper but wanted to set out first some observations on the experience of journalists covering traumatic news events.

Through a series of anonymized interviews, I have attempted to explore firstly what coping mechanisms journalists employ to shield themselves from the strains of covering traumatic news stories and secondly the nature of advice and best practice now emerging from major news organisations and the Dart Center. The 20 interviews, which I conducted as part of a larger phenomenological study into the affective drivers of journalism practice, focused on those who routinely covered or handled news that could be categorised as traumatic. It is during such news events that the powerful professional norms based around objectivity are challenged and come under threat (Rosenstiel & Kovach 2005; Schudson 2002). And it is at these times that the doubts and hesitations of journalists rise to the surface. The journalists I interviewed covered a variety of “beats” and had varying levels of experience since it is not just high profile foreign correspondents who cover traumatic news or interview victims of violence. Almost every journalist can expect to interview those caught up in violent or traumatic news stories during the course of a career – from global conflict and natural disasters to car crashes, child abuse and domestic crime. Many journalists find violence on their doorstep on their local news beat (Simpson & Coté 2006, 2).

I selected journalists who had been involved in coverage of some major news stories from a pre-internet era and some from today’s world of social media. These

⁵ The trust was set up in 1995 in memory of Rory Peck, a freelance cameraman who was killed in Moscow in October 1993. He had been filming a gun battle during Russia’s October coup and was caught in crossfire.

⁶ Interview with the author.

⁷ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is defined by the European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies as a series of stress-related symptoms that last for more than one month after someone experiences, witnesses or is confronted by events that include death, or threat of death or serious injury. See: <https://www.estss.org/learn-about-trauma/dsm-iv-definition/>

included the 1996 shooting of 16 primary school children and their teacher in the Scottish city of Dunblane. At the time, the massacre shocked an uncomprehending nation. There were no prior reference points, no massacre of American school children at Columbine (1999), no shooting spree at Winnenden in south west Germany (2009) and no mass murder of 77 teenagers on the Norwegian island of Utoya (2011). The second set of stories comprises two high profile events in 2013 – the killing in broad daylight on a London street of an off-duty soldier and the use of chemical weapons against children in a suburb of Damascus during the Syrian civil war. Both involved liberal use of graphic “user generated” still images and video, captured on mobile phones by passers-by or those caught up in the incidents. In the case of the Woolwich killing of drummer Rigby, his attackers actually waited for passers-by to film their statements on mobile phones.

My interviews showed that because of the lack of training around issues of trauma and emotion, journalists tend to develop their own ways of coping, effectively using a system of trial and error and “learning on the job”. The most commonly cited approach was one of a determined attempt to remain *detached*, a key marker of journalism’s objectivity norm. The other method often discussed was the practice of operating on “*autopilot*”, relying on experience and driven by the focus and adrenalin that comes from deadline pressure. My argument in this paper is that while both positions uphold the objectivity norm, they are also affective stances used by journalists, as a matter of conscious reflection or unconsciously, to protect themselves from what can be distressing events. At the same time, these mechanisms are also fragile and can break down under extreme stress.

Objectivity as a coping mechanism

In its simplest definition, the objectivity norm, which still enjoys talismanic status amongst many (Rees & Richards 2011), is said to ensure that journalists report factually on traumatic news events without injecting their own emotions or prejudices. It is the classic definition of the strategic ritual of objectivity (Mindich 1998; Tuchman 1972), relying on such hallmarks as detachment, impartiality and fact-based reporting and placing the journalist in the role of the unaffected observer. From my interviews, however, it was clear that detachment, or the ability to operate on a form of autopilot, at the same time serves as a coping mechanism to help shut out the disturbing subject material of story.

One of the senior newspaper journalists I spoke to who had covered Dunblane told me that his detachment had not been a conscious stance, but rather an instinctive combination of professional training, adrenalin and pressure to deliver the story:

...the adrenalin kicks in. Your whole concern is ‘I’m covering a very big story here. This is a real test. I’ve got to get this right. Where is my material going to come from?’ And that, you can argue, that is a form of detachment in the sense that you’re not getting sucked into an emotional situation. You’re dealing with it in a sort of highly energised professional way. But I can’t put my hand on my heart to say that that was a conscious thing.

A senior broadcast journalists drafted in to cover the shooting told a similar story. I asked her what she remembered most. It wasn’t the emotion but the stress:

There's something that kicks in when you've got a big story which (means) you tend to lose a bit of empathy to be honest with the story itself and what's happened. You obviously know that it's kind of the most terrible thing ever. You know that but what you feel when you're running an operation like that is high stress rather than emotion. Well, that is the emotion.

Another broadcast journalist talked about the relentlessness of the 24-hour news cycle and how this afforded a form of protection:

It was very hard and I think because I had so many outlets to service, if you see what I mean, and because I was so busy and because people were asking for two-ways all the time and people were doing, you know, bulletins, et cetera, and they wanted voice pieces. I remember coming home at about 4:00 in the morning and washing my face, and I remember looking at the kids sleeping in bed, and then I just literally had to switch off and go back into, you know, reporter mode...

For each of these journalists it was only later, once the Dunblane story had begun to move down the news agenda, that the emotions of the grieving parents began to catch up with them. The ability to take a detached stance had kicked in during the heat of the coverage but when asked to reflect on this, with 20 years hindsight, the detachment became rationalised as a hallmark of professional journalism and was couched in journalism's normative framework. Equally, in discussing coverage of contemporary stories such as the Woolwich killing and Gouta chemical weapons attack, the phrase "I didn't have time to stop and think" often occurred. And the professional norm of keeping the broadcast correspondent's emotions off screen was still very powerful. One experienced foreign correspondent was quite open about how she tried to separate or compartmentalise the professional and the personal:

To be perfectly honest, what happens with me I get very upset usually at the time, but the very upset I do off camera. You know, I do get very upset I cry quite a lot. I'm not ashamed of that, I think its fine. I'm a human being for God's sake. But I don't do that bit on camera because that bit is losing control and I don't think you should lose control. And then if I'm honest I get over it pretty quickly and get on with things, what you have to do.

One crime reporter I spoke to, who had been covering a spate of child abuse stories, told me how easy it was to identify with victims. However, she checked herself every time she felt she was becoming too involved and stood back to protect herself.

But these stances of detachment and autopilot did not always work. In some cases, faced with the distress of those people caught up in a big story, journalists *disengaged* to an extent that went far beyond the normative stance of detachment. That was often linked to a sense of guilt from intruding into personal grief and effectively making a commercial product out of suffering. One foreign correspondent said:

As a journalist, you often feel like, especially when you're interviewing people about bad things, it's kind of like the subtext of what you're doing is walking up to people and saying, 'Can I press on your wound?' you know?

‘Can I find out just how bad you feel?’

I encountered several examples of avoidance although this is something few journalists would admit. I was told how some reporters, instructed by their news desks to interview parents of children killed in Dunblane, made sure that their approaches were spotted by the police and were therefore stopped in their tracks. None of these journalists had received until recently any training about how to protect their own mental wellbeing nor had they been taught how to interview victims and survivors. The common approach was one of relying on the objectivity code to place distance between the journalist and subject. When it came to interviewing, it was a matter of learning by trial and error, or, as Rees calls it (2013, 418), practising on the public.

How social media content is creating a new challenge in the newsroom

The explosion of social media has opened up a new threat to the mental wellbeing of journalists operating in what had previously been thought of as a safe newsroom environment. It is hard to think of today’s news without focusing on the all-pervasive nature of digital images but it is easy to forget about the often inexperienced journalists sifting through gruesome pictures and video footage on social media desks. While many journalists look down on user generated content as not being “real journalism”, its commercial value has been widely recognised. Graphic content, recently associated with beheading videos generated by ISIS’s publicity machine, raise the emotional content of news. And online news organisations have started to pick up on the power of emotions to drive traffic and promote audience engagement (Myrik & Wojdyski 2015, 15). Much has been written about the immediacy and affective impact of the images of September 11 (Allan 2013, Chouliaraki 2006, Grusin 2010, Seidler 2013) or the gruesome “selfies” taken by U.S. soldiers as they tortured prisoners of war at the Abu Ghraib jail in Iraq (Grusin 2010, Hoskins & O’Loughlin 2010). But the focus has been on the affective force of such images on the public rather than on journalists handling such material.

Some of those I interviewed were young and starting out on their careers while others were more experienced and overseeing social media desks. Many such desks (e.g. at the BBC⁸) sprung up in the wake of the July 7 London bombings in 2005 after those caught up in the attack sent in mobile phone pictures from the bombed Underground carriages. The journalists handling user generated images are typically inexperienced, hired for their web-savvy skills, sometimes freelance, and are operating in a completely different environment from those in the field on assignment as a foreign correspondent. It emerged that the work on a broadcast intake desk or in trawling social media can be a solitary task and devoid of the camaraderie that can help shield a group of journalists sent in to cover a breaking news story. One experienced broadcast foreign correspondent drew clear differences:

I think if you are a journalist who goes into the field and does ‘dodgy’ stuff, you develop camaraderie with fellow journalists, you go through a shared experience and you bond – all of that can help you talk to people and get

⁸ Helen Boaden, the BBC’s Director of News at the time of the London bombings in 2005, identified the attacks as a watershed and “the point at which the BBC knew that newsgathering had changed forever (2008)”. Within 24 hours, the BBC received 1,000 stills and videos, 3,000 texts and 20,000 e-mails.

through it. But what these people do (on an intake desk) is really solitary and confined and they have no camaraderie and no bonding because that's not how their job goes. Who will they have the dark humour with and say, hey, that was a shitty day ... that's why in newsrooms there should be more of a recognition of what they are doing and support.

Some of the desk staff I spoke to showed symptoms of stress, avoidance and withdrawal, which in turn can have a contagious impact on the wider newsroom. Those sitting in front of screens all day taking in a diet of Middle East conflict and beheadings are highly vulnerable, are not always an integrated part of the newsroom culture. One senior editor told me how to begin with the news organisation had run staff through five-day eight-hour shifts on the social media desk until becoming aware of the impact and quickly introducing a policy to safeguard staff. The editor recalled how one of the young deskers, hired for his social media skills and shielded from the rest of the newsroom by the headphones he was wearing, started continually making ducking motions. It turned out he had had been watching a video from Syria of two young Shiite boys being tortured by ISIS. And he had been reviewing similar material all day. It had been so far outside his cultural points of reference that he started investigating such material after work to try to understand what was going on. The editor explained:

...he was just desperate to try and understand it and that sent him back to the material again and again. Even when he was out of work and -- his own personal Twitter lines were -- at that time were not separate from work. So he was trawling this stuff after work and accessing these videos and watching them. He admitted, you know, it was -- he admitted he was afraid he'd become addicted to this stuff, but it was in an effort to understand it.

An awareness of the need for training emerges

Four years ago, Chris Cramer, the experienced BBC, CNN and Reuters journalist, lamented the lack of awareness around trauma:

It has taken the media industry far too long to realise that it is perfectly natural for journalists, like other people, to feel the effects of trauma ... the media need to wake up to traumatic stress as a subject worthy of debate.⁹

However, slowly but surely, there appears to be a change. One catalyst has been the harrowing experiences on social media desks. In addition, the work by the psychiatrist Feinstein has documented the exposure of journalists to trauma and, most recently, vicarious or secondary trauma (2014); and best practice training by the Dart Center has begun to be incorporated more into hostile environment courses. Shapiro believes there is still further to go but reports a clear rise in the number of crisis reporting courses that promote an awareness of trauma issues and peer support mechanisms originally used in the military and by "first responders" such as police, ambulance and fire crews. A global initiative launched in February 2015 saw 70

⁹ Cited in Masse, M (2011). *Trauma Journalism – On Deadline in Harm's Way*. New York: Continuum Books.

media organisations sign up to a set of safety principles, including the need for psychological as well as physical self-care.

The industry has generally moved fast to tackle the issue of graphic images. In a note to BBC news staff in September 2014, Managing Editor Keith Blackmore wrote:

In recent weeks we have seen some exceptionally distressing examples of graphic imagery of people's violent deaths distributed by means of agencies, Twitter, Facebook and other social media. This trend is likely to continue and that means BBC staff will have to go on confronting such material in order to report it accurately to our audiences. We are aware that this work puts a great deal of strain on some members of staff.... *No one should feel they have to watch any of this content, at any time, and may indicate this to their manager without fear of consequence.*¹⁰

That pledge to respect a journalist's right not to watch content echoes recent moves by news organizations to acknowledge that journalists may not want to cover war zones or harrowing stories and that this should not be labelled a sign of weakness or harm their career. The BBC guidelines reflect best practice principles set out in August 2014 by the Dart Center, which also draw on the concept of detachment. These stress no one should be asked to view graphic imagery repeatedly; links to such material should not be widely distributed within a newsroom; and that a senior news executive should be responsible for deciding what content is used for public dissemination. News organisations such as ITN and Thomson Reuters have taken note of the need to send internal warnings about graphic material, vary shift patterns and introduce outside training and employee assistance programmes.

Conclusion

Given the overwhelming impression that today's news is dominated by conflict, terror and disaster, it would be natural to assume that journalists would be trained to deal with victims and survivors of trauma and to take care of their own mental wellbeing.¹¹ It is, however, only in the most recent past that a greater understanding and awareness of such issues has begun to emerge. The interviews I conducted showed that, left to their own devices, journalists tend to fall back on their own coping mechanisms when faced with traumatic news. The professional norm of detachment, while on the face of it upholding the ideal of objectivity, affords a measure of distance and serves as such a device. At the same time, every day routine and the competitive pressures to deliver the story can sometimes allow the most horrific news to be covered on autopilot without the grief of others intruding into a journalist's feelings. But these coping mechanisms are fragile and sometimes break down, leading to classic symptoms of traumatic stress. The torrent of user generated images now flooding into newsrooms, and the commercial awareness that such content can increase public engagement (and revenues), has added a new threat to the mental wellbeing of journalists. But that has also given fresh impetus to efforts to promote awareness of mental health issues, formulate guidelines and increase training. Today, several major news organisations have begun to pay more attention

¹⁰ My italics

¹¹ e.g. financial journalists are usually trained in the basics of macro-economics or accounting.

to such issues. Yet as the Dart Center's Shapiro observes, this is patchy and lacks the more consistent approach that is now the rule with hostile environment training.

(Abstract, text and bibliography = 5,000 words)

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