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## The Trauma Factor:

Reporting on Violence and Tragedy

*Gavin Rees*

“Whenever you and hundreds and thousands of sane people trying to get out of a place and a little bunch of madmen trying to get in, you know the latter are reporters.”

H.R. Knickerbocker, Hearst Reporter in the 1930s  
(quoted in Randall, 2007: 24)

“Then, and later, I felt nothing. I never talked about what happened in those places, but I wrote about them. I disagreed that reporters suffered from trauma; after all, I argued, we were the ones who got out. It was the people we left behind that suffered, that died. I did not suffer the syndromes, I did not have the shakes. I did not have psychotic tendencies. I was not an alcoholic or drug addict who needed to blot out memories. I was, I thought, perfectly fine and functioning.”

Janine di Giovanni, senior foreign correspondent,  
The Times (2011: 139-40)

Anyone who turns on a television, opens a news browser, or leafs through a newspaper will find evidence to suggest that the world can be a violent and capricious place. On the 24-hour news channels, production teams race to get as close as they can to riots, shooting sprees, armed conflict, natural disasters and other situations where violence has become the focus of public attention. In local news too there is a steady flow of trauma narratives - the traffic accident, the street stabbing, the fatal house fire. Some trauma stories seem to flare up spontaneously, others only meet the public eye if investigative journalists put weeks of systematic labour in uncovering them:

abuse in children's homes, the hidden complications of unsafe pharmaceuticals, government-backed torture campaigns, are all stories of this kind.

Trauma is news, and the contribution to the public good that journalism can make here should be clear enough. That said, no area of coverage arouses greater ambivalence. We may find ourselves gripped by the news, while simultaneously wishing that we had never seen it. News on trauma has a high signal value: it is attractive because it tells us about threats that can affect ourselves or are communities, and it can galvanise active responses that may reaffirm our sense that life has value (Granatt, 2004). And equally, news of suffering can frighten and demoralise us, leaving us feeling overcome and helpless (Newman and Nelson, 2012).

The media is often accused of overplaying coverage of violence and tragedy and of using its inherent emotional charge to boost audience figures and circulation (See for instance discussions in Seaton, 2005; Moeller, 1999). At times that may be so, but closing our eyes to violence and tragedy hardly seems a viable path. How, for instance, would have casting a veil of silence over the mass killing of young Norwegians on the Island of Utøya in July 2011 or the continuing consequences of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, have served the public interest? These stories need to be told: the question that remains is how.

Insightful trauma reporting can promote accountability, bolster the resilience of individuals and help the public to meaningfully engage in issues that have a determining value to the quality of their lives. Partial and inaccurate reporting or journalism that is high on entertainment value but low on insight and sensitivity, on the other hand, is likely to compound distress, marginalise victims and survivors, and, in general, diminish a society's capacity to face key decisions.

There is nothing necessarily straightforward about doing this well. On all levels and in nearly all walks of the profession, journalists will face intense, practical dilemmas regarding how to cover trauma effectively. Since journalism first began, local journalists have been knocking on doors and asking bereaved parents how their children died. But what does it take to do that without making things worse for the family? Moreover, there are also audiences to think of: news can influence public behaviour. How might an editor frame the suicide of a celebrity

in a way that is less likely to inspire vulnerable individuals to take their own lives? Or how might a broadcast news-team produce a package on a mass killing in Syria that effectively communicates its horrors without impelling viewers to switch off and disconnect from the issues? And if that is not enough, we also need to remember that the news is brought to us by human beings who may have to work with dark and disturbing material for prolonged periods of time. How do journalists handle the toxicity of such topics as war and sexual abuse without it leaking into their personal lives and corroding their own health and relationships?

Given the urgency of this, one might think that journalism as a professional activity pays significant attention to preparing media workers to meet these challenges. Traditionally this has not been the case, unfortunately. Debate about ethics and reporting standards in journalism has a long and distinguished history, and instruction in ethics is a core part of nearly every professional and university training curriculum. But such framings rely largely on a discussion of abstract rules and principles; what they lack is something we are calling here the trauma factor, namely precise, detailed and substantive discussion of what violence and loss do to people. A trauma literate approach has sight of two interconnected sets of questions: what is human distress and how might trauma be managed? Before going on to examine the implications of this for innovation in journalism, we need to look at the animal itself and see how empirical research into trauma shapes the subject.

What is trauma?

Trauma is old as human experience. Accurate depictions of the consequences of violence abound in the world's great literature. Writers and poets, as diverse as Homer, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Wilfred Owen and Sylvia Plath, have scattered throughout their work passages that express a profound awareness of how people are altered by violence. In the twentieth century, the experience of each of the two world wars led to a flurry of scientific research and new understanding of the mental health implications of trauma, but in both cases the level of interest fell off during peacetime and the new ground was lost.

The development of trauma research as a coherent scientific

field is relatively recent. It stems from the late 1970s when two separate groups of mental health clinicians, one working with combat veterans from Vietnam and the other with female victims of sexual violence, began to notice surprising connections between their respective study populations (Herman, 1997). Both groups were working with patients who had difficulty in neatly filing away memories of what had happened to them. Some would experience vivid sense impressions returning, unbidden and with such force that it would be like it was happening all over again; however great the separation in space or time, it would feel to them as if they were back in combat or being raped again. The researchers also noticed significant changes in how people related to others. Sometimes victims and survivors complained of emotional numbness and of losing the capacity to feel love and intimacy towards people who had been close to them. At others, they reported such reactions as intense, hard to control anger, lapses in concentration and feelings of radical insecurity. These could make it difficult for them to manage relationships and hold down work. The people affected often used the metaphor of a glass wall - they felt that an invisible barrier had come down and cut them off from the world as they had previously experienced it. In the accounts of both combat veterans and rape victims, shame and isolation were common themes. However much family members, friends and colleagues might urge them to move on, they felt stuck and unable to find a combination of buttons and levers that would lift the glass cage.

The precise constellations of these patterns differed from person to person, but there was enough commonality to lead to the diagnosis of a new condition, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the development of various highly-effective treatment strategies. The identification of PTSD was an important breakthrough in the understanding of trauma but one that we should not be too distracted by in terms of the discussion in this chapter. The term can have a rather mesmerising effect on the public debate. In the popular imagination, there is a tendency to view trauma as a binary thing: one either gets “traumatised” - i.e. ill - or one does not. What is often lost is a sense of the manifold ways in which people’s performance and decision-making may be altered in traumatic situations. As we will discuss in more detail throughout this chapter, this has

profound implications for journalism. Trauma can subtly impact the judgement of both reporters and sources, in ways that is quite independent of whether anyone on either side of that equation develops PTSD or not. Modern trauma science has far broader implications than just the health dimension.

Trauma comes from the ancient Greek noun for “wound” but it may be more useful to understand that it comes from a verb stem that means to pierce into. When physicians talk about trauma, they are referring to physical damage to the body. Here, we are considering the capacity of an event to pierce into the psyche, altering how people think and feel. In standard definitions, for an event to be classified as traumatic it has to involve exposure to actual or threatened death, injury or violation of the physical integrity of the person, as happens in rape. One need not necessarily witness an event directly to be affected by it: hearing on the phone about the death of somebody close could qualify as a trauma because of the centrality that person has in one’s own identity (NICE, 2005).

Just because an event is traumatic, and is likely to pierce into the psyche, doesn’t mean that it will necessarily have an impact that will be adverse and long lasting. The event and the response to it need to be distinguished (Newman and Nelson, 2012). When confronted with death or danger people experience a range of short-term automatic reactions. These have evolved over millions of years to aid our survival; as humans we share parts of the inbuilt defence apparatus that is common to all mammals. When the brain registers an external threat, a complex cascade of hormones is released: blood-flow increases to key muscles so that they can work harder; reaction times decrease, and the body feels less pain and bleeds less if cut. On a perceptual level, people may become more responsive to sudden movements in their peripheral field of vision or find themselves unusually focussed on the task at hand, as if operating on autopilot. These reactions are often very useful in a survival situation, but they are also pre-verbal - they happen largely independently of the brain structures that deal with words and abstract thought. For journalists working at the scenes of disasters, this is something of a double-edged sword. On one hand not reflecting too deeply may help one to function amid carnage and stay on task, but, on the other, the same tunnelling of focus may lead to key details or important lines

of inquiry being missed. In addition to making good survival choices, journalists also need their intellectual faculties to be fully online. The neurology of trauma suggests that we do not have as much conscious control over our reactions as we might like to believe (Wise, 2009).

The level of biochemical activation in the brain usually settles down in a few days or weeks after the threat has passed. In that time, people may continue to experience unsettling reactions such as intrusive thoughts - for instance, bad dreams or flashbacks; or high levels of arousal, leading to irritability and difficulty in sleeping. People may experience numbing, dissociation - feeling spaced out and disconnected - or an intense need to avoid reminders of what happened to them. None of these reactions are unusual and nor do they imply any long-term trauma trouble. Sometimes, though, such patterns can become more persistently etched into the psyche. If someone is still experiencing a wide-range of significant reactions two months after an event and the threat associated with it has passed, he or she may be suffering from PTSD or another trauma-related condition, such as post-traumatic depression, but that is something that should be assessed by a specialist clinician (NICE, 2005).

Trauma is not just reducible to survival brain chemistry. As humans, we have intellectual and existential dimensions to our lives that our mammalian forebears lack. We strive after meaning and invest ourselves in conceptions of justice, fairness and what constitutes a good life. We need to understand how bad things can happen, and want to feel that we are understood and valued by others. Violent acts often defy people's ability to make sense of them.

At first, researchers assumed that the level of objective fear - i.e. how unremitting that stress is and how likely a situation might be to result in actual injury - was the key index of the traumatic impact of an event. But the presence of human agency is also important. An accident at work takes on a very different nature, if it turns out that a close friend has deliberately sabotaged the machinery. And man-made disasters trouble people more than ones whose causation is purely natural. The psychiatrist, Jonathan Shay, who works with combat veterans, uses the expression "moral injury" to describe the increased psychological vulnerability that soldiers experience if they believe that they have been forced by circumstances or their leadership to partici-

pate in actions that are morally wrong. Combat trauma can lead “an unravelling of character” which may in turn result in further abuses. For Shay, the quality of leadership is key. Soldiers surrender a portion of their autonomy to their officers, and need to believe both that they are fighting for a just cause and that their leaders have their best interests at heart. Betrayal or disillusionment with a cause bite particularly deeply (Shay, 1994).

Interestingly, data is beginning to emerge which suggests that journalists may also fare worse psychologically if they feel guilty about how they treat their sources, or if they feel betrayed in some way by their editors, for instance if a story is unnecessarily spiked. Believing one’s work has value is known to be psychologically protective; conversely reporters who feel that their journalism has failed to bring the change that they hoped it would - for example new legislation to end an abuse or aid for a famine-struck region - may be more vulnerable (Browne et al., 2012). One seemingly perplexing addition to this is how ready people often are to blame themselves for events for which they had no direct responsibility. Trauma and guilt reactions are often closely entwined. We will come back to this later but it is also one of the reasons why journalists need to be particularly carefully about implying blame when discussing trauma with sources or with colleagues who have been caught up in traumatic situations.

### Assessing impact

In general we tend to overestimate the impact of certain categories of trauma and underplay others. As journalists are just as prone to this as others in society, injecting some figures into the discussion may be helpful. Grief per se is not necessarily as incapacitating and long lasting as some might imagine. Research by Bonanno and Kaltman (2011) into the impact of significant bereavements, such as the death of a loved one, found that only between 10 to 15 per cent of people experience grief reactions that continue to impair their normal functioning several years after the loss. People exposed to natural disasters, such as earthquakes and flooding, also tend to show high rates of resilience, although the impact is likely to be greater where communities are poor and unable to replace lost resources (Norris et al., 2002).

The ratio starts to shift, however, the more human agency is involved. Particular kinds of interpersonal violence, such as sex-

ual assault and abuse are associated with high rates of traumatic impact. A key study in the US found that 45.9 per cent of women and 65 per cent of men who reported rape as their most upsetting trauma developed PTSD (Kessler et al., 1995). These figures are significantly higher than the rates one would commonly see in soldiers returning from combat. Nevertheless war trauma and natural disasters seem to play more prominently in the news discussion of trauma than sexual violence. A Dart Centre survey of 1256 academic articles on journalism practice that reference trauma found that mass casualty public events, such as the Iraq War and the Boxing Day Tsunami were all well represented but only 2.2 per cent discussed sexual assault (Nelson and Newman, 2010). Violence that is geographically nearer to us and buried within networks of personal acquaintance, it seems, is harder to focus on and gets underplayed in a way that the more spectacular public events do not.

Epidemiological data for the impact on journalists is patchy. Depending on the study, research on US journalists suggests that between 86 to 100 per cent have witnessed a traumatic event as part of their work. In terms of the impact of that exposure, research worldwide has found possible rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, ranging between, 4 and 20 per cent, depending on the group studied (Newman and Nelson, 2012). War reporters are at the upper range of that spectrum with high rates of PTSD as well as depression and alcohol abuse. According to one study, the lifetime prevalence of PTSD in that group is 28.6 per cent (Feinstein et al., 2002). While that may seem very high, given the density of atrocity and life-threat these journalists had been exposed to over careers as war reporters that spanned an average of 15 years, the figure might be better read as a testament to resilience rather than vulnerability. (It is less than one would commonly find for civilian populations living in war zones.) Unfortunately, good data are lacking on media workers who find themselves stuck in a perpetual disaster situation that also happens to be their home, such as journalists caught up in the drug wars in Mexico or covering political violence in Pakistan, for example.

The implications for journalism practice

Given the importance of this, one might expect that journalism as an industry invests significant effort in preparing media work-



ers to understand how trauma may impact upon their sources, themselves, or their news choices. However, it is only relatively recently that journalists have on a grassroots and a managerial level started to look out beyond their own disciplinary boundaries in order to gain insight from other professionals who are engaged in trauma work. This is a little odder than it first looks. Other genres of journalism have always insisted on expertise. No financial editor, for instance, would send a reporter out to cover the financial markets without an understanding of what money supply is or how bond yields work. Nevertheless journalists who have no formal understanding of grief and trauma reactions are still routinely sent out to knock on the doors of the bereaved, and war correspondents are expected to perform at their best in conflict zones with no training in managing the trauma reactions that they or their colleagues may experience.

This picture contrasts with other first responders like the police and the fire brigade. Local journalists often arrive at the scene of house fires and traffic accidents soon after (or sometimes before) the emergency services do, and foreign correspondents are exposed to many of the same horrors that relief workers and soldiers are. Family liaison officers in the police, for instance, receive extensive training and on-going professional development in how to approach people who have been bereaved or attacked. Appropriate communication skills are now an integral part of contemporary medical training. The military and emergency services also have support structures and training to help them manage their own exposure to trauma. These structures barely exist in journalism.

To be clear, it should be stressed, that facing trauma squarely is not just a problem for journalism. By its nature it is a challenge for anybody. When MacDuff in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* returns from witnessing the slaughter at the king's court, he describes scenes of horror that "Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name..." For MacDuff, the events he has witnessed are literally unspeakable, so aggressive to his senses that they feel prior to language. But nevertheless he also feels impelled to give shape to the horror and to tell others. This double-bind is what Herman (1997) calls the dialectic of approach and avoidance. It is a dance that all trauma reporters are locked into. Their job is to find words for events and feelings, which not only may they struggle to express, but which

their sources themselves may have great difficulty in articulating. We may be caught between the contradictory desires to both bury the truth and to dig it up (Newman and Nelson, 2012). Trauma reporting is clearly no easy task and one that is likely to be freighted with best efforts, compromises and, in some cases, unavoidable mistakes.

Many journalists are highly skilled at navigating these contradictions and develop a deep intuition of how to tread lightly and respectfully when working with victims and survivors. The problem is that there is very little training in this, and so journalists are left to themselves to find out what works and what doesn't largely by trail and error, by practicing on the public. There is also surprisingly little peer-to-peer discussion of these issues, which further reduces the opportunities for experienced journalists who are good at trauma work to pass their approach onto others (Richards and Rees, 2011; Simpson and Boggs, 1999).

The industry does have a series of ethical codes that are designed to maintain standards and to prevent exploitation of vulnerable people. These, however, do not provide much in the way of practical guidance. They lack substantive discussion of how people experience traumatic situations, and without this it is almost impossible to sensibly frame the real world dilemmas that reporters encounter on the ground. For instance, the Editors Code issued by the UK Press Complaints Commission, encourages journalists to show sympathy and behave "sensitively" when intruding into "grief or shock" - note the code doesn't reference trauma explicitly (for a discussion of this see Rees et al., 2012). But how does one define sensitive? The same lack of specificity bedevils much of the academic writing on journalistic ethics. A traditional ethics course may draw reference to the importance of avoiding unnecessary distress, but one needs to know more about what that distress is composed of and what is likely to aggravate it. If these are lacking, practical dilemmas are likely to be overlooked. Why are certain questions likely to render a rape victim ashamed and inarticulate, even many years after the original sexual assault? How does one respond if an interviewee breaks down into tears in an encounter that an interviewer may personally find frightening and guilt-inducing? Why do victims often become so enraged by even small, seemingly trivial, inaccuracies in published copy? And so on.

One block to conceptualising these issues may come from

something that lies buried deep within the intellectual furniture of journalism. If news-making has an ideology, a working world view that most of its practitioners share, top of that list might be the idea that a journalist should be focused on the world out there, on the people and their stories, rather than on themselves. There are genres of journalism that gain their strength from personal reportage - cultural criticism and magazine writing for example - but generally the consensus in current affairs reporting is that it is stronger when the journalist is firmly in the background. If a village is destroyed by an artillery bombardment, the audience is more interested in what has happened to the villagers than how the journalists themselves feel about it.

However, the valuable precept that it is not about the journalist can segue into a more general presumption that not only should the journalist not get in the way of the story but, in a sense, that he or she is not really there at all. In this schema, the journalist is like an optical device that allows images from the world to pass through, without him or herself, or the phenomena under observation, being in any sense affected. What is being communicated is pure objective reality.

There is not the space here to go into a fuller discussion of objectivity, its allied notions of fairness and impartiality, and its connection with the industrial logic of journalism production. (For possible approaches to this interesting, if somewhat labyrinthine, topic compare: Bourdieu, 1998; Deuze, 2005; Ward, 2005.) The most important point to make here about the myth of the unaffected observer is that it is just not true - the reporter is there, and responds to the events by virtue of his or her status as an embodied human being.

Philip Williams, a correspondent for Australia's ABC was at the Beslan school siege, in which 331 hostages were killed, 176 of whom were children. Like many of reporters who covered that horrific incident, Williams had difficulty in adjusting back to home life and relating to his colleagues and family afterwards. Reflecting on the impact those killings, he said:

*"It is really important that we get our senior people to acknowledge that a) bad things happen and that we are human, and that we are.. just as vulnerable as any other member of the community.... otherwise we are setting ourselves*

*apart, aren't we? We are sort of saying that somehow being a journalist magically makes us bulletproof and it doesn't.*"  
(Dart Centre Australasia and MacLeod)

Williams is discussing an extreme situation, but even with less overwhelming trauma stories, the content and the human interactions involved in sourcing them have resonances that are at play within the journalist. Williams is also drawing our attention to an apparent double standard. We expect people in our stories to be affected by events and we believe our audiences have an almost insatiable appetite for human-interest stories and vivid emotional copy, but often we cast ourselves as unaffected observers, more interested in facts and the technical manipulation of words and images than in feelings. (For a longer discussion of this and the talismanic role the word objectivity has in journalism, see Richards and Rees, 2011). This is an oversimplification, of course, but there is certainly something suspicious about the idea that professional observers are and should be entirely, or to any degree, unaffected by the suffering they report on. A subtle everyday discounting of personal impact is nevertheless something of a norm in the profession, one that potentially handicaps anybody hoping to do effective trauma journalism.

A feeling of invulnerability may admittedly be useful in situations in which courage is being tested, but this discounting may make it harder for journalists to register and fully factor in their own responses to trauma. This has three potential sets of consequences. First, the straight health risks of doing intensive trauma work might be missed. PTSD, depression, compromised immune system response, alcoholism, etc. can all lead to missed deadlines and failed assignments and, ultimately, derail careers and personal relationships. Secondly, there is the danger that recognition of the more nuanced ways in which trauma affects both how sources relate to journalists, and how journalists do their journalism, may be impeded. These tend to get missed under the mesmerising glare that the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder exerts on the discussion. Trauma influences working performance in many ways. It is not unusual for journalists on traumatic assignments to experience sharp irritability, distrust of others, fixation on limited dimensions of the story, or lapses in concentration and memory, all of which can lead to poor

decision making and errors in news judgement. The ability to calibrate risk accurately may also suffer as a result of trauma exposure. Journalists, for instance, may become so attuned to the buzz of danger that it starts to feel more normal and everyday than their lives before. People in this situation may even start to find safer environments uncomfortable and alienating and seek to return to places where 'being on edge' feels like a better fit. The converse can also happen: rather than feeling more alive and intensely there in dangerous situations, the accumulative abrasion of covering death may leave journalists feeling apathetic and unconcerned for their own safety or that of colleagues. In neither case is risk judgment likely to be optimal.

And lastly, being aware of one's own reactions to trauma is an essential factor in understanding how to work with sources more effectively. In interviews, the difficulty journalists have in digesting the traumatic content of what they are hearing can have a knock-on effect on interviewees, as well as on the quality of information obtained. Research suggests that being present with somebody and listening to raw testimony is a more demanding form of emotional labour than just gaining intellectual familiarity with the material. In a famous study, Harber and Pennebaker found differences in skin conductivity between subjects who were shown film of holocaust survivors describing their experiences and those who only read similar material (cited in Brewin, 2003 :19).

Listeners, when confronted with distressing material, may find themselves experiencing a need to change the subject or to press their own versions of events onto the person speaking. The denser the trauma content, the greater the challenges an interviewer is likely to have in containing their own reactions. Trauma victims and survivors will often go over the same events again and again in an attempt to make sense of them. It is not unknown for listeners - including journalists - to blank out, or feel anger, and even, in some cases, aggression, when confronted with problems that they themselves do not see a solution to and which may arouse feelings of helplessness.

Earlier we mentioned the willingness of many victims and survivors to blame themselves for things which were done to them and which were thus not their fault. Unfortunately, onlookers often have an opposite need to blame the blameless.

Psychologists call this variety of other-blame hindsight bias. That is the strong motivation people may have to maintain a sense of their own invulnerability through seeking out reasons why a disturbing event could not have happened to them. The logic is: 'I'd have done something different and so I'd have been fine.' "Thus rape victims," as Chris Brewin (2003: 20-2) writes, "are blamed for what they were wearing or where they were walking, for not fighting back, or for being unable to read the minds of the men who attacked them." (Note there is nothing objective about this flavour of rationalising; it is a strategy the onlooker uses to manage personal anxiety.) Onlookers may also feel a need to offer reassurance or help, that may stem more from a need to reassure themselves than a realistic appraisal of the others' needs. In disaster situations, it is not unusual to hear people say such things as "everything will be OK soon", even when that looks far from being true.

Changing seats and returning to the perspective of trauma victims, we can see how undermining all this can be. Two of their principal anxieties are likely to be a) that they won't be listened to, and b) that they won't be believed. Survivors often have great difficulty themselves in making sense of what happened to them and bad interviewing technique can significantly undermine their attempts to gain some control back over their situation through their own understanding of it. Conversely, people appreciate the chance to be seen and to be heard. Skilled journalists who have learnt how to listen without passing judgement and who understand how to help structure a victim's narrative are likely to augment an interviewee's sense of security. They are also likely, of course, to get better information and material that is more quotable.

Non-judgemental listening is a vital skill for journalists doing trauma interviews. To some extent its practice is common sense, but it is not easily developed without focused effort and a recognition on the part of interviewers that their own psychology can affect the interviewing dynamic (Rees, 2007b). Sceptics might worry that this approach might lead to soft questioning, and overly victim-centred reporting. That is a misreading which stems from a common confusion regarding the difference between empathy and sympathy - the two terms are not synonyms. Sympathy has the connotation that one sides with the other. Empathy refers to the ability to read

and understand another's emotional position; it says nothing about whether one agrees with it or not. Indeed, both empathy and emotional self-awareness are indispensable for journalists seeking to assess the veracity of an account.

Sometimes trauma survivors lie, and interviewers may find that a traumatic or dangerous context makes it much harder to work out what is really going on. When reporting on the fighting in Kosovo in 1998, the Canadian journalist Nancy Durham, came across a young woman in a field hospital called Rajmonda Reci. She told Durham that her six year old sister had been killed by Serbian soldiers and that was her motivation for wanting to fight with the Kosovo Liberation Army. The story went around the world. Later on, though, Durham returned to Rajmonda's home for follow-up piece to find that the supposedly dead sister was still alive. With hindsight, Durham wondered if she had asked more detailed questions of the exact circumstances of the alleged murder, the story might have started to unravel. But it is not always easy to ask probing questions about something so sensitive as the death of a close relative (Durham, 2012).

What if the source is telling the truth? On a practical level, fact-checking with a traumatised source requires real care: how does one query an account without implying that one does not believe it? Ill-thought out, overly interrogative styles of interviewing could do real damage where somebody is already predisposed to self-blaming. To complicate this further, sources may appear untrustworthy, even when trying to be truthful. Victims of violence may have great difficulty in accurately piecing together what happened. Typically the accounts of survivors of interpersonal violence are more fragmentary and inconsistent than accounts of other crimes (Brewin, 2003: 94; Koss et al., 1996). Victims, when trying to tell their stories may also exhibit different forms of emotional dysregulation - such as smiling for no apparent reason - or they may go silent when asked particular questions. These well-documented trauma reactions have a neurological basis: on a storage-retrieval level people are having difficulty in accessing the answers.

If a public figure behaved in any of those ways, one's first instinct might be to suspect a lie or a cover-up. In general we may underestimate how much the standard working tech-

niques that we deploy as journalists have been honed in response to public engagement with powerful people, officials, business people and politicians, etc.. In these interactions, we tend to assume the following: that the public has a right to know, that sources are clear about what they are saying when they go on the record, that they frame their responses with regard to issues of public concern, and that adversarial interviewing techniques are not only effective but an expected part of the process of discovery. In other words, it is a power game that both sides know, fully understand and for the most part quite enjoy, despite usually protesting the opposite.

Trauma, however, typically disempowers people. It deprives them of a sense of security and control. And so we may need to re-evaluate our assumptions about public dialogue when working with vulnerable people, if we are not to leave them feeling unnecessarily battered and diminished by their engagement with the media. One of the alarming features of testimony presented to the Leveson Inquiry into the conduct of the UK press was how some journalists casually took advantage of the weak position victims were in to cajole them into acting in ways that clearly ran counter to their best interests, as the evidence of the McCann and Dowler families underscores (Leveson, 2011a,b).

So far in this chapter, we have looked at the challenges without giving adequate space to how they might be addressed. Good trauma reporting requires some specific knowledge, familiarity with certain interviewing techniques and a baseline ethical concern. But above all, it requires agility and precise attention to the specifics of each situation. Two brief case studies will illustrate how journalists have innovated to meet the professional challenges trauma poses.

### Working with vulnerable sources

Kristen Lombardi first made her name by helping to expose the clergy sexual abuse scandal in Boston, a story that shook the Catholic Church in the United States and further afield. Later on, at the Center for Public Integrity, an organisation that funds investigative journalism, she began working with a team exploring the prevalence of sexual assault on US University campuses. The hypothesis was that the college au-



thorities were covering up the true extent of the problem and failing to punish perpetrators effectively.

The challenge was how to lift the lid on a story that many hoped would be left unreported. The universities as part of their investigation into the alleged assaults had forced many of the women to sign dubious confidentiality agreements, and often students were under pressure from both peers and parents to remain silent.

Those who had spoken to the media had not necessarily had a happy experience of it. Kathryn Russell, for instance, a student at the University of Virginia, had spent three hours going into great personal detail with a journalist from the CBS Early Show, but only a brief soundbite of twenty seconds made it to air, which bore little relationship to what she had hoped to communicate.

Lombardi realised the key to unlocking the story was to get fully informed consent, and to make sure that all her potential contributors knew what they were getting into before they opened up to her. It was important that they understood the implications of her working methods, as she explains:

*“It was difficult. A lot of students thought they would just tell me their story and that’s all I would need. But I needed documents. I needed to corroborate what they were saying, and, if I was going to feature their cases, I needed people who were comfortable with me filing records requests for their judicial file, talking to the school officials, signing waivers granting permission so the school officials would talk to me. I needed them knowing I was going to go to the accused student. The women knew what this accused person would say about them.”* (Lombardi quoted in Shapiro, 2009).

Before Lombardi explained this, it had not necessarily occurred to her sources that the accused had a right to reply and that their views would appear in print. Some were astonished that anybody they trusted could give their alleged perpetrators such time and consideration.

Lombardi showed the women sections of her copy before publication, in order to steel them against painful surprises. In the UK, this is now more or less standard procedure for TV documentaries on such themes: contributors are shown a fine

cut and asked to flag inaccuracies, usually with the proviso that there is no guarantee that anything other than factual error could be corrected. But the same practice is more controversial in print. If we switch the framing back to the political interview, the difficulty comes into focus: it looks like copy approval, creating a space where the source can exert influence on the editorial process, and it could potentially derail publication. (For example, if the source brings their lawyers in or pre-empts the story by giving a different account to another newspaper.)

But Lombardi was working with vulnerable women whose health could suffer if publication re-triggered adverse trauma reactions. The interviews had been more demanding than she had expected. Although a very experienced trauma interviewer, she was not fully prepared for working with younger victims:

*“The difference between them and church victims was decades. The church victims had years to process what had happened to them. They were emotionally more mature. That made a huge difference in their ability to open up and to be able to handle what they were feeling when they were reliving their stories.*

*With the student victims, people fell apart on me after the fact. I take great pride in the compassion and care that I exhibit. I try to be very thoughtful as an interviewer. I try very hard not to retraumatize. But I was really unprepared for how much people would flip out. People dropped out. People have disappeared. I have one victim who has an incredible story who disappeared, who won't respond. Also, I took it really personally. I took a lot of it really personally, and I was surprised by that.”* (Lombardi quoted in Shapiro, 2009).

One of the golden insights that good trauma reporters develop through experience is to take each person as they find him or her. One has to meet people where they are, not where one would like them to be. No situation and no interviewee is the same as the last.

Fostering resilience in new teams

Twenty years ago, it was more or less a taboo to suggest that journalists themselves could get into significant personal trauma trouble. The framing was that real journalists ought

to be able to “suck it up”, or if one is finding it too hot by the fire, one should get out of the kitchen, etc.. Those attitudes began to take a concerted knock when a number of high-profile, multi-award winning journalists came out and admitted that covering the Rwandan genocide and the wars in the Balkans had taken a toll of their own mental health (See for instance this BBC documentary on war reporting presented by Jeremy Bowen: Langen, 2005).

By the time of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, several international news organisations - including the BBC and Reuters - were all moving to implement innovative trauma management programmes for their news staff.

The BBC scheme, which the Dart Centre helped to set up, drew on a model first developed for the Royal Marines called TRiM. Both the military and broadcasters faced a similar problem. There was a tendency to believe that admitting to being in difficulty was a sign of weakness that could harm their future careers. The idea behind trauma education programmes like the BBC's, elements of which have also been adopted by Sky News in the UK and ARD in Germany, is to put in place a culture where colleagues and managers know what to look out for when somebody may be getting into significant trauma trouble and that there is no stigma in seeking help. This is important because PTSD is a condition that responds very well to appropriate treatment, a fact that is perhaps not as widely known as it should be. But, rather like a broken limb, it is better to have it dealt with earlier than later. The longer one ignores PTSD, the more likely that other complications, such as failed work assignments, relationship breakdowns, and alcoholism, etc. will start to bite (Rees, 2007a).

Helping managers to be better mentors is a key element in the broadcast trauma management programmes. Evidence from the military suggests that poor, inconsistent and emotionally illiterate leadership styles are a key contributing factor in breakdown among soldiers. When it comes to trauma work good, insightful leadership makes a real difference (Jones et al., 2012).

Workplace schemes also aim to give journalists a basic understanding of how traumatic stress works and self-care strategies for alleviating its effects. It is important to know how to calm one's system down after being exposed to tox-

ic situations, and to limit the amount of time in which one is exposed to harrowing material. (This may be particularly important for picture editors and photographers who work intensively with traumatic images.) Seemingly simple steps, such as getting proper sleep, good nutrition and exercise, things that tend to get pushed aside when on deadline, can substantially help in rebalancing the system (Brayne, 2007).

Perhaps the most important single factor that keeps people resilient is good social support (Hobfoll et al., 2007). The key thing to understand here is that trauma isolates and fragments, while being able to spend time with people one trusts and can talk to, or indeed just hang out with, works in the opposite direction. However, journalists may not feel able to confide in friends or family, either for fear that they won't be understood or out of a reluctance to burden others with the same dark material they have been struggling with. To help address this, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation has developed a sophisticated peer-support scheme, where volunteer journalists get a basic training in how to talk about challenging trauma-related issues with colleagues in a way that is less likely to alarm or stigmatise. The intention is to foster a culture where factoring in trauma is normal part of the job, as basic as talking about bias and impartiality might be in political reporting.

While trauma awareness has made inroads in journalism, its uptake has been patchy: newspapers, for instance, lag behind broadcast organisations, and freelancers, who tend to be isolated in any case, are poorly served. It is still often assumed that trauma work is the preserve of a small subset of war reporters and others who focus on disasters or highly traumatic human-rights-based content, whereas, in fact, the subject cuts across a much broader range of journalistic output. Sports journalists may find themselves reporting on mass casualty incidents such as stadium fires and stampedes, and local journalists routinely deal with assault and traffic accidents in small communities. Home affairs and crime reporters, who have to cover murder trials and harrowing child assault cases in great detail over long periods, may be particularly exposed.

Reporting craft and self-care are intimately connected, and it is important that training and newsroom management tie them in together. If trauma awareness is seen as something

extraneous to the journalism and driven by those outside the profession, such as psychologists or those working to an occupational health agenda in the human resources department, then there is a danger that this crucial relationship will get lost. A journalist who makes bad or unethical reporting decisions, or who feels that they lack the necessary skills to handle interviews sensitively, is likely to find the work stressful in a way that could potentially increase their risk of developing the kind of moral injury discussed earlier in this chapter. Handling an interview well is important for the wellbeing of both the interviewee and the interviewer. Very few journalists get adequate training or guidance in how to work with victims and survivors of trauma, especially at the beginning of their careers when it is most needed. Considerable scope remains here for innovation in professional training and practice (Richards and Rees, 2011).

Some final thoughts

Most of the discussion here has been devoted to exploring the personal interactions that make news production possible, be they between journalists and their sources or between journalists themselves when working in news teams. We have not given much space to representation, to how the lives of victims and survivors are portrayed in the news.

Sometimes the words in a story, once crystallised into print or digital ink, can seem to develop a life of their own and float in a disembodied way high above the lives of anybody they describe. When tragedy hits a community, journalists may find ourselves shoehorning complex sequences of events into set narratives and defaulting to stock characters - the grieving widow, the feckless parent who can not control a delinquent child, the brave rescuer, etc.. Often these devices and templates may well provide a useful shorthand which helps the audience engage with complex events; at other times they may obscure crucial details and traduce the experience of victims and survivors. Take the story, for instance, of somebody who has rescued five neighbours from an apartment block fire. A news team might believe that they are doing him a favour by billing him as the hero of the hour, but what if he does not recognise himself in that picture and is instead wak-

ing up every night wracked with guilt towards those he failed to save from the inferno? Or what if the story of the feckless parent and the delinquent teenager is really quite different from how it was cast? The media also has a role in how people make sense of traumatic events and how they manage their fears. A TV report suggesting that a community is so blighted by a tragedy that meaningful recovery is remote is unlikely to be assisting its future. (For a discussion of victims' perceptions of media participation, see Maercker, et al. 2006).

Representation is a key part of the trauma-reporting jigsaw. But the concentration in this chapter on the interactional is a deliberate attempt to draw attention to a shortfall. For the most part, writing about how to do journalism is curiously blind to this dimension. The final products, the words on the page or the packaged video report - the concrete objects - are given forensic scrutiny, and often so is the technology that served as the tools for their publication, but the human dynamics - the behind the scenes conversations and relationships that are essential in the making of the news - are all too often skimmed over or lost. Journalism is about working with people as much as it is about working with words or new technology. Media theory is also culpable in this respect. Often it appears to work more like archaeology than social anthropology: its analysis proceeds from examining the artefact rather than from witnessing the processes and relationships that went into its making.

It could be that most of the time the interactional seems too mundane to comment on. Factor in trauma, though, and things begin to look different. We start to become more interested in the life of a story both before and after publication. How was it obtained and what were the consequences of its publication for the people in it? What did the reporter say to the partner of the deceased? When we factor in trauma, it starts to become clear that the challenges of trauma reporting slip underneath the radar of everyday professional deliberation not because they are simple and mundane but rather because they are challenging and hard to think through.

We started this chapter looking at approach and avoidance, how all of us - sources, journalists and whole societies are both attracted to trauma and repelled by it at the same time. Knowledge of the bad things that can befall us is some-

thing we both want to understand and simultaneously shelter ourselves from. Media work on trauma can be one of the most rewarding genres, because it makes the final product seem less transient and disposable: it gives journalism a different kind of depth and it gives voice to aspects of life that we have an existential need to understand. But it is also daunting territory. Finding a route through it that captures the essence of a traumatic situation, in a way that preserves the dignity of victims and survivors, requires attention, skill and experience. The best way for journalists to cultivate those capacities is through peer-to-peer discussion of the issues. The more we discuss trauma and our own responses to it, the more clearly we are likely to see the people we are writing about. And the reverse is also true: understanding how trauma affects others and what it takes for them to be resilient is the key to sustaining ourselves, and consequently our journalism, when working on challenging assignments. The full benefits of taking stock of the trauma factor, then, are in the end most likely to be seen in the quality of the reporting itself.

## Challenging Questions

- When, in your view, does news become traumatic?
- Choose a news story pertinent to this chapter's discussion. Evaluate the strategies journalists adopted when reporting it – were they sufficiently trauma-aware?
- What suggestions do you have for making news reporting of traumatic incidents more responsible?
- In what ways might emotional literacy be useful for journalists?

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