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Trauma Tips from journalists who covered mass shootings

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Abstract

This paper mines 51 in-depth interviews with reporters who have covered trauma for insights journalism educators can use to better prepare journalism students. Results show that journalists found themselves in situations they never expected and were surprised by when and how the trauma impacted them. Some struggled to find positive ways of coping with the trauma, drinking too much, working too long, and downplaying their need for care. Others found positive ways to deal with the stress, focusing on personal projects like training for a marathon or on the good they were doing for their community. Participants covered the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida; the 2017 Route 91 Harvest country music festival shooting in Las Vegas; and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting in Parkland, Florida, in 2018.

Learning from *their* experience: What journalism educators can learn from journalists who covered trauma

Journalism educators are preparing students for a difficult job. Journalists deal with ever-increasing expectations, ever-decreasing newsroom staffs, looming threats of layoffs, a political environment often hostile to the press, and the 24-hour demands of the digital news. While often not recognized as "first responders," journalist do work that puts their personal safety and mental health in danger.

One of the major challenges comes from the increasingly regular occurrence of mass shootings (Valeeva *et al.,* 2022). These unanticipated all-hands-on-deck breaking news stories push reporters to their professional and emotional limits. Breaking news or cop-beat reporters often bear the initial brunt of the coverage. While those reporters regularly cover murder, violence, and trauma, the mass shooting coverage only piles on. The rest of the newsroom, however, is not isolated from the trauma. Environmental reporters, visual journalists, health correspondents, investigative reporters, and even editors and mangers deal with the emotional consequences of covering a mass shooting. Journalism educators are now facing the responsibility of preparing students for the traumatic work ahead. For most working journalists in America, the question is not *if* they will cover a mass shooting in their community, but *when*. In some cases, it's *how many*.

This paper examines the lived experiences of 51 journalists – a diverse group that includes breaking news reporters, television producers, and radio hosts, ranging from zero years of experience to almost 40 –

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to develop lesson that journalism educators can rely on to prepare today's students for tomorrow's seemingly inevitable traumatic news. The goal of this paper is not only to understand and describe what these journalists have experienced, but also to learn what journalism educators can do to prepare students for the challenges ahead.

Literature Review

The literature on mass shootings, terrorism, and trauma is extensive. For example, Chyi and McCombs (2004) studied the framing of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, suggesting an analytical coding scheme for future framing research. Muschert and Carr (2006) applied that scheme to the coverage of nine school shootings between 1997 and 2001. Houston (2009) linked exposure to media coverage of terrorism with post-traumatic stress disorder. Park, *et al.* (2012) compared the Columbine shooting with the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, concluding that race was especially salient in the Virginia Tech coverage, not only in the breaking news coverage but also in newspaper articles publish well after the shooting. Morin (2016) explored the media frames in coverage of the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and the 2013 Navy Yard shooting, concluding that media coverage served to "other" the shooter, keeping separate the "villain" from the audience. Durosky *et al.* (2023) found that newspaper coverage of the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting referred to the shooter and his name more than the coverage of the Columbine shooting did, despite calls for media organizations to focus more on victims and less on the shooter.

While studying media coverage of mass shootings is important, so too is understanding how journalists do or should deal with the personal trauma experienced during the coverage. This is a topic that has received more attention of late. In 2000 Maxson called for more trauma training in journalism programs. Dworznik and Grubb (2007) made a similar call for implementing trauma training after they interviewed students who covered a death-penalty murder trial. Kim and Kelly (2010) explored the ethical dilemmas faced by photojournalists as they capture tragedy with their cameras. Seely (2019) surveyed 254 journalists and interviewed 24 of those participants about the toll of covering trauma, concluding that journalists who more frequently cover trauma experience more PTSD symptoms.

In 2023 *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* published a special issue focusing on "trauma literacy and global journalism." Articles included a call for training educators to include mental health resilience in their curricula (Markovikj & Serafimovska, 2023), an exploration of the trauma faced by student journalists (Arrey & Reynolds, 2023), and an analysis on how journalists in Estonia experience and cope with hostility (Ivask & Lon, 2023). Hill (2023) wrote about student journalists who covered an execution. The students in that study asked for more trauma training.

This study expands on the current literature by using in-depth interviews from several journalists who have covered traumatic events. This targeted purposive sampling allows for an understanding of the myriad ways a singular news event might affect individual reporters differently. This article includes interviews with 18 journalists who covered 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida; 23 journalists who covered the 2017 Route 91 shooting in Las Vegas; and 10 journalists who covered the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida. Like Dworznik-Hoak's (2020) exploration of journalists who covered Hurricane Harvey, this paper drills into the experience of reporters who covered three mass shootings.

Background

On June 12, 2016, about 300 customers were enjoying Latin Night at the Pulse Night Club, a gay bar in downtown Orlando, Florida (Ellis *et al.,* 2016). Just after 2 a.m., Omar Mateen opened fire on the club. He took hostages into the bathroom and called 911 and then a local television station to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State. Three hours after the shooting started, police breached the club by detonating an explosive. Mateen was shot at 5:14 a.m. That night, 49 people were killed and 53 were wounded in what was – briefly – the deadliest mass shooting in American history (Lotan *et al.,* 2016). The earliest Central Florida reporters were in downtown Orlando by 3:15 a.m. while the situation was still considered an active hostage situation.

Nearly 16 months later, 58 concert-goers were killed in Las Vegas when a gunman opened fire from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino (Pearce, 2018). At 10:05 p.m. on October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock fired his first shots toward the Route 91 Harvest Festival, a country music concert in the Las Vegas Village. The shooting lasted ten min-

utes. Police broke into Paddock's room at 11:20 p.m. to find Paddock dead. Years later, two more gunshot victims died from complications from wounds received that night, bringing the total to 60 (Lacanlale, 2020). That shooting eclipsed the Pulse shooting as the deadliest in American history. The first Las Vegas reporters arrived on scene around 10:35 p.m., 20 minutes after the shooting stopped, but well before it was known that the shooter was dead.

Less than five months after that, Nikolas Cruz entered Building 12 on the campus of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (Alanez *et al.,* 2018). At 2:21 p.m. on February 14, 2018, Cruz started shooting. Six minutes later – after killing 17 people, 14 students and three staff members – Cruz left the building unnoticed by police. Cruz was arrested 82 minutes after the shooting started, nearly two miles from the school. South Florida reporters were gathering information from students inside the building via Twitter while Cruz was still there.

Method

This paper uses qualitative in-depth interviews with 51 reporters, editors, and visual journalists who have covered traumatic events for print publications, television stations, and public radio. Participants include 18 journalists who covered the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, 10 journalists who covered the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting in Parkland, Florida, and 23 journalists who covered the Route 91 Harvest country music festival shooting in Las Vegas.

Following the phenomenological approach described in Creswell and Poth (2018), this paper will prioritize the voice and experiences of the participants. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. Some were contacted directly; some were contact through newsroom leaders. Participants were allowed to choose the location of the interviews. Most interviews were conducted in newsroom conference rooms or spare offices. Some were held in coffeeshops or restaurants. One of the interviews were conducted via video conferencing program. Interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes. Each participant signed an Institutional Review Board-approved informed consent form and was granted anonymity. All interviews were transcribed for analysis.

The transcriptions were initially opened coded (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and notes were taken on the transcript and in a digital document. Thematic analysis – searching through codes for larger themes – led to seven lessons students, educators, and newsroom managers could learn. Five participants who were quoted in the manuscript reviewed a late draft. Their feedback overall was that this article reflects their experiences, though some suggested changes to one of the "lessons." This will be discussed below.

This approach to qualitative research takes inspiration from communication scholar Pauly (1991) when he wrote, "In the tradition in which I work, qualitative researchers seek nothing more nor less than to become wise in the ways of others" (p. 23). The overall goal of this research is for journalists to learn ways to do this important work better and healthier.

Results

The results of the paper are organized into seven lessons journalism educators can take away from the interviews. These lessons can be integrated throughout the journalism curriculum and through student media advising.

Lesson No. 1: Expect this to happen

Mass shootings are already too common and are becoming more so (Valeeva *et al.,* 2022). Big metropolises, like Las Vegas and South Florida, and small towns, like Southerland Springs and Uvalde, Texas, have experienced this. Several reporters said they expected it to happen sooner or later. One television reporter in Orlando said the Pulse shooting didn't feel like a defining moment in her career, but rather was something to be expected. She said, "Oh, now I have one out of my way." A television camera operator in Orlando always thought Disney made them a target. He said, "We'd talk, driving to and from stories, about how vulnerable our area is."

Even reporters who cover different beats should expect to get involved – not just the breaking news team. Health reporters in Las Vegas and Orlando found themselves at hospitals interviewing victims. An environmental reporter in Las Vegas went to the Strip. A Central Florida food writer was contacting victims' families and writing obituaries. When asked to pitch in, she thought, "Ugh, I just want to write about pretty food." A South Florida government reporter said,

> Every single person in the entire newsroom had to be involved in the coverage because first of all, we have a smaller newsroom. It was the biggest story that probably we'll ever cover in

our lives.

She ended up on the investigations team that covered the story for months. A radio station, not accustomed to covering crime, sent reporters toward the scene. The news director said, "All of us became crime reporters." No matter your beat, these journalists show, when a major story breaks, you will get involved.

Lesson No. 2: You will be surprised by what you might see

Many journalists were surprised by their experiences. Most crime scenes are contained by the time reporters arrive – caution tape is up and police are in control. That isn't always the case with a mass shooting. Two reporters – one in Orlando and one in Las Vegas – found themselves past the police line. The reporter in Orlando ran into the SWAT team.

> A cop car pulled up with like four armed deputies in SWAT gear. And they got out, and they started pointing their guns at me and started telling me, "Raise your hands." I remember I almost peed my pants.

The Las Vegas reporter was in the parking garage of the Mandalay Bay casino when the scene was still active, though the shooting had stopped. He was ordered around by police like the rest of the guests at the hotel, so much so that he later saw himself in the body-worn camera footage released by the police department.

A Central Florida photographer said he was two or three miles from the Pulse night club, and still saw people with blood on their clothes. He later found a street the police hadn't yet blocked and was able to take pictures of the police entering and leaving the building after the shooter was killed.

> And they would walk in, and as soon as they did their job in there, they would come out, and there was a hose – there was a fireman with a hose. They would take off their medical booties, throw them in a container, and then the guy with the hose, hosing of their shoes.

These reporters had to talk to people during the worst moments of their lives, and it often was not easy. A Las Vegas television reporter described seeing people fleeing the scene, wanting to get information from him.

> The thing that sticks out to me is it looks like I would imagine what people would look like coming back from war. They were you know, the glazed over looks and just confusion, asking me you know, "What do you know? What have you heard?"

Some witnesses were upset to see the press. A Las Vegas reporter described seeing a woman walking toward her with blood on her clothes.

> I tried going up to her to see if she'd speak to me, and she yelled at me, which I probably deserved. But this this one sticks with me. She's like, "I just saw someone effing get shot in the head. How could you even try to talk to me right now?" So she lost it, and I lost it.

Lesson No. 3: You'll be surprised by when and how long this will affect you

It was common for journalists to say that their emotions overwhelmed them at surprising times. Most were able to keep their composure during the coverage, but it was once they were off duty that the emotions came out. A South Florida reporter talked about how a song from the musical Hamilton triggered her emotions as she was driving. She said, "And that song came on, and I cried so hard, I almost pulled over, because it just hit me all at once… it's been weeks." Another song triggered a South Florida reporter in the car: "A John Denver song that comes on, and I'm driving home, and I just burst into tears." She said she understood what was happening to her. "But I'm like, it's okay because I just processed all these other people's emotions and took it and away, compiled it into a story."

While the car wasn't the only place these emotions crept it, it wasn't uncommon. A South Florida photographer said she experienced the emotions 48 hours after her original coverage:

> I was getting off of the exit from the freeway to turn to go to my house, and I noticed that like the front of my shirt was wet. And I guess I had been crying all the way home and I didn't realize it.

A Las Vegas reporter forgot about an appointment to have internet installed in her home the day after the shooting. The technician arrived and asked what room to put the router in. "And I remember just like, staring at him for it felt like forever," she said. "And then I just started crying."

Journalists do experience what appear to be post-traumatic episodes. Months after the shooting, a Central Florida television producer was outside when an ambulance drove by. She complained to her friends about how loud it was. Her friend said, "The ambu-

lance wasn't turned on. It just drove past. The lights weren't on. There was no noise." One Central Florida anchor would just drive for hours or walk around a shopping center. Viewers would recognize her, talk to her, and cry with her. "It let me know that I wasn't alone," she said. "They thought I was helping them, but they were really helping me."

Another toll on journalists is how long the story might stay with them. Reporters who work on the investigative teams spend weeks, months, even years covering these stories. Unlike the Pulse and Route 91 shooters, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas murderer was arrested, not killed during the shooting. This resulted in a trial, meaning the story was drawn out even longer. Some journalists are still covering that story years after it happened. One South Florida reporter has connected with many of the victims' families on social media, which means she regularly sees content from those families.

> That's the kind of material that the parent will post on Titter, like some beautiful video of their daughter on her birthday or you know something like that. And so it's not even for a story. It's just, it's just all over my social media.

For both the Las Vegas shooting and the Parkland shooting, police released records weekly, creating a weekly cycle where reporters would have to put their heads back into the mass murder space. A Las Vegas television reporter said:

> There were a good four or five months where every Wednesday, go down and get the video releases, the body-worn camera, the surveillance cameras, helicopter footage, everything. And hours and hours and hours of it, we'd be scrubbing through, so I got to look at all of the video. And that was rough.

These newsrooms were committed to covering every funeral and writing an obituary for every victim. A South Florida reporter said, "All of us ran out of black clothes in this newsroom." A Las Vegas reporter wrote 18 obituaries, which means 18 families to call. Unlike breaking news stories, these stories last months or even years, and the traumatic effects can pile up.

Lesson No. 4: Watch out for your colleagues or employees

Participants shared several examples of situations where colleagues or editors could have or should have been more aware of the toll this coverage was having the team. One Central Florida reporter did an interview on TV. Her editor got a text from a friend who saw her. "That reporter of yours on TV, she needs to sleep, because she looked wrecked." A radio newsroom director in Orlando didn't realize her staff might have been suffering from PTSD until they had a PTSD expert on their show.

> I look at all the symptoms of PTSD, I look at the newsroom, and I immediately walked to HR, and I went, "He needs to come now! We have all the symptoms here." And I felt bad that it took me so long.

A Las Vegas editor felt responsibility for putting her reporter in harm's way. This reporter is the one who was in the Mandalay Bay parking garage.

> I just apologized to him more than once just for, you know for putting him, for having that happen, but because he's so young I mean, he'd only been a reporter here for like six months I think before that happened.

She reflected on her own children, near the same age. She choked up talking about his, months after it happened.

Many reporters complained about the inadequate care from their leaders. One said he kept coming into the newsroom because he didn't know what else to do to cope. Management then misinterpreted that as competitiveness, commitment, hunger, and dedication to the story. "I was just trying to keep going," he said, "and the best way I knew how to keep going was to be here." One Las Vegas producer asked to leave early one afternoon. She had been working 14-hours or more the previous days and said all the work was done for the Thursday and Friday shows. She needed a break. "I wanted to go home and cry and take a nap, you know?" she said. Her manager said, "I don't know how it would look to your coworkers." She decided to stay at work.

Many newsrooms did things like bring in therapy dogs, remind employees about HR benefits that include therapy, or even bring in a counselor for a session or two. Many reporters felt like they were supported by their newsroom leaders. The journalists really appreciated the care packages sent by other newsrooms who have covered mass shootings. The reporters appreciated whatever efforts newsroom leaders made. But for many, it wasn't enough to match the challenges they faced. The reporters in this research indicated it was still clear that newsroom leaders need to stay aware of the toll these stories can have.

Lesson No. 5: Have a plan for yourself

When work stress builds up, it is important to have a plan to handle that stress. Many of the journalists said they struggled to find the best ways to handle that stress. The stereotype of the journalist-who-drinks-too-much was reflected in the findings. When asked how he copes, one joked, "Vodka and video games." This sentiment was repeated by others – some were slightly offhanded, but others honestly said they drank too much during that stressful time. Several talked about how they had to remind themselves to eat and to take breaks. A Central Florida reporter started smoking again. One Las Vegas reporter had a full-on mental health crisis, leading to alcoholism and a suicide attempt.

Others were able to find positive ways to deal with the stress. One South Florida reporter visited a therapist to help him sleep at night. One reporter immediately signed up for a marathon to find an outlet for her stress:

> I spent so many of those runs, thinking about all the stuff that I had read and seen and what to do with it and stuff and working through that. And, I mean, it helped a lot because it's hours.

She said the marathon training gave her a distraction: "The first thing I thought about when I woke up was dead kids, you know." At the finish line, she collapsed and cried and thought, "Oh my gosh, this, like, this is how I survived the Parkland shooting."

Lesson No. 6: Be aware of the everyday stress too

These journalists face real day-to-day stress. For example, many of the Orlando reporters mentioned covering the murder of Christina Grimme, a pop singer who was killed outside of an Orlando music venue the night before the Pulse shooting. Days later, many of those same reporters covered a two-year-old boy killed by an alligator on a Disney property. The trauma compounds.

In Las Vegas, the television and breaking news reporters were covering the death of three boys who were killed by a drunk driver. A television reporter thought, "This is the worst thing I will ever see in my life." She was on her way back to the vigil for a live shot for the 11 p.m. newscast when her producer called and told her about the shooting on the Strip. One Las Vegas reporter said he was happy to be moved off the breaking news/police beat. "I'm just sick of dead bodies," he said.

A Las Vegas reporter said he and his breaking news colleagues cover some difficult stories:

> And so we see this stuff, you know, even without the shooting. I mean, I've seen bodies at scenes. I've seen some tough stuff. My coworkers here and elsewhere have covered some tough stuff. And I ... generally, I don't think we really get enough support from our news organization.

Newsroom leaders might consider creating rotations or monitoring systems to allow breaking news reporters to take a "sabbatical" to write feature stories or cover the school board for a few months.

Another concern is the economics of the news industry. Though these interviews were focused on the mass shooting or traumatic event, many reporters talked about the precarious economic position they are in. They mentioned how small their newsrooms have gotten or the constant concern of impending layoffs and buyouts. One Las Vegas reporter said, "I find what we do so important, but I'm scared to death, that it will ruin me financially, or put me in such a precarious place that I can't depend on it, you know."

One Las Vegas reporter said the news industry could treat reporters better in general, not just after a major story.

> People are being laid off at a whim, and you don't get a raise and maybe you don't have a job next year. And your prospects for getting a job tomorrow is not very good. So yeah, this is not a great business to be in if you're looking for someone to really care about you.

A mass shooting or major hurricane makes an already stressful job even more so.

Lesson No. 7: Not everyone needs the same amount of care

Not all reporters are built the same. For example, a Las Vegas reporter said he didn't internalize grief the way other reporters did. That was why he was willing to be on the team that watched the police body-worn-camera videos.

> And part of the reason I've done so much of it is because it just hasn't, it hasn't bothered me for whatever reason, and I'm not exactly sure why, I don't know. I thought about, "What the hell's wrong with me? Why isn't this bothering me more?"

One result of this research is the indication that perhaps those difficult tasks shouldn't be assigned but

given to volunteers who feel that they are up to it.

Two participants pushed back on the original "Lesson No. 7: Not everyone needs extra care." One wrote in response to the draft: "I think most journalists who cover traumatic events probably need it more than they are willing to admit." One pointed out the stigma represented by a quotation from a Central Florida TV reporter: "If you are a strong person going in [to a story like the Pulse shooting], you'll be a strong person coming out." That statement implies that if you come away from covering trauma with your own mental health issues, you weren't strong enough going into that coverage. Another reporter, however, wrote in response that newsrooms, as much as possible, should move away from this mentality and make sure everyone has access to training and care.

Conclusion

Journalism educators play an important role as they prepare journalists for the job ahead. As this research shows, not all newsrooms are equipped to help journalists who need mental health support, a problem likely made worse by the remote nature of post-pandemic reporting (Cherubini *et al.,* 2021). Keats and Buchanan (2009) developed the construct "assignment stress injury" (ASI) as a term to describe the injuries journalists suffer as they do their work. ASI covers addiction, depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, secondary traumatic stress, and physical health problems (Keats & Buchanan, 2009). While the goal of this research was not to diagnose the participants, the journalists interviewed showed signs of these injuries, including some of the symptoms of PTSD. According to the American Psychological Association, PTSD symptoms include reexperiencing the trauma, avoiding activities or places that remind of the trauma, and physical arousal (APA.org, n.d.). Many of these participants described those symptoms.

The seven lessons gleaned from these journalists are just a start, but they could be included throughout a journalism education curriculum. Students in introductory journalism classes can be introduced to the challenges. Students in reporting and newswriting classes learn how to cover a car accident, fire, or murder, but also learn how to deal with experiencing that coverage. Students in advanced journalism classes might be asked to reflect on the challenges they've already experienced as student journalists. Students in journalism ethics class might discuss the ethics involved in reporting on trauma. When possible, guest speakers invited into classrooms could discuss their experiences covering and coping with trauma. The journalism industry faces serious challenges; this paper is one effort address at least one of those challenges.

Limitations and future research

One limitation to this paper was the broad nature of the participants. For example, of the 51 participants, only six worked in management. Future studies could focus more exclusively on managers and editors, photographers, reporters who had specific assignments, like writing obituaries or covering the traumatic event as it happened. Future studies might also explore and showcase successful approaches to mental health, either in newsrooms that have successfully implemented a program or journalism programs that have effectively taught self-care.

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