Reporting on Trauma

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Résumé : Reporting on violence and trauma are at the heart of journalism, but this is an area of journalism ethics that is only in recent years beginning to get the attention it deserves. Based on my experience as a journalist and as a teacher of journalism, I would argue that we don't spend enough time talking about the impacts of trauma—on both journalists and on survivors of violence—in our profession and in our schools. In recent decades, trauma training has entered into the discourse of journalism ethics and into the curriculum of journalism schools. What is the impact of journalistic interviews on survivors of violence ? What harm can we, as journalists, commit as we pursue stories for the sake of "good," that is, information, knowledge, and awareness ? Fortunately, and increasingly, there are resources for journalists who are interested in approaching trauma reporting with greater sensitivity and awareness. In conjunction with the growing presence of trauma training in journalism, there has been increased exploration of the possibility of re-victimization through the interview process. The majority of journalists are obviously not trained as psychotherapists ; this does not mean, however, that they should not have a basic understanding of the impacts and repercussions of psycho-trauma and, accordingly, be better equipped in how to do their work in the extremely delicate, sensitive, and emotionally precarious situations that can arise in stories surrounding violence and trauma. Journalists can take specific and conscious steps to avoid or diminish the re-victimization of their interview subjects. Some basic guidelines include letting the interview subject set the ground rules for the interview ; explaining the purpose of the story or coverage without pretending that it will provide a solution ; avoiding the language of blame ; choosing details because they advance the story rather than provide shock value ; and communicating with sources before the story is published. Most crucial, perhaps, is the journalist's responsibility to take the necessary time to sensitively report and contextualize the story.

Mots-clés : manquant

Reporting on violence and trauma are at the heart of journalism, but this is an area of journalism ethics that is only in recent years beginning to get the attention it deserves. Based on my experience as a journalist and as a teacher of journalism, I would argue that we don't spend enough time talking about the impacts of trauma—on both journalists and on survivors of violence—in our profession and in our schools. In recent decades, trauma training has entered into the discourse of journalism ethics and into the curriculum of journalism schools. One notable organization in the United States that I have used as a resource, for example, is the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma associated with Columbia University, which offers workshops, publications, and training targeted at sensitizing journalists in how best to interact with survivors

of trauma ; how to conduct interviews in a responsible and sensitive manner ; how journalism approaches can and should be tailored to fit the individual situation and the individual person involved.

So many of us become journalists because we hope to have a positive impact in the world : to illuminate and inform, to give "voice" to the under-represented. And while there might be benefit in the public realm in terms of knowledge production and even action, we also have a responsibility to explore the impact we have on our subjects ; that is, the people we interview. How do we as journalists (and journalism teachers) ensure that we are follow the guiding principle of *do no harm* ?

Over the past decade of my journalism career I've increasingly focused on coverage of vulnerable communities, including refugees and internally displaced people, and other survivors of institutionalized violence and trauma. Specific topics include reporting on survivors of and activists against mafia violence in Sicily ; an underground railroad of LGBT refugees from Iran that extends from Turkey to Canada ; a neighborhood built by and for women in Columbia, all survivors of FARC-related violence ; and, most recently, refugees and asylum seekers in Calais and Paris, as well as across Europe.

Unfortunately, it's all too easy to find examples of journalists exploiting subjects or otherwise displaying gross insensitivity in their interviews with survivors of trauma, particularly in the context of breaking news. I use a couple of examples with my journalism students that exemplify this to a dismaying degree : The first, a clip of CNN reporter Rosa Flores interviewing a survivor of Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Texas, just moments after the woman arrived to a temporary shelter with her young children. The interview subject, identified only as Danielle, encapsulates the rage and frustration that so many survivors of trauma experience when faced with questions from the media. Finally, she breaks down in front of the camera as she tries to respond to the journalist's questions. As she expressed to the journalist : "People are really breaking down and you all are sitting here with cameras and microphones trying to ask us what the fuck is wrong with us," she said. "And you really trying to understand it with the microphone still in my face, with me shivering cold, with my kids wet and you still putting the microphone in my face."

Obviously in some ways this is an easy example to cite. This is breaking news, television news, all of the conditions are there and ripe for exploitation and insensitivity : emotions are raw and the situation remains precarious. Even physically, the subject, Danielle, is still in a state of suffering during the interview. The clip also speaks to the difficulties of what's known in the trade as "parachute journalism."

A more complex example of the impacts of trauma and the perils of interviewing survivors of even decades-old violence can be found in an episode of Radiolab, a popular podcast in the United States that explores topics linked to science. In one of the show's most controversial episode to date, the hosts of the podcast explore the topic of "Yellow Rain." To give a bit of background, yellow rain was a substance alleged to have been used in biological attacks targeting the Hmong people in Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. Soviet officials deny that they used biological warfare in this way during that era, and U.S. scientists have also questioned the evidence. There is

no consensus today on whether or not this type of warfare was, in fact, used—and exploring this question is the topic of the controversial 2012 episode of Radiolab about Yellow Rain, which included interviews with an expert formerly with the CIA as well as expert testimony from Western scientists. The story also incudes an interview with an eye-witness and survivor of the conflict, a Hmong refugee now living in the United States, Eng Yang.

Already in the introduction to Eng Yang and his translator and niece, Kao Kalia Yang, we notice some discrepancies. Whereas the "official" sources in the story are introduced by their full names and titles, Eng Yang is introduced as a "Hmong guy," rather than a former consultant to the Thai government, hired to document his community's experience during the war.

Equally problematic is that instead of treating him as they did the other guests, Radiolab all but dismisses his account. Even more, as one can hear in the podcast, the interview has the tone of a prosecutor interviewing a hostile witness, rather than a journalist asking for a trauma survivor's testimony.

After many minutes of excruciating back and forth, the interview ends when the translator breaks down and cuts the conversation short.

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What is the impact of journalistic interviews on survivors of violence ? What harm can we, as journalists, commit as we pursue stories for the sake of "good," that is, information, knowledge, and awareness ?

Fortunately, and increasingly, there are resources for journalists who are interested in approaching trauma reporting with greater sensitivity and awareness. In conjunction with the growing presence of trauma training in journalism, there has been increased exploration of the possibility of re-victimization through the interview process. As Carrie Rentschler describes in *Second Wounds : Victims' Rights and the Media*, a growing awareness of the journalist's potential to inflict additional harm first emerged from advocates for victims' rights. "In particular, advocates identified the news interview as a site of re-victimization. If the news media can hurt the people they cover while also claiming to give them voice, advocates asserted, then journalists must alter their conduct to create a better platform for victims to claim their rights and their access to representation."

The majority of journalists are obviously not trained as psychotherapists ; this does not mean, however, that they should not have a basic understanding of the impacts and repercussions of psycho-trauma and, accordingly, be better equipped in how to do their work in the extremely delicate, sensitive, and emotionally precarious situations that can arise in stories surrounding violence and trauma.

Journalists can take specific and conscious steps to avoid or diminish the re-victimization of their interview subjects. Some basic guidelines outlined in *Covering Trauma* include letting the interview subject set the ground rules for the interview ; explaining the purpose of the story or coverage without pretending that it will provide a solution ;

avoiding the language of blame ; choosing details because they advance the story rather than provide shock value ; and communicating with sources before the story is published. Most crucial, perhaps, is the journalist's responsibility to take the necessary time to sensitively report and contextualize the story.

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The following are helpful and essential guidelines for reporting on trauma, reprinted here with permission from a handbook of ethical guidelines by Jina Moore for Search for Common Ground, *Covering Trauma : A Training Guide.*

1 Consent

In traditional journalism, getting consent for an interview is straightforward : you ask people if you can talk to them, and they say "yes" or "no". In trauma journalism, consent involves more steps. Here are some of those steps ; depending on the situation, additions to this list may be needed.

The general principle is this : Trauma happens to people without their permission. Responsible journalism should make certain, at every stage of reporting and writing the story, that survivors are giving their permission freely.

Identify yourself immediately.

Sometimes journalists are afraid that they will get angry reactions from trauma survivors or their families, and they may be tempted to delay explaining who they are because of that. But trauma survivors and their families often feel like their trust in the world has been broken. If you withhold that you are a journalist, you will reinforce that feeling –and lose the story.

React to any reaction with respect :

Trauma survivors may react angrily, cynically or otherwise negatively when you identify your purpose. It's important that you don't respond with anger or disrespect : no one should feel coerced or bullied into talking to you.

Explain how you will use the interview.

It's not enough simply to say, "I'd like to interview you for my program." You should explain why your program is including stories on trauma and how you expect the survivor's sound bites will be used. You should assure them you will keep them informed as the program progresses –and be sure to do that.

Confirm how you will identify the survivor.

No matter who your source is, you should agree with them about how you will identify them at the start of your interview. With trauma survivors, you should find a mutually agreeable way to use their information without violating their safety or trust. Never name minors.

Confirm permission to use sensitive details several days after your interview.

In the course of an interview, people sometimes say things that they later may regret, or perhaps even forget they said. With professional sources who have significant political or economic power and experience talking to –even using –the media, like politicians or businessmen, it is fair to disregard their post-interview regrets. But with survivors of violence, whose stories are about powerlessness, that's not fair. If a woman talks about intimate details of a rape, or a child soldier tells a story about brutalizing his neighbor, go back to them several days after the interview and confirm that you can use those elements. If they ask you not to use a certain part of the interview, don't use it. If it's crucial, explain to them why you think so and exactly how you will present the information. This is not the same thing as handing off veto power over your story. Your story probably has other voices and other ideas within it. Give the survivor the final say over what information about their experience –as a sound bite or in summary –you will broadcast.

Always fact check.

You should review every detail of a survivor's story which you plan to broadcast with the survivors before the program goes on air. They are frequently distracted or confused when retelling their stories, even years later. Fact-checking ensures that the survivor told you what he or she meant to tell you –and that you properly understood. Fact-checking also avoids unpleasant surprises for survivors by giving them an idea of what they –and their neighbors –will hear on the radio.

2 The Interview

Don't start with hard questions. Ask trauma survivors about themselves and get some sense of their lives before asking them about their most vulnerable moment. If you are interviewing the survivor of a village massacre, you might start by saying, "Tell me about your village before the violence came." This will help put them at ease –and having that context will also make your interview and ultimately your story better.

Avoid the language of blame.

If a woman says she was raped on the road late at night, don't ask her, "Why were you out late at night, anyway?" If a child was abducted when getting water alone, don't ask him, "Why did you go get water alone?" Researchers have found that these questions can cause psychological damage to survivors, because the questions imply that the trauma is the survivor's fault. No matter what piece of information you need, word your question carefully to avoid the language of blame and fault.

Remember that trauma can re-order memories.

Many survivors of trauma do not tell what happened to them in a linear way. Chronology is often confused, and certain details are remembered at inexplicable times. Even when you need to clarify the order of events or emotions, avoid sounding like you don't believe your interview subject. Don't say things like, "But you said the militia arrived while you were in the fields harvesting rice, and now you're saying you

were raped by soldiers in the rainy season. So which one is it ?" Instead, ask them context-based questions about the event that can help both of you figure out the chronology or other details together. Try a follow-up like, "I hear you saying now that this happened in the rainy season. But last time, I think you mentioned that you were harvesting rice. Was it raining while you were in the fields ?" Survivors themselves will recognize the discrepancy that you have also recognized, and you can talk through it together. Present yourself as a conversation partner, not a prosecutor of the truth.

Use real words.

Some well-intentioned journalists try to soften their questions by using euphemisms, like "passed away" instead of "died" or "violated" for "raped." No euphemism makes the memories easier ; using clear words shows you respect the dignity of the survivor.

Choose your translator carefully.

Sometimes we have to do these sensitive interviews through translators. Work as hard as you possibly can to make sure your translator will not present him or herself to the subject as an intimidating presence. If you are interviewing a woman about her rape, try to find a female translator. If you are interviewing survivors of a fight between two different tribes, don't use a member of the opposite tribe as your translator. Make sure your translator understands these interview guidelines so that they don't misstep either.