

Trauma-informed newsroom

Managing trauma exposure at RiverTown Multimedia

Michael J. Brun

July 16, 2019

University of Minnesota Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication

Professional M.A. in Strategic Communication Capstone

WATCH: Her cancer went undetected, now this grandmother wants to help others get the right diagnosis

By [Michael Brun](#) on Feb 13, 2019 at 4:00 p.m.

'It took a village': Right people, right time help save a heart attack victim

By [Michael Brun](#) on Mar 21, 2019 at 5:00 a.m.

Mother of slain River Falls girls to speak at trauma workshop

By [Michael Brun](#) on Aug 9, 2016 at 4:53 p.m.

Sheriff: Goodhue County deputy sustained 'significant' injuries in Wednesday assault

By [Michael Brun](#) on Jan 19, 2017 at 5:18 p.m.

Charges: 2-year-old's death the result of brain injury

By [Michael Brun](#) on Dec 4, 2018 at 1:52 p.m.

There's nothing "small"
about small town news.

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comms plan

“One of the most important things a newsroom can do for its reporters and editors is teach what trauma is and what trauma does to the brain – and how that has implications for us as journalists.”

Katherine Reed, associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism

Problem definition

Post-traumatic stress and
secondary traumatic
stress

Avoidance, dulling of
emotion

Alcoholism

Burn-out and turnover



Why teach trauma?

According to Reed:

When a reporter understands trauma, they are equipped to interact with someone who has experienced a traumatic event.

This makes the reporter feel better about their work and negates the effects of trauma exposure.

Newsroom interviews

Five RiverTown
Multimedia reporters

Mix of education, years of
experience

One-on-one qualitative
interviews

objectivity
peer-support emotions
victim empathy detached
heartbreaking
professionalism
fires regret
trauma crashes

Insights

RiverTown Multimedia reporters are **professionals** who value **objectivity**, but they are also **empathetic** people who want to treat victims with respect.

Reporters already talk to each other and try to help work through difficult stories. What the newsroom needs is **education** to do peer support well.

Internal comms plan

Objective: Change RiverTown Multimedia culture through education on the effects of trauma, self-care methods, and how to responsibly interview trauma victims.

Desired outcome: Develop a trauma-informed newsroom.

- Editors recognize signs of trauma in reporters and provide support
- Reporters are educated about trauma and its effects



TRAUMA & JOURNALISM

A Guide For Journalists, Editors & Managers



Compiled and edited by Mark Brayne



WHAT'S THE STORY?

Journalists who cover areas such as science or the economy need to be able to report on the events they're reporting. You may not have the expertise in that area, but you will have the experience of reporting on distress. You may have reported on people who have experienced trauma.

In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event or experience, people will experience a range of psychological and physiological responses. These are often referred to as acute stress reactions or hyperarousal.

Just like bleeding, bruising, and psychological trauma, these responses are part of a natural cycle of healing.

It's not just as simple as waiting for things to heal, and then moving on. It's a cycle of healing, and it's a cycle that can be broken.

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and appropriate — can be associated with some denial of the enormity of what happened. After the initial, perhaps adrenaline-fuelled phase

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Roadblocks



- Professional identity
- Limited resources
- Remote workforce

Implementation

Month 1	Month 2	Ongoing
<p>Tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Editor training• Plan newsroom training <p>Optional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Online trauma course• Schedule expert speaker	<p>Tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Newsroom training session• Start peer-support chatroom <p>Optional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Online training course for reporters	<p>Tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regular newsroom discussions and peer support• Editors check in with reporters for signs of trauma
<p>Stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• News director• Editors	<p>Stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• News director• Editors• Reporters	<p>Stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• News director• Editors• Reporters
<p>Budget considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Printing Dart Center guides• Possible speaking fees	<p>Budget considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Printing Dart Center guides• Meeting food/refreshments	<p>Budget considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coffee/lunch meetings for remote workers



Criteria

- What reporters and editors learned
- Frequency of newsroom discussions
- Opinions on the usefulness of those discussions

Method

- Qualitative interviews after six months



Trauma-informed newsroom

Change RiverTown Multimedia culture through education on the effects of trauma, self-care methods, and how to responsibly interview trauma victims.

Issues:

- Post-traumatic stress and secondary traumatic stress
- Burn-out and turnover

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About the author

Michael Brun is a multimedia journalist in southeastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. His newspaper career started in 2013 at the Red Wing Republican Eagle, where he covered local government, health, and crime. In 2016 he took on and helped develop a newly created multimedia editor position with the RiverTown Multimedia newspaper group, part of Fargo, N.D.-based Forum Communications Co. He manages the group's online presence and has served as interim editor of the Woodbury Bulletin and South Washington County Bulletin. He continues to write feature stories and helps cover the Minnesota Legislature for the regional Forum News Service.

Michael studied strategic communication in a master's program at the University of Minnesota Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication. He holds an undergraduate degree in journalism from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

Executive summary

From fatal crashes to violent crimes and natural disasters, journalists are routinely exposed to traumatic events, images, and descriptions. If not handled properly, trauma exposure can negatively affect a journalist's wellbeing and put victims at risk of further harm.

Compounding the issue is the norm in journalism for objectivity, which can cause reporters to suppress difficult emotions. This kind of emotional labor ultimately impacts news organizations through reporter burn-out and turnover. Troublingly, research shows that trauma training is lacking in journalism schools and newsrooms.

“One of the most important things a newsroom can do for its reporters and editors is teach what trauma is and what trauma does to the brain — and how that has implications for us as journalists,” according to Katherine Reed, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism who teaches a class on trauma.

This capstone project proposes an internal communications plan for implementing a trauma-informed training program at RiverTown Multimedia, a community newspaper group in southeastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. The objective is to change newsroom culture through education on the effects of trauma and how to report on traumatic events. Messaging is based on “Trauma & Journalism: A Guide For Journalists, Editors & Managers” published by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

KEYWORDS: Trauma, emotional labor, burn-out, turnover, journalism, communications

Introduction

As a novice reporter, I was sitting in the newsroom when a report of a fatal head-on crash came over the police scanner. I grabbed a camera and drove to the scene. The crash was close, so I arrived shortly after the firefighters and before police had time to close the road. I parked in the ditch several yards away and walked to the wreck on foot. I was snapping photographs when a pickup truck came racing up to the scene. A man got out and was quickly ushered into the back of an ambulance. I surmised at the time he must have been a family member of the deceased. I turned off the camera and walked back to my car. At the time I didn't talk to anyone about what I witnessed. I filed a short story about the crash, archived the photos, and tried to forget about it. But the memory of that man climbing into the ambulance has stayed with me. I think about it every time I report on a crash.

A few years later into my career, I was sitting at a patio table interviewing the mother of three murdered children. The woman was going to speak at a mental health conference for first responders about processing the trauma they encounter on the job. I was assigned the preview story. I recorded a video of her describing the 911 call she made the day her children were killed. As she fought back tears, I had to plant my elbows on the table to support my trembling arms. I sat there in silence with a frown on my face. It was the most I could emote without ruining the soundbyte. As I wrote the story and struggled with the emotion of retelling this woman's tragedy, I considered attending the mental health conference myself. If firefighters and police officers need that kind of emotional support, then why not journalists?

The inspiration for this capstone project came during a fall 2018 class on communication in human organizations taught by Dr. Jeremy Rose at the University of Minnesota. The class included the concept of emotional labor in the workplace and the toll that regulating emotions takes on employees and organizations. I started to think about trauma exposure for journalists and the implications it has for reporters, news organizations, and communities. It brought up difficult memories of stories I have covered in my journalism career and made me realize I was still experiencing the effects of being exposed to trauma. I wondered if my colleagues were struggling the same way.

This project follows the RPIE communications model of research, planning, implementation, and evaluation. I begin by defining the problem of trauma exposure for journalists, including a review of research into related effects of emotional labor and burn-out. I also identify available resources for journalists to learn about trauma. Next, I detail qualitative interviews conducted with five reporters at RiverTown Multimedia, a community newspaper group covering southeastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin. I am part of a five-person editorial team that leads approximately two dozen reporters in the RiverTown Multimedia newsroom. I asked reporters about the kind of stories they find emotionally challenging, the extent of their knowledge about the effects of trauma, and what more they would like the organization to do to support them. Finally, I propose an internal communications plan to implement a trauma-informed training program at RiverTown Multimedia. The objective of the plan is to change RiverTown Multimedia newsroom culture through education on the effects of trauma and how to report on traumatic events.

Problem definition

I have been exposed to trauma in a variety of ways in my journalism career. I have encountered traumatic events first-hand when reporting from the scene of crashes and fires. I have read disturbing details in court documents. And I have experienced second-hand trauma interviewing people who have gone through a traumatic event. Though I have continued to advance my reporting skills to tell these difficult stories, I have neglected professional development on the topic of trauma exposure and the effects trauma has on myself and the people I interview. Research indicates this is an overlooked problem in the journalism profession with serious implications.

To learn more about trauma exposure in journalism, a colleague referred me to Katherine Reed, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism who teaches a class on the subject. I spoke with Reed via video call June 7, 2019.

“One of the most important things a newsroom can do for its reporters and editors is teach what trauma is and what trauma does to the brain — and how that has implications for us as journalists,” Reed said.

According to Reed, it is important to educate reporters about trauma so they know how to take care of themselves as well as to avoid harming or re-victimizing others. “The way we treat other people has implications for how we feel about our journalism and how we feel about ourselves,” she said. When a reporter understands trauma, they are equipped to respectfully and ethically interact with someone who has experienced a traumatic event; in turn, this makes the reporter feel better about their work and helps negate the effects of being exposed to trauma.

Reed said she advocates for in-person newsroom conversations to talk through stories involving trauma and make thoughtful decisions about coverage. She further said editors need to be able to spot the symptoms of trauma and recognize when reporters need a break.

“It’s not very complicated,” Reed said. “If a reporter has somebody they feel they can talk to and trust, and who isn’t going to judge them, that makes a big difference.”

Trauma effects

Researchers have studied the range of traumatic events that journalists encounter as well as how trauma exposure affects the wellbeing of journalists and the quality of their work.

Simpson and Boggs (1999) compared trauma exposure in journalism to the experiences of public safety workers. The effects of trauma exposure — which can be directly experienced or heard second-hand from sources — accumulate over time and can negatively impact a reporter’s future willingness to cover similar stories. This avoidance behavior and associated dulling of emotions “. . . undermines efforts that often require unusual energy, clear thought and the willingness to take risks to obtain information, traits associated with excellence in journalism” (p. 18).

Journalists surveyed in the Simpson and Boggs study cited talking with colleagues, friends, and family members as the most common ways of processing trauma exposure. Other journalists surveyed reported engaging in destructive behaviors such as alcohol consumption. Journalists are commonly first on the scene of traumatic events along with police, firefighters, and paramedics; however, reporters typically don’t receive the same after-action debriefing as other first responders to process what they experienced (Barnes, 2013). According to Ochberg (1996), journalists who interview trauma victims may encounter post-traumatic stress disorder, a syndrome characterized by intrusive memories of a traumatic event, emotional numbing, and

physiological changes leading to difficulty sleeping and concentrating. Journalists are also at risk of developing secondary traumatic stress disorder, described as “. . . an empathic response that affects us . . . when our professional detachment is overwhelmed by certain life events.”

According to Figley (1995), therapists and other professionals who listen to stories of trauma in others may feel the same emotions themselves, particularly for those professionals who exhibit strong empathy. Simpson and Coté (2006) posit that some reporters with a history of trauma in their personal lives may identify with or form relationships with trauma victims they interview. They suggest that it is best for both parties for journalists to understand the effects of trauma and to be able to spot the signs of trauma in others.

Emotional labor

The anecdote of my interview with the mother of the murdered children is an example of how reporters regulate their feelings. I chose to suppress my urge to comfort her so I could record a video. The act of workers controlling their emotions as a job requirement is examined in Hochschild's 1983 book, “The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling.” She called the practice emotional labor, defined as “. . . the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (p. 7). According to Hochschild, flight attendants are routine practitioners of emotional labor, with their job requiring them to hide negative emotions behind smiles when interacting with passengers. Researchers have continued to study emotional labor in a range of professions such as librarians, police detectives, and customer service (Shuler & Morgan, 2013; Stenross & Kleinman, 1989; Ishii & Markman, 2016).

Research specific to emotional labor for reporters is relatively new. Hopper and Huxford (2015) interviewed 20 current and former newspaper reporters to study the emotional labor of

being a journalist. A focus of their research was the role of objectivity, a professional norm for reporters to be detached observers and a “transparent conduit” for information (p. 29). They posited that emotional labor in journalism largely entails the suppression of emotion to maintain objectivity. All survey participants said they agreed that controlling emotion is an important aspect of being a professional journalist. All participants also said the perception that reporters need to engage in emotional suppression came from a general commitment to behaving professionally, not as an explicit requirement of their news organization. No participant reported having any formal training on handling emotions on the job; rather, most indicated they learned by following the example of veteran coworkers.

Burn-out

The emotional labor of suppressing feelings and shirking job duties as a reaction to trauma exposure have implications for reporter burn-out and turnover in newsrooms. The topic of burn-out received recent media attention after the World Health Organization announced in May 2019 that burn-out would be added to the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases. It is defined as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed,” and has three dimensions: “Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and reduced professional efficacy” (“Burn-out,” 2019). Lower work commitment and higher work pressure strongly correlate to emotional exhaustion and burn-out for journalists (Cook, Banks, & Turner, 1993). A meta-analysis of research on emotional labor by Hülshager, Schewe, and Hurrell (2011) also suggests that engaging in surface acting — regulating feelings through suppression, amplification, or faking that results in an

inauthentic expression of emotion — is correlated with emotional exhaustion and weak organizational attachment for employees. Meta-analysis provides some potential remedies to control the negative outcomes of surface acting, such as training to regulate emotions in healthy ways.

Trauma training

Research has shown a troubling lack of training for journalists on how to manage trauma exposure and appropriately interact with people who have experienced a traumatic event. A survey by Dworzni and Garvey (2018) of accredited journalism schools found only one out of 41 respondents offered a course specifically on the topic of trauma exposure. Of the schools that teach trauma training to some degree, lessons include self-care, dealing with trauma when working on deadlines, trauma symptoms, compassion, and empathy. Respondents said the topic was taught with commonly used teaching methods such as discussions, lectures, readings, and videos, while alternative teaching methods such as role-playing, simulations, and real-world interactions with trauma victims were less commonly used. The authors posit that this lack of training is problematic for the wellbeing of journalists and the wellbeing of trauma victims put at risk of additional harm through insensitive questioning.

A leading voice for trauma training is the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. The center published “Trauma & Journalism: A Guide For Journalists, Editors & Managers” (Brayne, 2007) with advice on how to report on trauma and ways to deal with the effects of trauma exposure. According to the guide, “Journalists are professional first responders to crisis and disaster. But they’re among the last of those groups to recognise the psychological implications of that

responsibility” (p. 1). The guide recognizes that trauma exposure is inherent to the job and advocates for reporters to be educated about trauma and its effects. Recommendations for reporters include being patient, taking time to breathe, and treating trauma victims with respect. It also provides guidelines to follow when writing stories, such as taking care not to sensationalize details, respecting the safety of interview subjects, and avoiding further victimization. Additionally, the guide has tips for editors to help their reporters and change newsroom culture regarding trauma. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma partnered with the Poynter Institute to develop an online course on trauma (“Journalism and Trauma”). The free course includes lessons on traumatic stress, how to interview people exposed to trauma, and ways to cope with secondary stress disorder.

Qualitative interviews

Before developing a communications plan for a trauma-informed training program, I sought to better understand the nature and extent of trauma exposure for RiverTown Multimedia reporters. I also sought to gauge the level of knowledge reporters have about trauma in order to shape the complexity of the training program. This presented two research questions:

RQ1: What kind of stories do RiverTown Multimedia reporters find to be emotionally challenging?

RQ2: What training have RiverTown Multimedia reporters received regarding trauma exposure?

Additionally, I was curious about reporters' level of interest in trauma training and if they would be willing to participate in formal peer-support activities. This added a third research question:

RQ3: How interested are RiverTown Multimedia reporters in trauma-informed training?

Method and design

I determined qualitative interviews would be the best method to answer the above research questions. To design the interviews I first compiled an interview guide with four questions to probe reporters' past trauma exposure; the role of emotional labor to maintain objectivity; reporters' level of knowledge about trauma; and the resources reporters would like to see implemented in the RiverTown Multimedia newsroom.

I selected five RiverTown Multimedia reporters to invite to participate in the interviews. The group represented approximately 20% of the newsroom. Reporters were selected to include a variety of beats, years of experience, and journalism training. Two of the reporters are in the first year of their journalism career, two have three to five years of experience, and one has more than five years of experience. The reporters have all covered crime, crashes, and other potentially traumatic stories. Four of the reporters have degrees in journalism.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one in the RiverTown Multimedia newsroom. Reporters were asked the questions in the interview guide as well as additional probing questions to spur conversation. Interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes. Notes were taken during the interviews and later compiled for analysis. See Appendix A for the complete interview guide.

Results

RQ1: What kind of stories do RiverTown Multimedia reporters find to be emotionally challenging?

The interviews all revealed a common theme: RiverTown Multimedia reporters are routinely exposed to traumatic events and have been deeply affected by that exposure. Four of the reporters focused on the emotional impact of covering crime stories, especially those involving sexual violence. One of them said covering local crime stories made them feel less safe in their community. Reporting on court documents was identified as a challenge because the written descriptions caused reporters to visualize the disturbing details. According to one reporter, “Your mind races, and it goes to places that it shouldn’t.” One reporter described a cumulative effect of negative emotion when covering crime stories and feeling burned-out after a

couple years on the beat. One reporter said a crime story caused them to have dreams about it. Another indicated it was difficult to stop thinking about the details of a crime.

Three reporters said fires, vehicle crashes, and other similar disaster stories caused them distress. One reporter described interviewing a crying woman whose house burned down. The reporter said: “That has stayed with me. In the weeks after, it kept coming back to me, and I wondered if my response was OK.” One reporter said seeing dead bodies and wreckage at vehicle crashes was the hardest part of covering such stories. One reporter said they have felt apprehensive on the way to the scene of a traumatic event. Additionally, the reporter said that not immediately knowing the condition of an accident victim caused them distress.

On the topic of emotional labor and objectivity, all reporters said they believe there is an expectation for journalists to be objective; however, they also described ways of using emotions to build rapport with interview subjects. One reporter said a degree of empathy is important to tell stories about victims of trauma. “It’s almost like I play the therapist,” the reporter said. Another reporter said a good story requires a balanced approach: “A lot of journalism, I think, happens as you are being a human along with your sources.”

RQ2: What training have RiverTown Multimedia reporters received regarding trauma exposure?

In line with research on trauma training in journalism, RiverTown Multimedia reporters have had limited education about trauma and its effects. Four of the reporters said they have received no formal education about trauma. “We need a lot more education on it. What do you do with these stories, these emotions?” one reporter said. The single reporter who had a class on

trauma said the curriculum was valuable. The reporter also said they would be interested in additional training.

RQ3: How interested are RiverTown Multimedia reporters in trauma-informed training?

All five reporters said they would be open to learning more about trauma and participating in a peer-support program at RiverTown Multimedia. One reporter voiced a desire to talk with fellow journalists about their experiences instead of family members. “That’s what’s great about having a newsroom, is you can talk about it with somebody else who will understand,” the reporter said. One reporter said they already speak with experienced colleagues and in small groups for help working on difficult stories. The reporter added that they prefer to speak with colleagues in person.

Analysis

There is nothing “small” about small town journalism. RiverTown Multimedia reporters routinely encounter emotionally challenging stories that are causing short- and long-term effects to their wellbeing. Additionally, though RiverTown Multimedia reporters are professional journalists who value objectivity, they are also empathetic people who want to treat victims with respect. Interest in trauma effects is high among RiverTown Multimedia reporters, but education and training on the topic is lacking. RiverTown Multimedia reporters already talk to each other and try to help work through difficult stories. What the newsroom needs is education and tools to do peer support well.

Communications plan

What follows is a proposed internal communications plan for a trauma-informed training program at RiverTown Multimedia. The plan aims to address needs specific to the RiverTown Multimedia newsroom as identified in the qualitative interviews with reporters.

There are two audiences to be addressed: the news director and editors, who will be trained to be newsroom leaders and tasked with recognizing trauma in reporters; and reporters, who will be trained to process trauma exposure and interact with trauma victims.



Figure 1. Organizational chart for the RiverTown Multimedia editorial department.

Objective

The objective of the communications plan is to change RiverTown Multimedia culture through education on the effects of trauma, self-care methods, and how to responsibly interview trauma victims.

Roadblocks

Based on academic literature and qualitative interviews, I identified three roadblocks to implementing the communications plan. I address them below with considerations on how to overcome them.

Organizational vs. professional identity. All five RiverTown Multimedia reporters interviewed said they believe in the importance of objectivity as part of being a professional journalist. This echoed the study by Hopper and Huxford (2015) that found journalists follow this norm as a perceived requirement of the profession, and not their news organization. I posit that RiverTown Multimedia reporters align more strongly with their identity as journalists than as employees of RiverTown Multimedia. Therefore, it is important for communications about trauma training to come from respected industry voices. For this reason, I based messages on recommendations from the Dart Center in order to leverage the reputation of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Furthermore, the plan calls on editors to lead the newsroom in becoming trauma-informed. According to the Dart Center guide (Brayne, 2007), “Rather than farming out responsibility for trauma response to outsiders and trauma professionals, managers, editors, and colleagues should themselves take organisational ownership of managing the first-line impact of trauma” (p. 17). I consulted human resources about available mental health resources provided by the employee assistance program. The role of HR in this plan is to connect reporters to professional counseling when peer support is not sufficient.

Limited resources. Community journalism is an exercise in doing more with less. As news organizations shrink and fewer reporters are tasked with covering more beats, any

newsroom initiative must consider the limited time and funding available. The scope of the educational material in this plan is kept intentionally simple. Basing newsroom training on the basics of trauma exposure in the Dart Center guide and Poynter Institute course will control the amount of work time requested of editors and reporters. Both resources are also free, with only nominal printing fees for providing copies of the Dart Center guide.

Working remotely. Another consequence of shrinking news organizations is more reporters working outside of the newsroom environment. RiverTown Multimedia has closed several offices in recent years, and reporters formerly based in those buildings now work remotely for at least part of the work week. This poses a challenge for in-person peer support. A partial solution is to establish a section for peer support on the newsroom's online chat software. But the onus is ultimately on editors to speak with reporters working remotely and make an effort to encourage in-person communication. According to the Dart Center guide (Brayne, 2007), "Connection with other human beings helps balance and reinforce the brain chemicals and hormones that allow us to process and survive emotional distress. So, make reliable arrangements to keep in touch, regularly, and stick to what you've agreed" (p. 14).

Tactics

The desired outcome is to develop a trauma-informed newsroom at RiverTown Multimedia. Such a newsroom would be led by editors who are cognizant of the emotional impact difficult story assignments can have on reporters. Editors would be equipped to recognize signs that reporters are struggling with trauma exposure and have the training to provide appropriate support. Reporters would be educated about trauma and its effects — empowering them to interact with trauma victims without causing additional harm as well as to manage their

own trauma exposure. Additionally, a trauma-informed newsroom would have a culture that values open conversations about difficult stories and peer support. To reach this outcome, I propose the following tactics for editors and reporters:

For editors

Good: The news director and editors will receive printed and digital copies of the Dart Center guide. The editorial team will be required to read the document and then meet to discuss it. An all-newsroom training session will be scheduled for editors to introduce reporters to the subject of trauma and explain the importance of being trauma-informed. Following the session, editors will put into practice the recommendations in the Dart Center guide. See Appendix B for a selection of key messages.

Better: As time allows, editors will also complete the free Journalism and Trauma online course provided by the Poynter Institute prior to the training session.

Best: In addition to the above, editors will also reach out to the Dart Center and/or local police departments, fire departments, and mental health organizations to schedule an expert to speak about trauma at the training session.

For reporters

Good: Reporters will be required to attend a newsroom training session on trauma exposure and will receive printed and digital copies of the Dart Center guide.

Better: Reporters will be encouraged to complete the free Journalism and Trauma online training course provided by the Poynter Institute.

Implementation

The plan will be implemented in three stages: initial training for editors, a newsroom training session for reporters, and ongoing newsroom discussions and peer support.

Month 1	Month 2	Ongoing
Tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Editor training • Plan newsroom training Optional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online trauma course • Schedule expert speaker 	Tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsroom training session • Start peer-support chatroom Optional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online training course for reporters 	Tasks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular newsroom discussions and peer support • Editors check in with reporters for signs of trauma
Stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News director • Editors 	Stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News director • Editors • Reporters 	Stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News director • Editors • Reporters
Budget considerations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Printing Dart Center guides • Possible speaking fees 	Budget considerations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Printing Dart Center guides • Meeting food/refreshments 	Budget considerations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coffee/lunch meetings for remote workers

Evaluation

The success of the plan will be measured against the objective of changing RiverTown Multimedia culture through education on the effects of trauma, self-care methods, and how to responsibly interview trauma victims. Evaluation will be based on what reporters and editors learned, the frequency of newsroom discussions about trauma, and opinions on the usefulness of those discussions. To accomplish this, I propose a second round of qualitative interviews six months after implementation. Questions will probe reporters’ confidence in being trauma-informed, the impact of newsroom discussions, and inquire about shortcomings to be addressed in future trainings.

Conclusion and future study

With industry headlines telling of shuttered offices and declining readership, the impending demise of community newspapers has been well documented. Though important decisions about online paywalls and membership-based business models have dominated leadership discussions at news organizations, the overlooked issue of trauma exposure has implications for the future of the journalism industry. If reporters get burned-out from trauma exposure or related emotional labor, the quality of their journalism could suffer. Burn-out is of particular concern at community newspaper groups like RiverTown Multimedia, which serve as launch pads for new journalists to enter the profession. If these beginner reporters leave journalism after their first encounters with traumatic events, then larger news organizations lose an important source of future talent. Fortunately, this is a problem editors and reporters can confront in the newsroom. Through education and open discussions about trauma and its effects, journalists can better take care of themselves and the communities they cover.

This project focused on journalists with a plan specific to RiverTown Multimedia; however, reporters are not the only communicators who are exposed to trauma. Public relations and crisis communications professionals encounter many of the same difficult events, images, and descriptions as journalists. I recommend that communications departments explore the resources referenced in this project and adapt them for the benefit of employees and audiences.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Qualitative interviews were conducted with five RiverTown Multimedia reporters June 5-13, 2019. Reporters were asked four questions with additional probing questions to help spur conversation. The interviews were conducted in an employee break room and ranged from 20 to 30 minutes in length. The reporters were informed about the purpose of the interview and the nature of this capstone project. All were told their names would not be used in the project.

The interview questions are presented here, along with summaries of the reporters' responses and gleaned insights.

Q1: What are the kind of stories that you have found to be the most emotionally challenging?

Four of the reporters said writing about crime was difficult, especially stories involving violence or sexual assault.

One reporter said covering local crime stories made them feel less safe in their community.

Two reporters said writing stories based on criminal complaints is difficult because the descriptions of crimes caused them to visualize the events in their heads. According to one reporter, "Your mind races, and it goes to places that it shouldn't."

One reporter said the emotional impact of covering crime has a cumulative effect. "That gets tough, the more and more you do it. That wasn't something that ever got any easier." The reporter said they got burned-out on the police beat after a couple years.

One reporter said they had dreams about a crime story after reporting on it. Another indicated it was difficult to stop thinking about the details in a criminal complaint: “That’s not something you can just scrub out of your brain after reading.”

One reporter said crime stories caused added pressure to report the story accurately out of respect for victims. “I needed to be on my A game because of the importance of the story. I just knew in my mind that I had to get everything right. I had to.” The reporter said mistakes in such stories were “heartbreaking,” and that negative feedback from crime victims brought strong feelings of regret. “It’s hard to dump that off. It’s hard to get rid of it.”

Three reporters said fires, vehicle crashes, and other disasters caused them to feel emotional distress.

One reporter said their “first real story” as a journalist was about a family’s house burning down. One of the family members started crying while the reporter interviewed them. “That has stayed with me. In the weeks after, it kept coming back to me, and I wondered if my response was OK.”

One reporter said seeing dead bodies and wreckage at a vehicle crash was the hardest part. “Showing up on the scene and seeing the burned out shell of a car where you know somebody burned to death.”

One reporter said they have felt apprehensive on the way to an incident. “I remember saying to somebody, ‘I don’t want to see what I don’t want to see.’” The reporter further indicated that not immediately knowing the condition of accident victims caused them distress. In one instance, an accident occurred on a Friday, and the reporter was not able to get details

about the victim's condition until the following Monday. "It's personal by that point. It gets more personal than what you want it to be. I took it with me the whole weekend."

Insight: There is nothing "small" about small town journalism. RiverTown Multimedia reporters routinely encounter a range of emotionally challenging stories that are causing short- and long-term effects to their wellbeing.

Q2: How important is it to be detached from stories and interview subjects in order to maintain objectivity?

All reporters said they believe there is an expectation for journalists to be objective in their reporting; however, all reporters also indicated they have struggled to what degree they should be detached from interview subjects.

One reporter said they are motivated to give victims a voice to tell their story. They said a level of empathy is important to tell these stories and tell them well. "It's almost like I play the therapist." Another reporter described a "wall of professionalism" between them and interview subjects. They said writing a good story requires "walking a fine line" on that wall to get the most out of an interview. "A lot of journalism, I think, happens as you are being a human along with your sources," they said. They further said it has been difficult not to cry along with interview subjects.

According to one reporter: "I know that being detached is kind of an expectation, but I feel myself drifting toward empathy sometimes. In some cases that can be helpful. You have to be human. You can maintain professionalism without being cold."

Insight: RiverTown Multimedia reporters are professional journalists who value objectivity. But they are also empathetic people who want to do well by their communities.

Q3: What training have you received regarding trauma and reporting on traumatic events?

Four of the reporters said they have received no formal education specific to trauma exposure for journalists.

One reporter said journalism school classes touched on journalistic ethics, but nothing on how to deal with the emotional effects of being a journalist.

Another reporter went to school to be a sports reporter and did not receive training about reporting on traumatic events. “We need a lot more education on it. What do you do with these stories, these emotions?” the reporter said.

One reporter said their education was limited to training on how not to upset sources by overemoting or coaxing them on.

The one reporter who did have a class focused on trauma exposure said the instruction was interesting and valuable. One key takeaway they remembered is that people respond to trauma differently. The reporter said they would be interested in learning more or having a refresher course on the subject.

Insight: Interest in being trauma-informed is high among RiverTown Multimedia reporters, but specific education and training is lacking.

Q4: What more could we be doing at RiverTown Multimedia to support you with telling the difficult stories?

All five reporters said they would be interested in learning more about trauma effects and participating in a peer support program.

One reporter said they would prefer to speak with colleagues about their experiences and share guidance in person, rather than over the phone or through chat software. The reporter said they already speak one-on-one with their more experienced colleagues or in small, informal groups when working on difficult stories.

One reporter said speaking with colleagues about difficult stories is preferable to talking to family members, because they either won't understand what they are going through or because they don't want to burden them. "That's what's great about having a newsroom, is you can talk about it with somebody else who will understand." A reporter echoed the sentiment that the newsroom environment is helpful to talk about and process difficult stories.

One reporter said they personally do not cover traumatic stories frequently enough to routinely make use of a peer-support program, but said it would be a good resource to have available in the newsroom.

Insight: RiverTown Multimedia reporters already talk and help each other through difficult stories — what they need is the education to do peer support well.

Appendix B: Key training messages

“Trauma & Journalism: A Guide For Journalists, Editors & Managers” (Brayne, 2007) published by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma provides recommendations for journalists to process trauma exposure and responsibly cover traumatic events. The following are key messages from the document to be included in the RiverTown Multimedia trauma-informed training plan.

For editors

How to manage trauma before, during, and after a difficult story assignment:

Before. Hold open conversations about trauma; acknowledge and thank reporters for covering a traumatic event; connect regularly with reporters; encourage reporters to engage in self-care.

During. Maintain regular contact; be a role model by engaging in self-care; be mindful of the timing and tone of criticism.

After. Show acknowledgment and appreciation; keep the newsroom informed about reporters who have been exposed to trauma; ensure reporters have opportunities to talk about trauma; follow up with reporters days and weeks later.

Signs of trauma

- Changes in personality or behavior
- Feelings of guilt or confusion, including inability to concentrate
- Physical illness such as back or stomach pain
- Changes in schedule such as coming in late or leaving late
- Increased alcohol consumption

Self-care tips

- Eat three meals daily and get enough sleep
- Drink water and maintain an exercise routine
- Take regular breaks
- Talk to a trusted confidant
- Avoid overconsumption of alcohol

Interviewing trauma victims

- Check first for permission to ask a tough question
- Use active-listening skills such as eye contact and mirroring of movements
- Ask simple, open questions and allow for pauses and silence
- Never ask “How do you feel?”; instead ask “How are you now?”
- Avoid over-empathizing and crossing the boundary to advocacy
- Establish boundaries for interview length and be clear when it is approaching the end