

Podcast episode 3

Forced Change: Talking trauma — how journalism educators are finding new ways to teach an age-old topic

Changement forcé : Parlons trauma - comment les formateurs en journalisme trouvent de nouvelles façons d'enseigner un sujet vieux comme le monde

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ABSTRACT

What does a “trauma-informed journalist” look like? What are the specific competencies associated with being a trauma-informed journalist? And what are the metrics used to measure the efficacy of current training on trauma-informed approaches to reporting? These questions grow out of a discussion at the Taking Care Roundtable, which brought newsroom leaders, journalism educators, working journalists, union representatives, and other stakeholders together in Ottawa in October 2022 for a two-day meeting intended to surface practical and innovative solutions to address some of the challenges highlighted in Matthew Pearson’s and David Seglins’s (2022) *Taking Care: A report on mental health, well-being and trauma among Canadian media workers*. This podcast episode features a discussion among journalism educators about the importance of teaching trauma-informed approaches to reporting, the current gaps in pedagogy and practice, and reflections on the student-led demand for this content in a post-pandemic environment where mental health and well-being is top of mind among many young journalists in training.

RÉSUMÉ

À quoi ressemble un “journaliste respectueux des traumatismes” ? Quelles sont les compétences spécifiques associées à ce type de journaliste ? Et quels sont les paramètres utilisés pour mesurer l’efficacité de la formation actuelle sur les approches de reportage tenant compte des traumatismes ? Ces questions sont nées d’une discussion à la table ronde “Prendre soin”, qui a rassemblé des dirigeants de salles de rédaction, des formateurs en journalisme, des journalistes en activité, des représentants syndicaux et d’autres parties prenantes à Ottawa en octobre 2022 pour une réunion de deux jours visant à trouver des solutions pratiques et innovantes pour relever certains des défis mis en évidence dans le rapport de Matthew Pearson et Da-



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vid Seglins (2022) intitulé “Prendre soin” : Un rapport sur la santé mentale, le bien-être et les traumatismes chez les travailleurs des médias canadiens. Cet épisode du podcast présente une discussion entre formateurs en journalisme sur l’importance d’enseigner des approches de reportage tenant compte des traumatismes, les lacunes actuelles en

matière de pédagogie et de pratique, et des réflexions sur la demande de ce contenu par les étudiants dans un environnement post-pandémique où la santé mentale et le bien-être sont au cœur des préoccupations de nombreux jeunes journalistes en formation.

Crack open a reporting textbook and the table of contents will surely outline many fundamental skills a journalism student must master if they hope to succeed in the industry. Finding original story ideas, writing snappy leads and nut graphs, incorporating colourful quotes and proper attribution, understanding media law and ethics, and learning the basics of copy editing and Canadian Press style are all covered (Bender et al., 2018).

What’s often missing, or referenced in a fleeting way, in these general texts is how to effectively, ethically, and sensitively report on traumatic events and the people touched by them. Despite the complex issues journalists in the early decades of the 21st century find themselves reporting on — from conflict, climate catastrophes and the COVID-19 pandemic to racial reckonings, political instability, and economic and social disparities — there is scant practical direction on how to tell these stories well and even less on how a journalist might protect their own mental health and well-being while doing so (Hadley-Burke & Saxena, 2021).

The lack of adequate training is borne out in research, most notably by a sobering statistic from *Taking Care: A report on mental health, well-being and trauma among Canadian media workers*. The 2022 report is based on voluntary and anonymous survey responses from more than 1,200 journalists and media workers in Canada. Ninety per cent of respondents said they did not receive any training on how to report on trauma while enrolled in journalism school (meanwhile, 85 per cent said they haven’t received it at work either) (Pearson & Seglins, 2022, p. 28). This is a gap in journalism pedagogy and practice that requires urgent attention.


Teaching trauma-informed approaches to journalism is crucial because it recognizes the special considerations journalists must make around language use and ethics when reporting on how trauma impacts individuals, families, and communities. More broadly, these approaches encompass a solid understanding of what trauma is and how it can affect people, the risks to journalists when they are exposed to trauma on the job, and the importance of mental health support and self-care resources for journalists to take care of themselves and look out for colleagues after reporting on traumatic incidents or interacting with survivors of trauma.

In the words of Roger Simpson and William Coté (2006), a pair of American journalism instructors who authored the seminal book, *Covering Violence: A guide to ethical reporting about victims and trauma*, “The most effective journalist is one who understands the risks of his or her work, has been trained well for that work, and is confident of the support of employers or others during and after the coverage of violent events” (p. 267).

There is no question individual instructors in some Canadian journalism programs are bringing this content into the classroom. Many may benefit from materials produced by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and the Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma, which have been working in this space for several decades. However, an overhaul of journalism curricula in Canada to make space for trauma-informed approaches has not happened yet. And because it’s not part of the core curriculum, it remains difficult to ensure that every graduating student, regardless of the path they took while in school, would have received some kind of introduction to the topic.

Why are programs reluctant to include this material? Is it simply a lack of sufficient time or competing demands to teach a wide and growing list of skills? Or is there a possibility that the macho, no-crying-in-journalism culture that has taken root in many newsrooms over many years has, to some degree, been replicated in journalism programs?

Whatever the reason(s), the way forward is clear – when educators create space for these conversations, acknowledge upfront that trauma may be something a student will encounter on the job, and provide meaningful advice on how to take care of sources and themselves, everyone benefits.

In this podcast episode, Carleton University journalism professor Matthew Pearson facilitates a round-table discussion with three other journalism educators: Saranaz Barforoush from the University of British Columbia, Duncan McCue from Carleton University and Kelly Roche from University of King's College. In this discussion, the four educators – drawn from different parts of the country – explore how their counterparts have engaged with the idea of bringing trauma-informed approaches to reporting into the classroom and reflect on what work remains. 

[Watch the panel's full discussion here.](#)

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Kelly Roche is best known for her trailblazing approach in the journalism program at Humber College in Toronto. She has managed digital newsrooms for Humber News and *The Signal* at the University of King's College in Halifax. Her freelance work has appeared in the *Toronto Star*, *CBC* and *Toronto Life*.

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