Podcast episode 4

Forced Change: Teaching anti-oppressive journalism in a time of pandemic fatigue

Changement forcé : Enseigner le journalisme anti-oppressif à une époque de fatigue pandémique

Eternity Martis and Shari Okeke, feat. Asmaa Malik, Duncan McCue and Adrian Harewood

ABSTRACT

In this podcast episode, a panel of journalism professors from Carleton and Toronto Metropolitan universities discuss their experiences teaching anti-racist approaches to journalism while also dealing with both pandemic fatigue and oppression fatigue. They identify how pandemic and oppression fatigue added new layers of stress for both educators and students. The panel touches on strategies they use for making BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) students feel welcome in journalism, for example by taking on mentorship roles both inside and outside of class. They also discuss how they bring care to the classroom by allowing students to rewrite assignments, incorporating breathwork in their classes, or incorporating regular check-ins to see how students are feeling.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet épisode de balado, un groupe de professeurs de journalisme des universités Carleton et Toronto Metropolitan discutent de leurs expériences en matière d'enseignement des approches antiracistes du journalisme, tout en faisant face à la fatigue de la pandémie et à la fatigue de l'oppression. Ils expliquent comment la fatigue liée à la pandémie et à l'oppression a ajouté de nouvelles couches de stress tant pour les enseignants que pour les étudiantes. Le panel aborde les stratégies qu'ils utilisent pour que les étudiants noirs, autochtones et de couleur (BIPOC) se sentent les bienvenus dans le journalisme, par exemple en assumant des rôles de mentor à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la classe. Ils discutent également de la manière dont ils apportent des attentions en classe en permettant aux étudiants de réécrire leurs devoirs, en incorporant des exercices de respiration dans leurs cours ou en procédant à des vérifications régulières pour voir comment les étudiants se sentent.

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Assistant Professor Eternity Martis created Toronto Metropolitan University's journalism course "Reporting on Race: The Black Community in the Media" in 2020, following a petition from recent TMU journalism graduates who were disillusioned with the media coverage of Black communities preceding and in the wake of George Floyd's murder (Xavier-Carter 2020). Martis's experience developing and teaching this course inspired this episode of the *Forced Change* podcast.

Martis began teaching the course during the pandemic's first year of online learning. She found that student attendance and engagement was high and consistent. By the third year, students were back in class in person and remained interested in the course. They appreciated the emphasis on anti-racist reporting and the safe classroom environment created for students of colour. However, by mid-term, there was a high degree of pandemic and oppression fatigue, which was evidenced by a drop in engagement before mid-term, frequently late assignments and students not doing the required readings. Martis notes in the podcast episode that compared to the years she taught the course virtually, once back in person, students shifted "to almost a sense of just complete fatigue." When Martis informally asked students for feedback to gauge whether their lack of engagement was due to the way she conducted the course, students unanimously agreed that they enjoyed the course and felt represented by the material; however, they said that learning about anti-Black racism, and journalists' roles in perpetuating it, sometimes felt heavy and difficult. They also cited pandemic fatigue and struggles to balance school, personal, and home life during COVID-19, all of which led to reduced capacity for learning. Martis herself experienced exhaustion from the challenges of teaching the course combined with the heaviness of the material.

For this podcast episode, Martis gathered a panel of journalism educators to broaden the discussion with a diverse range of experiences. In addition to herself, the panel includes Asmaa Malik, associate professor at Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Journalism, Duncan McCue, associate professor at Carleton University's School of Journalism and author of *Decolonizing Jour-nalism: A Guide to Reporting in Indigenous Communities*, and Adrian Harewood, associate professor at Carleton's School of Journalism. The panel is moderated by assistant professor Shari Okeke from Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Journalism.

Educators have long faced stress and fatigue balancing their teaching, research, and service with the growing needs of the post-secondary institution. Journalism educators have been adapting their courses to reflect the journalism industry's ever-changing landscape, from the incorporation of new trends and technologies to addressing the employment and morale crisis caused by numerous layoffs (Ahmed, 2023) to a historic mistrust in news. This, in addition to the increased calls from journalists of colour and racialized communities to make journalism practice and education more inclusive and diverse.

COVID-19 brought a palpable, added layer of stress, exhaustion, and uncertainty to educators, who were forced to make the sudden switch to online learning. Months later, the murder of George Floyd and the following June 2020 protests finally ushered in a large-scale racial reckoning that brought major changes across institutions, the journalism industry, and journalism schools. This podcast episode explores how both events created a challenging sense of fatigue and overwhelm for instructors teaching anti-oppression courses and for their students. It also examines the strategies — such as engaging in community care — that were used to mitigate the fatigue.

Pandemic learning significantly upended teaching and learning (Day et al., 2020). Students' struggles with mental health decline (Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health, 2021) and financial instability (Statistics Canada, 2020a) created negative impacts on academic learning and success (Statistics Canada, 2020b). Journalism educators also faced fatigue, burn-out and mental health issues, but unlike other educators, also experienced the distress caused by having to constantly engage with and teach the news cycle. Scholarship on teaching during COVID-19 notes the emotional labour of teaching during the pandemic, as well as the stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and fatigue of teachers, with some resorting to

"surface acting", a phenomenon where teachers attempt to reassure and support students despite their own emotional overwhelm (Auger & Formentin, 2021, pp. 391-392).

At the same time, the long overdue racial reckoning ushered in urgent changes in journalism departments, such as including more anti-racist content, practices and courses that until then had been considered not objective or traditional enough in journalism schools and the industry. This added pressure was evident in the number of new courses created and instructors hired to diversify journalism education in Canada, such as "Reporting on Race" by Martis, and "Journalism, Race, and Diversity" and "Journalism and Belonging" by Carleton journalism professors Adrian Harewood and Nana aba Duncan, respectively. However, the racial reckoning of journalism schools along with the concurrent public health crises of COVID-19 and ongoing racism have taken a significant toll on both journalism students and journalism educators.

Some of the journalism educators featured in the podcast episode learned that teaching anti-racist methods and content could be overwhelming and retraumatizing, leading to burnout for themselves and for students experiencing oppression fatigue and "racial battle fatigue" (Smith et al., 2011). The frequent exposure to the police brutality of Black people can cause adverse mental health issues (Bor et al., 2018). Along with COVID-19 fatigue, instructors faced unprecedented requests to provide students more support, resources, leniency and mentorship, all while navigating their own overwhelm.

These challenges have led journalism educators to re-evaluate and emphasize the role of care in the classroom. Scholarship on the ethics of care in journalism have weighed care as a necessary human virtue that cannot be divorced from the objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality of journalistic practice (Steiner & Okrusch, 2006, p. 18). Care has always been part of journalism practice, if we consider that journalists must abide by institutional ethics and apply care in their approach to interviews, subjects, and the stories they write. Inherently, journalists tell stories that make us care "about the struggles of people, groups, and communities" (Steiner & Okrusch, 2006, p. 18). While journalism practice and theory has largely been male-dominated, Linda Steiner (2020) explores feminist and womanist approaches to care as a way to create a more compassionate, human-first approach to media. In her chapter, "Feminist Media Ethics" from *The Routledge Handbook of Mass Media Ethics*, she applies a feminist standpoint epistemology derived of the 1980s theories ethic of care, lesbian ethics, and Black womanism to create a more compassionate, sensitive, and caring approach to media research, journalism practice, news and entertainment content, and media workplaces that would have the potential to correct the power imbalances in the industry (Steiner 2020).

The panelists in this episode engage in a number of these approaches but offer another side to these theories of care in the institution of media by demonstrating how it can also be applied to care in the academic institution of journalism. Firstly, this is done by teaching students how to use care and trauma-informed approaches in their practice. As Harewood notes in the episode, care is at the centre of journalism:

> Care is about the kind of relationships that we're trying to cultivate. Care is just the way in which we approach our work. Care is how we treat the people, people that we're interviewing... The whole project is care. So if we don't have care, then what do we have?

Secondly, it is done by cultivating a classroom where care is integrated into the framework of the course. For example, doing check-ins and check-outs during class, offering flexibility on deadlines or reducing the assignment or reading load. As the professors in this episode discuss, making space for care from the planning stages of the course rather than including it reactively can help students and instructors better manage and identify overwhelm and fatigue.

However, there are drawbacks to these approaches. The time and effort spent to cultivate care, whether through mentoring, supporting students, or creating anti-oppressive courses and

modules is highly racialized and contributes to a significant amount of invisible labour. Martis and McCue speak to how their positions as racialized faculty means inevitably spending more time mentoring students on how to do trauma-informed reporting while also trying to cultivate hope among racialized students who are already disillusioned by the industry. Okeke discusses how this "cheerleading" extends beyond the classroom and outside of office hours. Student mentorship both in and outside of the classroom has been historically gendered (Auger & Formentin, 2021) and also disproportionately affects women of colour, who are more likely to do invisible labour in academia (Celeste & Joseph, 2021) than their white counterparts. These added responsibilities of being an emotional support and mentor for marginalized students makes it difficult for them to achieve their research goals and tenure (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). This additional work and overwhelm also contributes to retention issues (Reid, 2021).

McCue notes this burden of invisible work, and says that learning to say "no" is a form of self-care for racialized instructors:

> There are an incredible amount of demands upon racialized faculty when they do finally get hired and arrive at the academy. And there are many, many requests, for speaking, writing, teaching… sitting on various committees, and then the care that you have for your students, et cetera … so much of the burden falls upon you.

Ultimately, the panelists express hope for the future of journalism in the midst of unprecedented times, and note the care and mentorship professors develop now will benefit students. As Malik says, our students "are going to be shaping newsrooms. I'm very hopeful that we can continue … moving along. We have to keep up pace with our students and we've got to change the industry from the beginning."

As the panelists continue to adapt to a "new normal" which includes being back in the classroom, they discuss several fundamental questions including:

- How does pandemic fatigue and oppression fatigue impact the teaching and learning of anti-racist media courses?
- How do journalism educators make space for care in journalism, and how do they achieve buy-in from their department to do so?
- How can journalism educators teaching race/racism, oppression and decolonization adopt or create new models and approaches to learning that prepares students, especially racialized, for the inevitably difficult content matter while maintaining educator and student well-being?

The professors in this episode share their experiences navigating pandemic and racial fatigue, the challenges and values of teaching anti-racist journalism practices, and how they envision and implement care in their classrooms and in journalism education. In addition, this panel discussion explores where we're at now in navigating pandemic and racial fatigue, what students need and how journalism educators are trying to meet those needs.

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

Eternity Martis *is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism at Toronto Metropolitan University. Her writing has appeared in* Vice, Huffington Post, the Walrus, *CBC*, Hazlitt, The Fader, Salon, *and on academic syllabi around the world. Her work on race and language has influenced media style guide changes across the country. She is the course developer and instructor of "Reporting On Race: The Black Community in the Media" at Toronto Metropolitan University, the first of its kind in Canada. In 2021, she was the University of British Columbia's Journalist-in-Residence and Asper Visiting Professor, and the first Non-Fiction Writer in Residence at Simon Fraser University in 2022.*

Assistant Professor ***Shari Okeke*** *joined Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Journalism after more than 20 years at CBC. She is the creator of CBC's Peabody-nominated podcast* Mic Drop *which featured teens and preteens sharing personal stories in their*

own words. She is a story editor for the TCM (Turner Class Movies) podcast The Plot Thickens Season 4: Here Comes Pam *about Blaxploitation film star Pam Grier. Her advanced podcasting class at TMU created* We Met U When… *last fall. This semester the class is producing Season 2.*

Toronto Metropolitan University associate professor **Asmaa Malik***'s research and teaching interests focus on journalism innovation, equity in media and collaborative approaches to graduate supervision. She is the Velma Rogers research co-chair at the School of Journalism and has held several editorial leadership roles at the* Montreal Gazette *and* Toronto Star. *Her work has also appeared in the* Washington Post *and* the Walrus. *During her time as visiting scholar at Massey College in 2023-2024, she will be completing her work on equity in Canadian newsrooms and researching the experiences of Muslim journalists in North America and Europe.*

Award-winning broadcaster **Duncan McCue** *is a professor of Indigenous Journalism and (Story)telling at Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication. A long-time CBC radio host and TV news correspondent, he's the author of* Decolonizing Journalism: A Guide to Reporting in Indigenous Communities *and a proud Anishinaabe from the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation.*

Adrian Harewood *is an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University.*

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