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How journalists can protect their mental and emotional health while covering traumatic events

Sherry Ricchiardi / February 08, 2016

Covering tragedy, grief and victims is at the heart of what journalists do. For many, there is a personal price to pay, especially in regions where violence is part of the landscape.

Pakistan's media was put to a grueling test on Dec. 16, 2014, when Taliban gunmen stormed a public school in the northern city of Peshawar and killed 144, most under the age of 16. The brazen attack sent shockwaves around the globe.

News coverage did not end with the victims' funerals.

Pakistan's journalists wrote dozens of follow-up stories about grieving parents and survivors who "witnessed hell." Often, the details were harrowing.

Since the attack, Lady Reading Hospital, Peshawar's largest, has provided psychotherapy to more than 500 parents and children suffering from anxiety, depression or the more severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Dr. Mian Mukhtarul Haq Azemi, a senior psychiatrist at the facility, told the BBC. He said he believes the number of people affected by the massacre runs into the thousands. Journalists are among them.

Atika Rehman, an editor at Dawn.com, blogged about the emotional impact on reporters as they completed a six-month project, titled 144 Stories, that profiled each victim and launched on the one-year anniversary.

For reporters in Peshawar, the project “meant visiting each family and learning more about their loved one – in most cases a child under 16 – and sharing the heartache,” Rehman wrote in an email interview.

[“The reporters] told me later how they would weep when parents of a victim cried. They had nightmares and, at times, they described feeling like they were losing their minds”.

For some Pakistani journalists, horror explodes in their own backyards .

Veteran editor Farzana Ali, bureau chief of Aaj TV in Peshawar, described her feelings about covering the school massacre in an article on Germany’s DW Akademie website .

“It was shocking. There were body parts everywhere and women and children were crying. I spoke with about 100 families who had been affected ... I felt very weak and depressed. I also began to fear for my 15-year old son, and took a few days leave to get out of the city so that I could spend time with my family,” she said in the article. Ali attended a workshop on journalism and trauma in Peshawar after the attack.

The good news: There is growing support and resources for journalists who cover violence and human suffering. Some of it occurs on a local level. The University of Peshawar’s Department of Journalism and Mass Communication operates a trauma center for media professionals. So far, 40 have completed the program .

Numerous resources are available online. Here are a few:

ICFJ’s Disaster and Crisis Coverage manual extensively covers journalism and trauma issues, including signs of traumatic stress, reactions after witnessing violence, tips for self-care and peer support.

Chapter 10 in the Committee to Protect Journalists’ safety manual reviews signs of stress and outlines how media professionals can take care of themselves and each other.

The Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin also offers a guide to the ethical issues surrounding trauma and journalists.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma features special sections for journalists who cover violent conflict and other atrocities. There are tip sheets on how reporters can minimize harm when working with victims and survivors. In particular, the Dart Center's Self Care Tips for News Media Personnel Exposed to Traumatic Events are based on research on the well-being and resilience of news professionals in the field. They provide a good starting point.

Editor's note: Sherry Ricchiardi co-authored the ICFJ Disaster and Crisis Coverage manual.

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