



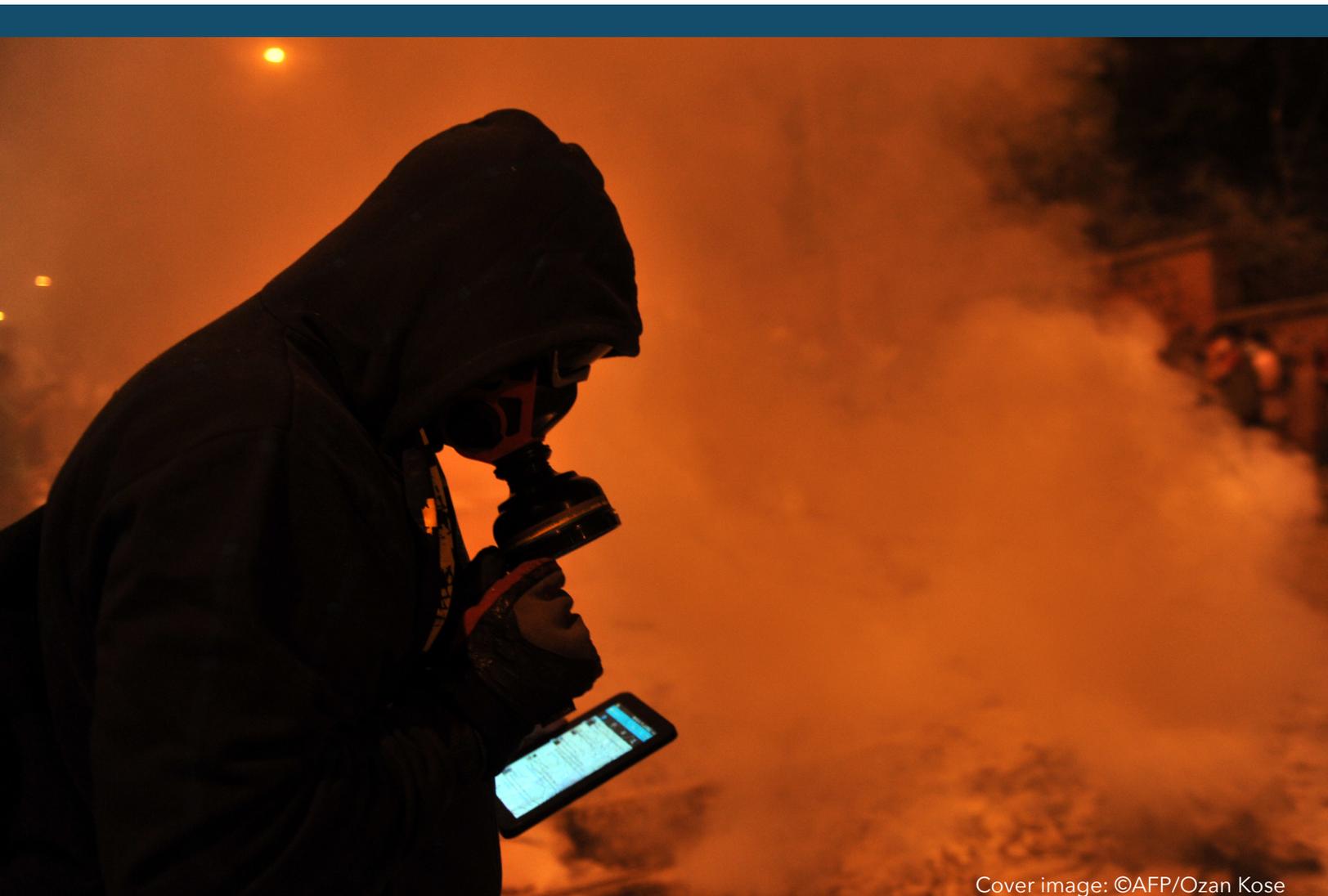
Eyewitness Media **Hub**

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# REPORT

## Making Secondary Trauma a Primary Issue: A Study of Eyewitness Media and Vicarious Trauma on the Digital Frontline

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Cover image: ©AFP/Ozan Kose

# Acknowledgments

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*SD, EG, HMB  
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# Executive Summary

**This report presents the findings of an in-depth study into the impact that viewing traumatic eyewitness media has upon the mental health of staff working for news, human rights and humanitarian organisations.**

The rapid and incredible growth of eyewitness media (also known as user-generated content or UGC)<sup>1</sup> has led to the emergence of a new cadre of journalists, humanitarian and human rights professionals whose job it is to seek out, verify and edit the most disturbing and traumatic raw images captured by non professionals and posted online. These professionals are tasked with viewing and sifting through massive volumes of eyewitness media - that is, raw, unedited, authentic footage now captured regularly on smartphones - to enhance their investigations, reporting, operations, prosecutions and advocacy.

**Professionals who work with eyewitness media watch disturbing footage from war zones, natural and manmade disasters and accidents over and over again to verify its veracity and to edit out images that are deemed too extreme for viewing by the general public.** Viewing traumatic images of death, destruction, blood and unimaginable horrors all day every day - often for years on end - is now an integral part of the daily work of many desk-bound staff working for news, human rights and humanitarian organisations who are often located thousands of miles away from where the actual horrors occur.

**Whether it is a broadcaster, publisher, human rights or humanitarian professional, symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are now evident amongst staff working in offices on what we call the digital frontline.**

This study builds upon previous research that proved that viewing distressing eyewitness media can lead psychological injury, including, but not restricted to, such conditions as PTSD and major depression. The principle aim of this research is to explore the following questions:

- How much distressing eyewitness media are professionals, who work in the three professional sectors, watching?
- How frequently, and in what volumes are professionals viewing distressing eyewitness media?
- What kinds of eyewitness media do professionals find particularly distressing?

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<sup>1</sup> The terms eyewitness media and user-generated content or UGC are used interchangeably in this report. A full definition of eyewitness media and UGC is provided in the introduction to this report on page 8.

- What coping mechanisms, if any, have been developed by staff to help mitigate the potentially negative effects of viewing distressing content?
- What support, if any, do professionals receive from their organisations and senior managers?
- Does organisational culture encourage or prevent professionals from requesting support from their organisation's hierarchy?
- What training and preparation is provided to raise awareness of or mitigate the adverse impact of trauma exposure on university graduates, newcomers and those established in post?
- What resources do organisations provide to prevent, mitigate and treat the adverse impact of trauma exposure? Which of those resources have been used? Which are found to be the most useful?
- What do staff who experience vicarious trauma need and expect from their organisations in order to support them?

Based on an online survey (to which we received 209 responses from people working with eyewitness media across all three professional sectors) and 38 in-depth, anonymous interviews we find that:

- **The impact of eyewitness media on journalism, human rights and humanitarian work means that the frontline is no longer geographic.** A new type of frontline has emerged that is digital. Staff at an organisation's headquarters who work with eyewitness media do so daily and often see more horror on a daily basis compared to their counterparts deployed in the field. Consequently, organisations have a duty of care towards office based staff working on the digital frontline who are at serious risk of vicarious trauma and PTSD.
- **Professionals who we surveyed use eyewitness media in their work. They use eyewitness media frequently and regularly view distressing content.**
  - 27 percent of all respondents engage with eyewitness media professionally for over four hours a day.
  - 22 percent of journalists engage with it for over six hours a day.
  - 24 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals see traumatic content daily.
  - Over half of all respondents (i.e. 52 percent of journalists and 57 percent of human rights and humanitarian workers) view distressing eyewitness media several times a week.
- **40 percent of survey respondents said that viewing distressing eyewitness media has had a negative impact on their personal lives.** Professionals have, for example, developed a negative view of the world, felt isolated, experienced flashbacks, nightmares and stress

related medical conditions. Many interview respondents reported suffering from vicarious trauma, PTSD, self-referral to professional counselling and some had even resigned where they had no organisational support.

- **Repeated, cumulative exposure to traumatic eyewitness media content was reported by respondents as being particularly difficult to handle in the professional context and led to increased distress.** To mitigate this, some organisations have introduced staff rotation systems or periods away from using eyewitness media professionally. However, we found that most organisations, particularly in the human rights and humanitarian sectors, had no specific trauma and mitigation processes in place for handling traumatic injury that our respondents were aware of.
- **Unexpected exposure to distressing eyewitness video was almost universally cited by interviewees as having a more traumatic impact upon them in comparison to distressing images and video that the individual was prepared to view.** Some organisations have taken technical steps and altered workflows to mitigate the chances of staff seeing distressing images they are not prepared for. But organisational approaches are in most cases ad hoc and not institutionalised and many initiatives come from staff themselves rather than senior managers.
- **Sound was reported to be one of the most distressing elements of working with eyewitness media.** For example, the sound of children in distress; hearing violence; the utterance of last words; people pleading for their lives and the screams as they die.
- **New technologies for discovering eyewitness media are often introduced into workflows before consideration is given to how they might increase staff exposure to distressing, traumatic and unexpected content.** For example, the introduction of the WhatsApp web client onto news desks and new tools to index human rights violations are having a particularly adverse impact upon staff. Organisations must, therefore, conduct full audits to determine how new technologies might increase the potential for vicarious trauma before introducing them into workflows.
- **Reported coping mechanisms amongst staff ranged from non-existent to healthy to unhealthy.** Potentially unhealthy coping mechanisms included: excessive alcohol consumption or the use of drugs to numb out feelings after work; binge-eating; frequent one-night stands; not leaving the house and isolating oneself from friends and colleagues. Coping mechanisms which research suggested are associated with better outcomes included seeking out professional counselling; having a good cry; dark humour in the office; looking at positive images, watching 'silly TV' and talking to colleagues and family members.
- **Professionals who told us that they have suffered from vicarious trauma are less likely to feel comfortable requesting help from their managers.** When asked how comfortable they would feel in speaking to their manager about the impact of traumatic content, 68 percent of journalists who reported that they did not feel they had experienced vicarious trauma

told us that they would feel comfortable speaking to their manager if they did. For those who felt they had been impacted in their personal lives by viewing traumatic eyewitness media, only 35 percent for said they would feel comfortable approaching a manager.

- **There is a 'tough up or get out' culture in human rights and humanitarian organisations. Vicarious trauma in these sectors is virtually a complete taboo.** We were repeatedly informed that managers did not take vicarious trauma or PTSD seriously and some even denied that it exists. In our survey, only 38 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals agreed with the statement: "My workplace culture is such that I would feel comfortable asking for support in handling traumatic UGC."
- **In contrast, news organisations better recognise the potential impact of trauma in the newsroom and are comparatively more engaged in seeking ways to mitigate its impact.** Not one manager from a news organisation dismissed vicarious trauma as a non issue. A small number of organisations are starting to put peer support networks in place, are providing online resources to build resilience and implementing staff rotation policies to ensure that staff members do not view excessive amounts of eyewitness media for prolonged periods of time. Staff working for organisations that have such policies reported healthier working environments and a culture within which they could discuss vicarious trauma with managers.
- **Despite some improvement in acknowledging vicarious trauma and an emergence of support, resources are, however, still not widely available to help and support staff who are working with distressing eyewitness media content.** Only 23 percent of our survey respondents across sectors had access to peer support networks. A mere 24 percent had access to relevant training, and only 31 percent had regular debriefs with their managers. Despite this, respondents reported that these resources, along with taking regular breaks from work, were considered the most useful to help mitigate the effects of viewing distressing eyewitness media.
- **Our findings suggest universities may be failing to teach and otherwise prepare their students for future careers in journalism, human rights or humanitarian work which are likely to involve viewing traumatic content viewed via eyewitness media.** Not one recent graduate that we spoke to had received any training at their university on eyewitness media in general, let alone on the potential of experiencing vicarious trauma as a result of viewing traumatic content.
- **Employers are not, with very few notable exceptions, warning or preparing new recruits that they are likely to encounter distressing content via eyewitness media in their work.** Furthermore, the majority of employers are failing to provide any form of training on vicarious trauma and how to recognise and manage it.

# Introduction

"I see blood every day. I see bleeding bodies every day and I cannot think about this clinically or scientifically. I cannot look at cut off limbs without thinking 'Oh my God'."

Social media journalist working for a news agency

One may be forgiven for thinking that this quote is from a journalist who is speaking about their experiences reporting from the frontline of a war zone or the scene of a manmade or natural disaster. This is not, however, the case. This journalist has never worked outside of the European headquarters of their organisation. The experience that they describe refers solely to the horrific content that regularly explodes onto their computer screen via social media. Viewing disturbing imagery all day, every day and seeing unexpectedly violent and distressing images is now a common task assigned to staff working in the headquarters of the large news, human rights and humanitarian organisations located thousands of miles away from where the actual horrors occurs.

Since the advent of social media, the work of a sub-section of journalists, humanitarian and human rights professionals is to seek out, verify and edit the most disturbing and traumatic raw images captured by non professionals and posted online. This workflow involves sifting through massive volumes of eyewitness media images and videos and looking at, or watching footage over and over again, to verify its veracity and edit out images that are deemed too extreme for the general public.

**The incredible and rapid growth of eyewitness media (also known as user-generated content or UGC) has meant that symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are now evident amongst staff working in headquarters who use eyewitness media to improve their reporting, operations, storytelling, investigations, prosecutions and advocacy.**<sup>2</sup> Whether it is a broadcaster, publisher, human rights or humanitarian organisation, PTSD is now a real and serious issues for office bound staff.<sup>3</sup>

Global news organisations publish eyewitness media content every day.<sup>4</sup> News agencies gather eyewitness media content to cover stories where professional cameras were, or are

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<sup>2</sup> The terms eyewitness media and user-generated content or UGC are used interchangeably in this report. Our definition of eyewitness media is photographs and videos of unexpected, historical or newsworthy events captured by people around the world on their smartphones used by broadcasters, publishers, human rights or humanitarian organisations in their own reporting, advocacy projects or investigations. The term user-generated content or UGC is also used to describe this type of material, but UGC encompasses blog posts, comments, tweets, mash-ups and gifs, which have not been considered in this study.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Wardle, C., Dubberley, S., Brown, P. (2014), Feinstein, A., Audet, B., & Waknine, E. (2014), Taibi, C. (2015)

<sup>4</sup> Wardle, C., Dubberley, S., Brown, P. (2014), Amateur footage: A global study of user-generated content in TV and online news output, Tow Center for Digital Journalism: A Tow/Knight Report, p. 30

not present. Usually this means that either in the immediate aftermath of breaking news or when covering events in locations that journalists are unable to access eyewitness media is the key resource that will document a story. Many organisations have created and developed dedicated teams or hired specialised journalists to work with eyewitness media. The impact of viewing large volumes of traumatic and disturbing content is an area that has not, thus far, been given much attention by academic researchers and the managers of news, human rights and humanitarian organisations. Weidmann and Papsdorf (2010) studied the impact that watching video footage of violent events had on television newsroom professionals. They concluded that “employees in TV newsrooms as a group do not seem at a special risk for psychological problems or post-traumatic symptoms”<sup>5</sup>, suggesting instead that: “This risk may be restricted to those journalists sent out to cover traumatic events”.<sup>6</sup> However, just four years later, Feinstein et al. (2014) concluded that viewing eyewitness media can lead journalists to experience symptoms of PTSD.<sup>7</sup>

PTSD was officially included as a psychiatric diagnosis in 1980<sup>8</sup> after studies of Vietnam War veteran revealed “that a specific pattern of psychological and physical symptoms could emerge from the experience of an extremely traumatic or stressful event.”<sup>9</sup> PTSD occurs as a result of events which are “outside the realm of normal human experience and cause intense feelings of horror and helplessness” such as “witnessing a murder, being raped, or being a prisoner of war” and “shootings, witnessing death, or any incident involving a child in trouble.”<sup>10</sup> PTSD develops as a response to experiencing these kinds of traumatic events. In 2004, Feinstein suggested that PTSD wasn’t just impacting soldiers. He demonstrated that war reporters can also show “symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression and general psychological distress.”<sup>11</sup> Earlier discussions also demonstrated that PTSD symptoms were, in fact, present among several different types of journalists including print media, photojournalists and war correspondents.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Weidmann and Papsdorf, “Witnessing Trauma in the Newsroom Post Traumatic Symptoms in Television Journalists Exposed to Violent News Clips”, *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, Volume 198, Number 4, 2010 p. 8

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Feinstein, A., Audet, B., and Waknine, E. (2014). Witnessing extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. *J R Soc Med Op*; 5(8)

<sup>8</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Washington, DC

<sup>9</sup> Dworznik, G., & Grubb, M. (2007). Preparing for the worst: Making a case for trauma training in the journalism classroom. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 62(2) p. 161

<sup>10</sup> Ibid pp 191-2

<sup>11</sup> Feinstein, A. (2004). War, journalists and psychological health: Guest editorial. *African Journal of Psychiatry*, 7(1). P.1.

<sup>12</sup> See: Simpson, R. & Boggs, J. (1999). An exploratory study of traumatic stress among newspaper journalists. *Journalism and Communication Monographs*, 1, 1-24., McMahon, C. (2001). Covering disaster: A pilot study into secondary trauma for print media journalists reporting on disaster. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 16, 52-56., Pyevich, C.M., Newman, E., & Daleiden, E. (2003). The relationship among cognitive schemas, job-related traumatic exposure, and post traumatic stress disorder in journalists. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 16(4), 325-328., Newman, E., Simpson, R., & Handschuh, D. (2003). Trauma exposure and post-traumatic stress disorder among photojournalists. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 58(1), 4-13

The most recent edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), the American Psychiatric Association has been updated and now concludes that PTSD can be brought on vicariously through the viewing of video or images of a traumatic event if this viewing is work related. DSM-V now states: "Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)" can lead to PTSD or PTSD-related symptoms. This "does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related."<sup>13</sup> Viewing traumatic content can lead to PTSD.

Feinstein et al. (2014) built upon this conclusion, noting that: "Frequency of exposure to UGC independently and consistently predict[s] multiple indices of psychopathology, be they related to anxiety, depression, PTSD or alcohol consumption."<sup>14</sup> While no such study into the impact of eyewitness media exists for workers in human rights or humanitarian professions, recent research by the Guardian newspaper suggests that there is "a trauma crisis among aid workers."<sup>15</sup>

**The recent acknowledgement that vicarious trauma - that is, work-related exposure to the extreme details of a traumatic event - is a pathway that can lead to PTSD is the starting point of our research.<sup>16</sup>**

In this report, we examine the extent and impact of vicarious trauma on professionals working in newsrooms, human rights and humanitarian organisations. We demonstrate that some organisations are, to a certain extent, recognising and tackling the impact that eyewitness media has upon their organisations and staff.

Our research methodology included an anonymous online survey which resulted in 209 responses. We also undertook 38 in-depth interviews with professionals working in news, human rights and humanitarian organisations and conducted a comprehensive literature review.

The traumatic impact of viewing distressing eyewitness media was evident in professionals working within all three sectors that are the focus of this report. We encountered several cases of workers being signed-off on long-term sick leave and people who had decided to undergo counselling to treat PTSD. We spoke to people who were at breaking point and wept

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<sup>13</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Washington, DC

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Feinstein, Blair Audet and Elizabeth Waknine. Witnessing extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. *J R Soc Med Op* 2014; 5(8)

<sup>15</sup> Guardian research suggests mental health crisis among aid workers: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/nov/23/guardian-research-suggests-mental-health-crisis-among-aid-workers> Published: 23rd November 2015. Accessed: 30th November 2015

<sup>16</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Washington, DC

whilst describing how their lives had been badly affected by viewing traumatic eyewitness media. Many reported having flashbacks, nightmares, paranoia and feelings of isolation, disassociation and a loss of faith in humanity. We talked to human rights investigators who had lost all faith in their management's ability to help or care for them - for whom it was a battle to move desks to simply sit by a window. We spoke with a number of talented individuals who had abandoned successful careers because they simply could not cope with the trauma of watching horrific eyewitness media for organisations that gave them little or no support.

This study builds upon research by Feinstein et al. (2014) noted above that proved that viewing distressing eyewitness media can lead to vicarious trauma and PTSD<sup>17</sup>. **Whether it is a broadcaster, publisher, human rights or humanitarian professional, symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are now evident amongst staff working in offices on the digital frontline.**

But another core finding is that vicarious trauma is now being recognised more widely as a real and serious issue. We found that an increasing number of organisations are attempting to prevent, mitigate and address the effects of vicarious trauma experienced by desk-based workers who work with eyewitness media. We found that some organisations - most notably news organisations - are starting to take the issue of vicarious trauma more seriously and that they are trying to offer support to staff, albeit often in non-institutionalised ways. Sadly, however, we discovered an institutional culture of indifference or even denial that vicarious trauma was prevalent, within human rights and humanitarian organisations in particular.

This report contains eight distinct sections. We start by exploring the amount of traumatic eyewitness media that is being viewed by those whose job it is to do so. We illustrate that the frontline has expanded to encompass headquarters where horrific images are viewed every day. We then explore the kinds of imagery that professionals reported that they find to be traumatic. The report then turns to examine the impact that viewing traumatic eyewitness media has upon the individual. We follow this up with a discussion of both managerial best practices and failures to assist professionals who view distressing eyewitness media and who display clear symptoms of PTSD. We examine the failure on the part of both educational institutions and organisations to warn and prepare professionals that they could be faced with distressing imagery before working with eyewitness media. Finally, we map the training that is available in organisations today. We conclude this report with recommendations for professionals, managers, human resource departments and universities.

Our hope is that this study will prompt organisations to recognise that they have a duty of care for their staff. This duty of care involves developing mandatory training to prepare staff and provide ongoing support for the evidently traumatic impact of working with eyewitness

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony Feinstein, Blair Audet and Elizabeth Waknine. Witnessing extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. J R Soc Med Op 2014; 5(8)

media. Field staff deployed in dangerous places, for example war zones, now undergo hostile environment training as a matter of course. Our findings illustrate that as the frontline has now expanded to headquarters, organisations must also provide meaningful preparation and ongoing support for staff that frequently view distressing eyewitness media on the ever expanding digital frontline.

# Methodology

The data for this research was collected in two phases: through an online survey and through in-depth interviews.

## Online survey

The online survey mapped the experiences of journalists, human rights and humanitarian professionals working with eyewitness media content. The survey was fully confidential and did not request or record the names of respondents or the organisations for which they work.

The survey was widely disseminated to managers at news, human rights and humanitarian organisations which were known to be using eyewitness media content in their work. Managers then distributed the survey to their staff. We also publicised the survey through Eyewitness Media Hub's Medium page ([www.medium.com/@emhub](http://www.medium.com/@emhub)) and it was widely disseminated through social media networks. Several respondents approached us directly having viewed information about our research and they were provided with the link to the survey. We purposely designed the survey in a manner that would ensure that we could not correlate those who had contacted us with their survey responses.

We launched the survey on 1 July 2015 and it was closed on 1 September 2015. In total, we received 209 useable responses. We had hoped to receive 100 responses from journalists and a 100 from human rights and humanitarian professionals. Upon closing the survey we had received 122 responses from journalists and 87 from human rights and humanitarian professionals.

23 percent of respondents were located in the United Kingdom and 15 percent in the United States of America. We also received responses from professionals located in 46 different countries: Afghanistan, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Burma, Burundi, Canada, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cyprus, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kosovo, Liberia, Mali, Malta, Mexico, Nepal, Netherlands, Pakistan, Palestinian, Poland, Republic of the Philippines, Qatar, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Ukraine.

The survey was designed to map the respondent's frequency of engagement with eyewitness media content in their daily workday. Survey responses revealed the amount of traumatic or distressing eyewitness media professionals are exposed to. The survey gauged levels of pre-engagement and ongoing training and the specific types of training that respondents found useful. It further mapped the availability of counselling services and other support

mechanisms within the respondent's organisations. The correlated survey responses are referenced throughout this report.

Importantly, the first survey question asked respondents to indicate whether they work with eyewitness media. If the response was negative, the respondent was not able to complete the survey and their entry was discounted from the results. It should be underlined, therefore, that our survey responses cannot and should not be used to make generalisations about vicarious trauma across the three professional sectors examined. By automatically including only those professionals that work with eyewitness media we guaranteed an important degree of specificity.

## Interviews

After the online survey was closed and the results were analysed, we conducted in-depth interviews with both senior managers and desk workers. Interview participants either volunteered to take part in the survey by indicating that they were prepared to be interviewed at the end of the survey (this was anonymised, so no link could be made between the interview participant and their survey responses). In addition, several individuals were approached by the research team because either they or their organisations were known to be heavy users of eyewitness media content or leading organisations in one of the sectors under investigation. A number of interviews were conducted during a week-long research trip to London where many news organisations are headquartered. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted during the Online News Association conference in Los Angeles in September 2015. The majority of interviews were, however, conducted over Skype.

When designing the study, our initial goal was to conduct 60 interviews. In reality, it became apparent that the many respondents were providing similar answers. A decision was then made to reduce the number of interviews as we had reached what Glaser and Strauss call "theoretical saturation."<sup>18</sup> In the end we conducted 38 in-depth interviews.

The in-depth interviews enabled us to elucidate the most important themes that emerged from the quantitative survey and our literature review. The goal of these interviews was to explore personal experiences of vicarious trauma with particular focus upon specific support, or lack thereof, that participants receive from their organisations, even where the interviewee told us that they were not displaying symptoms of vicarious trauma. Our interviews also helped us to understand the level of awareness of vicarious trauma within the industry within which they work. This enables us to draw important comparisons between professions.

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<sup>18</sup> Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, Ill: Aldine Pub. Co. Livingstone and Lunt call the theoretical saturation as the point at which "comments and patterns began to repeat and little new material was created." See: Livingstone, S., and Lunt, P. (1993) *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*. London: Routledge.

As with the survey, our objective was not to generalise about all journalists or all human rights and humanitarian professionals. Rather, our objective was to understand how individuals frequently working with eyewitness media content are impacted; if they feel they have been traumatised and the extent to which their organisations were, or were not, providing them with support. We found that both the respondents to our survey and those people who we interviewed were viewing a large amount of distressing images through eyewitness media. Furthermore, we found that there is a large disconnect between professionals who frequently work with eyewitness media and their managers. While not all professionals are experiencing vicarious trauma, the majority who responded to our survey are.

In the worst cases, professionals have been signed off sick for stress-related illness or they have had to resign from their positions because they are simply unable to take any more horror. Finally, we looked at how universities and organisations address teaching and training around vicarious trauma. Our findings suggest that universities may be failing to teach journalism or human rights students that they are likely to view traumatic eyewitness media in their careers and that organisations are largely, with some notable exceptions, not providing their staff the resources they need to counteract the impact of viewing distressing eyewitness media content on a regular basis.

# 1. Headquarters is the New Digital Frontline

"I frequently see skulls being shot to bits and blood pouring out. I remember seeing a man being killed. He looked like a nice guy, dressed respectably and wearing a nice jumper. He is simply asked by a fighter where he is from. He replies 'Tartus'. Then 'ratatattat, bang, bang bang' - he is sprayed with bullets and falls down dead. I see lots and lots of these kinds of extrajudicial killings every day."

Human rights investigator working with an NGO

The human rights investigator above is 'simply sitting' in front of their computer. They have viewed eyewitness media of thousands of executions and other atrocities. Their experience illustrates how the frontline is no longer only found at an event's actual geographical location. As one journalist highlighted: "I think that being in the main office used to be easy and not in your face, it does feel like the frontline much more than it did ten years ago." The frontline of human rights, humanitarian work and newsgathering has expanded to include headquarters - the new digital frontline.

While office-bound staff - in television newsrooms in particular - have always been exposed to distressing television news images shot by professional camera operators they used to be somewhat shielded from viewing atrocities.<sup>19</sup> Today, they are bombarded day in and day out with horrifically graphic material captured by amateurs that explodes onto their desktops in volumes, and at a frequency that is very often far in excess of the horrors witnessed by staff who are investigating or reporting from the actual frontline.

In our interviews, participants working in offices cited many examples of the kinds of distressing content they view on a daily basis. Examples included:

- "Pictures of amputations, dead bodies, the aftermath of explosions and attacks".
- "Photos and videos from Mexico. Particularly crimes committed by drug cartels and military - executions, the gory stuff".
- "There was a beheading video from Nigeria, that was one of the videos that definitely stood out for me".
- "Children with empty skulls, heads half blown off".
- "The anatomy of a decapitated man is almost unwatchable".
- "The bombing of nine children in a car".

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<sup>19</sup> Weidmann and Papsdorf, "Witnessing Trauma in the Newsroom Post Traumatic Symptoms in Television Journalists Exposed to Violent News Clips", *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, Volume 198, Number 4, 2010

- "Videos of men accused of homosexuality being thrown off five-storey buildings by IS".
- "The bombing in Suruç, the youth centre in Turkey. I've never seen anything like that on the graphic scale, it was just awful".
- "Child sexual abuse".
- "Extrajudicial killings and scenes of torture".
- "The Alton Towers crash in the UK. We got sent videos of people screaming on them, and you could really hear the screams".

## The frequency of exposure to work-related traumatic eyewitness media

In our survey, we asked respondents how much eyewitness media they viewed on a daily basis and how frequently they found it to be traumatic. The survey results and the interview findings underlined the quantity of traumatic content seen by those who work with eyewitness media.

In Table 1, we see that 83 percent of respondents view eyewitness media at least once per week. This was higher for journalists - with over 90 percent viewing at least once per week.

When we compare journalists to human rights and humanitarian workers, we find that 89 percent of journalists use eyewitness media several times a week. This fell to 64 percent of human rights and humanitarian workers.

TABLE 1			
Frequency of exposure to work-related eyewitness media	Total Percentage	Percentage Journalists	Percentage Human Rights / Humanitarian Workers
Daily	44%	55%	28%
Several times a week	34%	34%	35%
Once per week	4%	2%	7%
Several times a month	12%	7%	18%
Once per month	2%	1%	4%
Less than once per month	4%	1%	8%
n = 209			

When asked how much of their day they spend with eyewitness media (Table 2), 28 percent of workers engage with eyewitness media for more than four hours a day. 22 percent of journalists engage with it for more than six hours a day.

TABLE 2			
When you work with eyewitness media, how much of your day is typically spent engaged with this material?	Total Percentage	Percentage Journalists	Percentage Human Rights / Humanitarian Workers
Less than 1 hour	19%	11%	29%
1-2 hours	32%	34%	28%
2-4 hours	23%	20%	26%
4-6 hours	11%	13%	7%
Over 6 hours	17%	22%	9%
n = 209			

This is further accentuated by the frequency of exposure to traumatic eyewitness media. Table 3 shows the frequency with which respondents are exposed to traumatic eyewitness media. Even though journalists encounter eyewitness media more frequently than their counterparts in the human rights and humanitarian world, there is no significant difference in levels of exposure to traumatic eyewitness media.

TABLE 3			
Frequency of exposure to traumatic eyewitness media	Total Percentage	Percentage Journalists	Percentage Human Rights / Humanitarian Workers
Daily	17%	12%	24%
Several times a week	37%	40%	33%
Once per week	8%	7%	8%
Several times a month	21%	24%	17%
Once per month	7%	6%	8%
Less than once per month	11%	11%	11%
n = 209			

24 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals see traumatic content daily. This is particularly notable in Table 1 which illustrates that 28 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals respondents engage with eyewitness media daily.

Over half of all respondents (52 percent of journalists and 57 percent of human rights and humanitarian workers) stated that they view traumatic eyewitness media several times a week.

The fact that there is now in reality more potential for one to one view horror via eyewitness media at headquarters, as opposed to when deployed in the field, was highlighted by two interviewees who had worked in both environments.

A senior editor at a news agency notes that:

“You witness it a lot more with UGC. You’re exposed to more intense visual material than battle hardened war cameramen sitting in Sarajevo in the middle of the 1990s because it’s coming at you from everywhere - even more so than say in Jerusalem. I was there at the height of the intifada and there were body parts flying in and out of the office like nobody’s business, but there’s now a lot more of it.”

This sentiment was echoed by a senior investigator with a human rights NGO who told us that: “A lot of the worst things I will see are via UGC not in the field. I have seen bombs in the field but not people being executed in front of my eyes.” As Taibi notes: “Journalists who are exposed to trauma secondhand ... are at an even greater risk of developing psychological symptoms than those reporting on the ground.”<sup>20</sup>

Feinstein et al. conclude that “frequency of exposure to UGC material” is a key indicator of the potential for PTSD in newsrooms.<sup>21</sup> Feinstein et al.’s conclusions coupled with our findings which indicate the high frequency of which our respondents are being exposed to distressing on the expanded frontline illustrate the need for all news, human rights and humanitarian organisations to take the issue seriously.

## Workflow challenges

The expansion of the frontline to include headquarters raises important workflow questions. This was highlighted by a senior manager at a large broadcasting organisation:

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<sup>20</sup> Taibi C. (2015, May 19). It's not just war reporters: How viewing graphic content secondhand can lead to mental health issues in journalists. *The Huffington Post*. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/19/secondhand-trauma-journalists\\_n\\_7305992.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/19/secondhand-trauma-journalists_n_7305992.html) (accessed November 22nd 2015)

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Feinstein, Blair Audet and Elizabeth Waknine. Witnessing extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. *J R Soc Med Op* 2014; 5(8)

"I remember the last time we had something difficult coming into the newsroom that we had to worry about was when we had the killings in Iraq [in 2004]. I remember working then with the television news agencies to create a system where this content was not coming in to our newsrooms 'vicariously'. ... Now, we've had the beheadings, same subject, same impact - but today there is no way of controlling it. Our newsroom has been modernised in a way that every single journalist in our newsroom can access every single picture. ... There's no managerial, technical, operational obvious procedures that you can put in place in the way a few phone calls to key suppliers allowed us a way of creating a 'safe environment' for our colleagues."

**This permanent availability of eyewitness media on the new frontline which appears on all screens of all staff members is a serious challenge that organisations need to address.**

**Another dimension to this challenge comes from the way that eyewitness media is now so immediate, depicting the worst of, for example, a violent attack. Contrast this with the situation ten years ago when a professional cameraperson would film the aftermath of an incident often 30 minutes after it happened.**

This challenge was highlighted by one senior manager at an international news organisation:

"When I was an international producer in the field, some years ago now, we couldn't be everywhere, we'd get there some time after the incident had occurred. Then my cameraman would 'edit in camera'. He knew what wouldn't make it to air, so wouldn't film. We would then, in editing, make a second pass, and then our piece would be fed back to London. Now, it's amateurs shooting the immediate aftermath. They film everything on their smartphones. And there are so many filming from different angles. It's not like before, you just can't avoid seeing the worst stuff at the office anymore."

The dual workflow challenges of how to protect professionals who can see everything everywhere and what they are seeing is the pure, immediate aftermath of an event is recent. **The challenge is how to use this content to ensure better reporting and investigation while keeping professionals safe from vicarious trauma or PTSD.**

## 2. What Makes Eyewitness Media Traumatic?

In our interviews, professionals that view distressing eyewitness media at work were asked to identify different situations and types of content that made the impact of viewing more traumatic for themselves individually. Many responses clustered around similar themes.

In particular, we heard repeatedly how the impact of the content upon the viewer was more traumatic:

- When they were not expecting to see something horrific.
- When they were repeatedly exposed to distressing content.
- When they were looking for or at distressing content which was then not subsequently used in news output, reporting or advocacy campaigns.
- When content reminded the individual of personal experiences or was in some way connected to them.
- When the audio in a video contained sounds of human suffering such as screaming or people begging for their lives.

Finally, some respondents described feelings of guilt and shame and told us that they felt that they had no right to feel traumatised by traumatic eyewitness media content because, as one human rights investigator explained: "You think, I have just seen a fucking picture of someone getting killed, and there is a slight sense of embarrassment and shame."

We address each of these categories in turn.

### Unexpected and surprising traumatic content

"Definitely unexpected things - it makes it harder. If you know what to expect, blood, killings, it's not easy to watch of course, but if you know what's coming it makes it a bit better. There were some torture videos ... from Nigeria, they used some hot liquid ... I wasn't expecting it and that made it rougher."

Human rights professional working for an NGO

**The vast majority of interviewees across sectors described how distressing eyewitness media had more of a traumatic impact upon them when they were not expecting or prepared to view it.**

According to our survey findings (see Table 4), 33 percent of total respondents reported that they encounter unexpectedly distressing eyewitness media once a week or more (32 percent of journalists and 34 percent of humanitarian workers).

TABLE 4			
Frequency of viewing unexpectedly distressing eyewitness media	All respondents	Journalists	Human Rights and Humanitarian Workers
Less than once per week	67%	68%	66%
Once per week or more	33%	32%	34%
n = 209			

Interviewees spoke frequently of situations in which they had absolutely no warning that they would be viewing disturbing content and described how the lack of warning made the experience more traumatic. One senior newsroom editor explained that: “If there is a warning of what you are about to see, you are steeled for it, you can brace yourself.”

The intensified impact of unexpected horrific content was described by a human rights investigator working with an NGO: “We do get fresh virgin stuff and have to download files. We do not know what we are going to see ... When you know it’s coming you can breathe more deeply when watching it, take a glass of water and brace yourself, you can also watch it in bits and it’s not just hitting you in the gut.”

Situations in which staff are exposed to unexpected, disturbing content sometimes result from a lack of organisational awareness about the traumatic impact of content in general and/or from shoddy and inappropriate workflows. Frequently we were told by interviewees that their colleagues had, in good faith, surprised them by showing them distressing footage without warning. This had a more traumatic impact upon them as opposed to when they were warned in advance, for example, that they would be viewing a massacre.

A senior editor at a news agency explained how they were traumatised by unexpectedly distressing content when walking into their newsroom early in the morning to be confronted by the picture of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian boy found drowned on a beach in Turkey in September 2015.<sup>22</sup> They told us:

“The dead child on the beach. I walked in the office, a colleague rushed up to me saying ‘look at this, look at this, it’s really important’, and you don’t have time ... the

<sup>22</sup> “Alan Kurdi: Why one picture cut through”, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34150419>, Accessed 23rd November 2015

guards haven't gone up, and I spent the entire evening in tears, I was really fucking shaken by it. It is important to change your mental tack and put the bulletproof glass up before you deal with it."

While surprise is, of course, impossible to mitigate completely for those whose role it is to discover eyewitness media, specific workflows that do help were identified. One social media producer explained:

"Our media asset management software allows us to flag graphic content with a warning so we are able to usually brace ourselves before watching something traumatic. ... It's not just the blood and guts, we will be warned if it is, for example, a man who is weeping because they have lost a son it will be tagged and it is very useful."

One weakness identified in another newsroom was informal technical workflows which meant that those who do not need to view traumatic content are not consistently warned of the horrors contained within some video files on their server. A digital editor working with this news organisation noted that:

"We haven't got a consistent method in place for making sure that people don't watch video that's going on to the server. We sometimes put full video on the server that we're not going to broadcast but we want to keep for archive purposes of for cutting small pieces to go in a larger package. At the moment it's ad hoc - if I put something on the server, I send out an internal mail, and say please don't watch it unless you absolutely have to. If I'm not in, I don't think that gets done."

**While viewing some surprising and unexpected traumatic eyewitness is inevitable due to the nature of the work being done across the professional sectors studied here, there are steps that organisations can take to prevent, for example, each and every staff member viewing traumatic content when its potentially distressing nature is known.**

## The unconsidered impact of new technologies

**As new tools for sharing content evolve and newsrooms, human rights and humanitarian organisations increasingly engage with these tools, senior managers need to examine how the nature of new tools and inexperience in using them can impact staff.** They need to devise means to mitigate unexpected access to potentially traumatic material.

This is exemplified by one newsroom's trial of the desktop version of the social messaging tool WhatsApp. This trial exposed one journalist tasked with frequently viewing large volumes of eyewitness media to experience a very high level of trauma. This journalist broke down as they described the impact:

“I clicked on a video on the WhatsApp line the other day and I saw a child being raped. We have a mobile phone and desktop version of WhatsApp and I find watching the large images on a desktop more distressing as you cannot minimise them quickly enough. The problem is that you have no idea of what you will be viewing but you have to look at them in case they are news stories.”

The potential for viewing traumatic eyewitness media through the use of new technological tools was underlined by a website news editor whose organisation uses the same tool as its primary source for receiving content. This editor recalled that: “The first time I saw a scene of child abuse was via WhatsApp. The image became stuck in my head for several weeks and I couldn’t say for sure if even today I’ve forgotten it.”

One human rights researcher who is developing a new automated tool for the purposes of classifying violations of human rights and humanitarian law noted:

“Using our new system was emotionally traumatic. There is something horrible about focusing in solely on images of death without any context and I found it incredibly difficult to stomach. I found it completely revolting that I was initially quite happy that the system was working and then stopped for a minute to remember what I was actually looking for.”

**As new technological tools evolve across sectors, each and every organisation has a responsibility to conduct an audit in order to examine the potential risks of exposing their staff to additional traumatic content before rolling a specific tool out.**

## Repeated exposure and duration of exposure

As Feinstein et al. note: “PTSD-type symptoms are generated by the viewing of traumatic images” and it is “frequency rather than duration of exposure per shift appears to be the critical variable.”<sup>23</sup>

**In our interviews, we clearly ascertained that repeat exposure does have a more traumatic impact.** This frequent and cumulative impact was underlined by a newsroom social media specialist who explained that: “Looking at it every day or looking at it on a regular shift basis. Looking at it late at night, looking at it as first thing in the morning. You can't keep doing that without there being a consequence.”

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<sup>23</sup> Feinstein, A., Audet, B., & Waknine, E. (2014). Witnessing images of extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine Open*, 5(8), 1-7. p.5

One human rights investigator who had been conducting research using eyewitness media for over two years explained how repeated exposure impacted them:

“There was a cumulative effect. I had witnessed so much footage and it was slowly having an impact on me without my realising it. ... Last summer there was a series of awful events that were provoked or illuminated by eyewitness footage, and because they came one after the other, I didn’t have the time to process them. ... There were so many consequentially and I just didn’t have the capacity to stop and think about the war in Gaza, and the footage that was coming out of that, and then Ferguson, and the football player who was recorded in an elevator beating his fiancée. All of those happened in about two months and I just didn’t even have the chance to process one before the next came.”

**This type of repeated exposure can, in particular, have an intensified impact upon those who have specific skills sets or knowledge, and who are seen as the only ones in the organisation who understand certain technical tools, have certain knowledge or speak a particular language.** Arabic speakers, for example, often bear the brunt of verifying all of the content from Arabic speaking countries and/or populations, in particular, Syria and Iraq. “One real problem is that virtually all of our UGC is in Arabic and so it is hard to share the burden as we need to use Arabic speakers,” noted a Senior Legal Advisor working for NGO working on the frontline of a high intensity conflict.

The traumatic impact is compounded where there is a lack of management awareness about the impact in the first place - that is, where there is no awareness about the traumatic nature of viewing eyewitness media and/or a lack of understanding that they need to react to changing situations to protect the wellbeing of staff. Human rights investigators told us, for instance, of occasions when they requested to be removed from working on one violent conflict and were simply shifted to another. This seems particularly ill considered considering human rights work is not only about investigating brutal armed conflicts but can include, for example, human rights education and awareness raising and even reporting on positive developments, including the success of a particular campaign or advocacy strategy.

The management question is covered more in-depth in Chapter 4. However, **it is important to note that best practice in assigning work, including the periodic rotation of staff from highly traumatic work, is a simple means to mitigate the traumatic impact of repeated exposure of distressing eyewitness media.** Implementing this kind of best practice does not require an organisation to have a large number of staff members, nor does it require extra resources. It requires nothing but a willingness on the part of managers to recognise and act to ensure that staff are not repeatedly exposed to traumatic content over long period of time. One journalist, noting good management practice, told us that: “There are two social media producers [in the organisation] and we insisted that we have one week on and one off [hard news] and our boss accepted that and it really helped.”

A human rights investigator working for an another NGO highlighted the important role of management: “We are a new generation of UGC users and it should not be us, the ‘victims’ trying to work out what the practices should be. It should be the people who pay us to do this that should be coming up with the solutions. It would be really interesting for you to talk to my manager and ask him ‘how many videos of beheadings have you seen?’”

Organisations need to be aware of the intensified risk and subsequent duty of care owed to staff working for extended durations on distressing eyewitness media. Feinstein et al.’s research concluded that: “Neither duration of employment as a journalist nor duration employed on UGC material predicted any indices of psychological distress.”<sup>24</sup>

However, across 38 interviews, we conclude that the duration that one works on distressing eyewitness media is an important factor that increases the risk of the individual to developing vicarious trauma. More research is required to determine if there is a temporal breaking point in terms of the duration that one spends viewing traumatic eyewitness media content.

## Why am I looking at this horror?

“You don’t come to journalism for money, you come to journalism to tell stories, to make a difference, to have an impact. If you feel you are not making a difference, that’s actually going to affect you considerably.”

Social media specialist at an international news agency

As we have seen, the act of discovering, verifying and editing traumatic eyewitness media involves viewing large volumes of distressing content. **Our research illustrates that in order to help individuals avoid undue trauma, staff really need to feel that there is a point and purpose to viewing horror.** This was illustrated quite simply by one journalist who told us that: “I feel more depressed when I go through a lot of UGC and it is not used.”

**The vast majority of interviewees across sectors spoke of the need for there to be a tangible reason for viewing traumatic imagery.** This need was an important factor which to some extent helped to mitigate feelings of trauma and/or depression. For example, one journalist was thankful for colleagues who did not ask for distressing eyewitness media to be checked and verified if it was not going to be used stating that: “One producer will not send you stuff if they’ve not got an intention to use it. They’ll say ‘can you look at this, because I want to put it in the package for the evening bulletin?’ Actually that reduces the trauma because you feel there is a legitimate reason.”

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<sup>24</sup> Feinstein, A., Audet, B., & Waknine, E. (2014). Witnessing images of extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine Open*, 5(8), 1-7. p.3.

Within the human rights and humanitarian community, the reason for discovering and verifying eyewitness media is often very different from the newsroom. Journalists are likely to experience quicker rewards for their work when a particular piece of content is discovered and appears online or on television that very same day. Some human rights and humanitarian organisations may use eyewitness media like news organisations to highlight a current human rights concerns as they happen. However, the nature of humanitarian and human rights work normally differs from journalism in that it involves long term work on a particular country and/or thematic issue.<sup>25</sup>

**The way in which human rights and humanitarian organisations work with and use eyewitness media is far less developed than it is within newsrooms. However, when one feels that there is an identifiable purpose or reason - even if it will only be evident at an undetermined point in the future - it helps, to some extent, to mitigate traumatic impact.**

One human rights documentarian highlighted that: "I felt like I was working at an organisation that was curating these videos to advocate for change, and I think that helped in terms of coping with the footage itself."

One human rights lawyer working for an NGO who watches eyewitness media on a daily basis but has never received any technical training told us that: "I need to keep up with what is going on, so I watch as much UGC as I can on Palestine and as many countries as I can. There is a little bit of a blurry line here: Do I really do this for my job? I am not sure, but I do to keep up to date with things even if we are not specifically working on a case. I often wonder what the point is of doing this?"

A legal analyst working for a large intergovernmental organisation reported that some of her colleagues are involved in "gratuitous watching". They told us that: "Investigators who have to watch these things watch them in excess when they don't need to. I think that they are too bound up in the whole thing and can't stop watching them. It's almost like the interest that a crowd that goes to watch a stoning has."

When asked if they knew what they were looking for when searching social media networks for relevant eyewitness media, one human rights investigator said:

"I do have someone on the multimedia team that I can ask, but really I don't know what I am doing half the time when I am looking at UGC. I sometimes ask myself why I am actually watching something because I am not actually sure if it is relevant to our work as a human rights NGO or if I really know what I am doing or going to do with it. We need training on how to analyse videos, as we are still kind of making things up."

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<sup>25</sup> As Gregory notes, human rights investigation can take a very long time to bear fruits. In relation to eyewitness media documentation of the Syrian conflict, there is currently only: "Future potentially of justice mechanisms or, less hopefully, an archive of over half a million potentially evidentiary videos and social media posts that will never be utilised." See: Gregory, S. (2015): "Ubiquitous witnesses: who creates the evidence and the live(d) experience of human rights violations?" Information, Communication & Society, p. 6

## The personal connection: OMG! It could have happened to someone I know

“When you have a connection with a place or a cause it’s much more traumatic. There is a deep terror that the next thing that you see could be someone you know, it could be someone you care for. ... It is a horrific feeling to think that at any point the torture or death of someone you know could come across your desk as a piece of UGC”.

Human rights lawyer working for an NGO

**We found that distressing eyewitness content which depicts events to which the individual can sympathetically relate increases the feeling of distress in many interview respondents.**

This was particularly true of eyewitness media that depicts children experiencing harm or distress or where the viewer has a personal connection to the geographical region or people depicted. As one video editor with many years’ experience admitted: “[Traumatic content is] mostly to do with kids - they are the ones that get me. I’ve got a daughter of my own - so, yeah, it’s children particularly.” Even for those who did not have children themselves, watching traumatic content featuring children made them question if they wanted to have a family. “When I see a dead baby I find it very different, it has consequences like ‘Do I really want a child?’”, a social media journalist told us.

**Other examples of eyewitness media that respondents stated had a more traumatic impact upon them included connections to other family members.** For example, one social media producer referring to the video of a Jordanian airforce pilot burnt alive in a cage by the so-called Islamic State (IS) told us that: “My grandfather actually died in a house fire, so I don’t like that.”

We also heard from interviewees across sectors that traumatic impact was **intensified where they had a particular connection to a geographical area where they either come from or have worked.** A photo editor told us: “I find all of the images from the Lebanese civil war, people being shot, executions and bombs hard because I have been there and I find myself haunted by the UGC from there because I know the place and people.”

Finally, professionals across sectors found the traumatic impact of content to be greater where the distressing content involved violence against people working in the same profession or in collaboration with them. One human rights investigator described how:

“One of my contacts in a besieged area of Syria - a medical worker - sent me two pictures of two dead kids (three and five years) and there was no blood and guts. One of them was wearing a Spiderman top and I just felt for that kid so much. A little boy in his comic hero clothes playing and then the bombs came over and killed him and his sister, thinking of that and those little idiosyncratic moments resonates with me as well

as imagining the medical worker contact who had seen them just before they were killed, so it was almost like I knew them even if it was through someone else.”

## The traumatic impact of sound

“The thing that most affects me is when I can hear people screaming. Like the UGC of the Ethiopians being killed in Libya - they were killed directly without the simulations that the IS have in their videos where they know that they are walking to their deaths. They were uttering their last words as they were being killed and that was very disturbing. I find this harder than when I see someone being shot without the sound”.

Photo editor working for a news agency

**A large number of interviewees described how sound was one of the most distressing elements of working with eyewitness media.** One social media journalist summed it up, simply stating: “Sound makes the impact more real”. We heard it again and again - listening to the sound of violence; the utterance of last words; people pleading for their lives and the screams as they die intensified the traumatic impact. Audio was reported to be as bad, or even worse than witnessing the violence itself.

One human rights professional told us that: “Even if you did not see the on screen violence I think hearing the voice of someone dehumanising someone else to such a point that they want to see them exterminated and gone, that turns my stomach. That is the kind of stuff that gets to me.” Another human rights lawyer explained that: “I did, however, find the video of the Syrian woman who was stoned by a group of IS members which included her father to be distressing. I think it is because I could hear her pleading for her life and asking her father to save her before she was stoned to death.”

One UK-based intake editor spoke about the traumatic impact of sound from a serious accident that occurred in the summer of 2015, not in a war zone but in an amusement park called Alton Towers.<sup>26</sup> “We got sent a lot of UGC [from the Alton Towers crash]. We got sent videos of people screaming on them, and you could really hear the screams, and I think that goes to show that audio can have a really searing impact”, they recalled.

One photo editor described how:

“The Jordanian pilot video was awful - because I heard him scream ... The screams were horrendous and I could sometimes hear his screaming for weeks after. ... I had to watch that footage around four times to verify it. I turned off the audio after the first time as I could not stand it.”

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<sup>26</sup> “Alton Towers Smiler crash: Four seriously hurt”, BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32980354>, Accessed 20th November 2015

Only listening to the sound once, or listening to the sound at a very reduced volumes were two coping mechanism described as useful by interviewees across sectors. One human rights professional explained: "Usually I watch the video without sound after I hear it once because then I know if there's anything relevant in there or not and then I always turn it off for that specific reason that it always makes it rougher to watch." A journalist told us: "When I click on some links, I have the headphones off my ears, I have the audio on low", as they found the audio to increase trauma for themselves.

## Why should I feel traumatised? It's not happening to me

"I feel really silly. Because I am not in the field. How dare I be upset by these pictures when it's their parents and not me that are dealing with the death of children? It is not happening to me - I work from home sitting on my couch, drinking coffee with my two children around. I feel how dare I feel traumatised by this."

Volunteer working for a human rights NGO

Feelings of guilt, according to Browne et al., mediate "the relationship between exposure to work-related trauma and PTSD symptoms."<sup>27</sup> Many interviewees believed that they felt that they had no right to feel traumatised because it was not happening to them, especially because they perceived that their colleagues in the field would be harder hit.

Professionals who view disturbing eyewitness media may also experience another level of guilt. That is guilt evoked because the subject of the video has experienced far more trauma than they possibly could or have been killed. This appears to be more prevalent in the human rights and humanitarian world where professionals strongly identify with joining the profession to bring about positive change.<sup>28</sup> One human rights lawyer working for an NGO explained:

"I see vicarious trauma as the umbilical cord of privilege. You feel bad because of what you have seen and heard has a real impact upon your psyche because you are feeling these effects, you have empathy. Most of us are in these careers because we do have empathy for human suffering, that is why we do it, but in turn that makes us feel guilty - it is kind of this double whammy. Obviously it cannot compare to the direct trauma, it is a very different animal, but we get these mental and physical symptoms and the guilt ... we have so much compassion for the people that we are assisting that we feel that we really don't have the right to feel bad about how we feel."

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<sup>27</sup> Browne, T., Evangeli, M., & Greenberg, N. (2012). Trauma-related guilt and post traumatic stress among journalists. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25(2), 207-210. p. 209.

<sup>28</sup> Fechter, A.M. (2012), "'Living Well' while 'Doing Good'? (Missing) debates on altruism and professionalism in aidwork", *Third World Quarterly*, 33:8, 1475-1491

Another human rights lawyer explained that guilt manifested itself not just as a feeling but that it also permeated into their work patterns. They explained that:

"It felt self indulgent to take time off. I never gave myself permission to take time off or to work anything other than 12 or 15 hour days - I realise that this is not sustainable or healthy and it taps into my own martyrdom complex and that it does not give any genuine assistance to victims. ... But you feel that the work is worthy of attention. ... that you are dealing with someone`s life and that our work is urgent. ... Or if you have a bad day at work and you do not achieve very much, you feel as though you have betrayed the victims, that you have earned 500 Euro for doing diddly squat! You think these are people that are in the worst possible situation that I am supposed to be serving them."

# 3. Viewing Distress on the Screen: The Impact on Personal Lives

“Three years ago many of us in our team had reached the point where we were having work-life issues: headaches, stress-related issues. In the middle of 2012, a year-and-a-half into the Syria crisis, never having really worked with UGC before, I was aware that I was a bit fucked, really. Sleeping was awful, I developed early-waking syndrome after nightmares which were content related. I would wake up stressed with Syria-related thoughts, pictures of atrocities that I had seen that day or previously in my head. Until very recently I had at least two nightmares a week. The nightmares are usually about either being on the brink of being captured by security forces or being about to be killed by a bomb or something. I developed irritable bowel syndrome at the time I was most stressed. Eventually, I was signed off with paid stress-related leave. I am now seeing a counsellor.”

Investigator working for a human rights NGO

Interviewees described a range of ways in which they felt that viewing distressing eyewitness media has had a negative impact upon their mental and physical health and their personal lives. As we have discussed, **in the most severe cases, interviewees reported that they had been diagnosed with PTSD by mental health professionals and/or had no choice but to take long term sick leave, seek professional help or, in the case of human rights and humanitarian professionals, even to resign from their position when they were given no support by their organisations.** A number of human rights professionals and journalists spoke openly about being diagnosed with PTSD and the devastating impact that prolonged viewing of traumatic eyewitness media has had upon their personal and professional lives.

TABLE 5			
Perceived Adverse Effects of Traumatic Eyewitness Media on Personal and Professional Lives	Total	Journalists	Human Rights / Humanitarian Workers
High and very high personal adverse effects	40%	37%	44%
High and very high professional adverse effects	20%	16%	25%
n = 209			

Our survey results illustrate that a high percentage of respondents recognised the impact that viewing traumatic and distressing eyewitness media had had, in particular, on their personal

lives. As Table 5 illustrates, over 37 percent of journalists and more than 44 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals reported an adverse effect upon their personal lives.

The American Psychiatric Association, in the 5th edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, states PTSD symptom clusters include “intrusion symptoms” (e.g. distressing memories and dreams, flashbacks), “avoidance”, “negative alterations in cognitions and mood,” and “marked alterations in arousal and reactivity” (e.g. hypervigilance, angry outbursts).<sup>29</sup> The interviewees described such symptoms which they attributed to frequent and prolonged viewing of eyewitness media. They spoke of experiencing nightmares, flashbacks, feelings of isolation, depression, disassociation, panic attacks, stress-related physical conditions, a dread of going to work for fear of what they might view that day and the inability to leave work at the office. For example, one human rights lawyer working for an NGO (now in counselling) told us that:

“I cannot leave my work at home. It’s impossible. I would love to talk about this, but people don’t want to really talk about, for example, genocide. I feel isolated and people cannot relate to my work. ... It’s so fucking isolating”

One social media specialist with a broadcaster told us that:

“I saw a PTSD specialist. It’s really expensive. She wants to see me weekly because she’s slightly concerned about me. It’s not just the work stuff. It is the work, but then it is also how it affects your life. We’re human beings and we have a lot going on. Confronting death on a regular basis is too much sometimes.”

A journalist for a news agency highlighted that: “There needs to be an understanding of how UGC affects people, the juggernaut keeps rolling, but we’re human and after a while it can have a mental impact.”

Another journalist at a news agency (also undergoing counselling) told us that: “When I started, we did several weeks on the desk, but because of the nature of repeated exposure, I did find myself coming home and feeling very sad, and then by the morning I’d be fine, but I’d be sad in the evening, and I realised I needed to work something out to deal with it, and that’s what I’ve done.”

Across sectors a number of professionals who have been working with distressing eyewitness media for prolonged periods, but who have not as yet sought professional help, described a range of symptoms. Some broke down and wept as they spoke to our researchers. One junior journalist, who cried throughout the interview, admitted: “I have been deeply traumatised by this stuff [eyewitness media] ... I worry that when I do treat this trauma it will be too late. I am

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<sup>29</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition. Arlington. Washington, DC. pp. 271-2.

not coping at all. I cannot keep doing this work. It has deeply affected how I view humanity and it's had a devastating impact upon my mental and physical health. It has changed my view of humanity."

One social media specialist at a large news organisation stated: "One of the consequences I found is that it's given me a negative view of the world. I would never want anyone else to go through what I went through. I wasn't sleeping, I lost a lot of weight. It got so bad, I got very bad nosebleeds. I wasn't taking care of myself."

Another journalist specialising in content discovery in social media told us that: "You know you are traumatised when your everyday experiences become challenging, like someone listening to music loudly or not being able to decide which brand of milk to choose."

Similarly, a legal analyst working on a high intensity conflict noted easy mood swings:

"I am very short tempered. The little things get to me, like silly things; if I cannot work a stapler or something, which is supposedly small, I can just snap. At home at night I am scared that I might be burgled, if I see someone wearing black I think they are an Islamic State fighter, if there are helicopters overhead I think that they will drop a bomb or start firing. When I go to a restaurant even in a very safe city I make sure I sit as close as I can to the exit in case there is a bomb or attack."

**Even those professionals who told us that they felt that they were, on the whole coping with viewing traumatic eyewitness media, described how viewing particular content had led them to experience either short or long-term feelings of depression.** For example, one senior legal advisor working for an NGO on a high intensity conflict stated that: "I do feel sad and depressed because of my work. I have not as yet taken up counselling and I know I should. I have had open conversations about needing time off." A photo editor working with a major news organisation told us that: "Many of my colleagues have left or gone off work with depression. ... A lot of them cannot sleep, eat, they felt angry and depressed." They described a phenomenon that we heard repeatedly from professionals in all sectors whereby the viewer may not only have an immediate traumatic reaction to a particular piece of eyewitness media at the time of viewing, but experience flashbacks or nightmares related to a specific piece of traumatic content sometimes a long period after viewing and often unexpectedly. This editor stated: "I have lost 20 kilos in the last year and a half because of stress. Mental stress. Overthinking too much".

**With 40 percent of those surveyed stating that they had experienced high or very high adverse affects on their personal lives from viewing distressing eyewitness media at work and a large number of people interviewed reported symptoms that correlate to those outlined in DSM-V, evidence that those who use eyewitness media frequently are experiencing symptoms of vicarious trauma is clear.**

## Coping mechanisms: The good, the nonexistent and the unhealthy

Coping with the effects of viewing traumatic eyewitness media include various adaptive and maladaptive strategies. Adaptive or approach strategies are: "Coping actions that enhance resilience and increase adaptiveness". These can include: "Seeking emotional support, seeking information about the stressor, or making plans for its resolution."<sup>30</sup> On the other side, there are some maladaptive coping strategies linked to "avoidance-type actions (e.g., withdrawing, denying, disengaging from thoughts or feelings) and lower resilience."<sup>31</sup> According to Fedler, such dysfunctional ways of coping include "becoming hard or detached" in order to distance oneself from the work material, substance abuse such as excessive alcohol use and abandoning one's occupation.<sup>32</sup> Our respondents reported that they adopted a variety of both adaptive/healthy coping mechanisms and also maladaptive/unhealthy ways of dealing with work-related trauma.

One journalist with a major news agency who identified themselves as "extremely traumatised" simply stated that: "I do not have coping mechanisms". In a similar vein, a senior legal analyst working on conflict situations said that, while they were able to find healthy ways of coping when they were out of the headquarters, when spending prolonged periods of time based in headquarters they really "did not cope". They "soldier on and bury myself into even more work. I use work to get over work. I know it is not healthy!"

The unhealthy coping mechanisms that were described to us by professionals across sectors included excessive alcohol consumption or the use of drugs to numb out feelings after work. A senior news editor told us that his predecessor had referred to "three pint and five pint videos". Highlighting the risks of excessive drinking as a coping mechanism, they stated that: "We just need to say to people be careful, be very aware of this, and develop coping strategies because you only have a finite number of tokens in your pocket or marbles in your head". Other unhealthy coping mechanisms included frequent one night stands or, as a documentary journalist called it: "Head-down sex with different people every night". Other self destructive coping strategies included binge-eating, not leaving the house and isolating oneself from friends, colleagues and society in general.

Disassociation appears to be another common means of protecting oneself from the negative consequences of viewing traumatic eyewitness media and is prevalent in other professional groups that deal with traumatic materials. One volunteer working for a human

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<sup>30</sup> Buchanan, M., & Keats, P. (2011). Coping with traumatic stress in journalism: A critical ethnographic study. *International Journal of Psychology*, 46(2), 127-135. p. 128.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-9.

<sup>32</sup> Fedler, F. (2004). Insiders' stories: Coping with newsroom stress: An historical perspective. *American Journalism*, 21(3), 77-106. p. 92.

rights NGO, for example, said that they had become: "Numb and cold. I am afraid I don't notice things that I should, but I guess it is just a byproduct of being able to deal with this over so many years with all of this. I am really sorry to say this but at this stage it really takes very horrific scenes to shock me now."

**Disassociation and focusing on the technical aspects of verification or legal analysis of content use whilst in the office is commonly used by professionals in all sectors during work hours when viewing a specific piece of traumatic eyewitness media.**

This was explained by a social media journalist:

"When I am watching a killing I am not at all blasé, but there is a certain detachment in that I focus on the technical work I have to do, but it hits me later. For example, the Charlie Hebdo shootings and the video of the police officer being shot: I took a really mechanical approach to it. ... My immediate focus was we need to verify this immediately. ... But later I realised just how terrifying it actually was."

The healthier coping mechanisms described to us included seeking out professional counselling, having a good cry, dark humour in the office, looking at positive images, talking to colleagues and family members about traumatic images and watching or reading "cotton candy or airhead novels", "light fiction" and "silly TV". In the office, journalists told us that they habitually take breaks to look at, for example, "Tumblr feeds of cute dogs" or "Taylor Swift's Instagram feed." A large number of interviewees told us that they could no longer watch or read any violent or serious material outside of work or watch the news and attributed this to watching traumatic and violent eyewitness media at work.

Many professionals spoke about the importance of not looking at the internet or mobile devices outside of work, getting outside into nature, exercise, meditation, yoga and sport or spending time with pets. One analyst with a human rights NGO told us that: "I started doing much more sport, specifically running. I started that two or three years ago, and I learned that this is a really good way to balance work, you're by yourself for an hour or two, you just run, it's in your control".

The benefit of engaging in activities that allow one to feel in control was also emphasised by a journalist specialising in social media discovery who told us that: "I try to maintain a degree of activities of which I can control. I got really into sorting out our garden. Because it's an achievable task that helps you deal with the sense of helplessness which I think is the core of the trauma".

The range of coping mechanisms from adaptive to maladaptive that emerged in the interviews made it clear that training support from graduate school through to induction in professional life and ongoing professional support is required for those working with distressing eyewitness media. Simple steps, such as developing and sticking to personal care

plans, can go a long way towards ensuring that professional choose adaptive coping mechanisms, but many are not.

## 4. Vicarious Trauma is a Management Issue

“I heard a very senior manager say: ‘If I hear one more word about secondary trauma I will be sick. It does not exist and if people cannot deal with this stuff then they just need to get out’. In our organisation unless you have a sympathetic manager one does not dare utter a word about any kind of secondary trauma. People are seen as sissies if they need help and that they are not up to the job.”

Senior Legal Analyst working on conflict situations for a large intergovernmental organisation

**Our survey uncovered much about the workplace culture and management of the organisations within which journalists, human rights and humanitarian professionals who view eyewitness media work.** It also revealed a difference between how much eyewitness media managers are seeing compared to their staff.

As Table 6 illustrates the more senior the role, the less eyewitness media the individual is exposed to. 83 percent of journalists or human rights or humanitarian professionals view eyewitness media several times a week or more, while 62 percent of senior managers see the same quantity. In relation to viewing distressing images, a very similar pattern is evident.

TABLE 6			
Frequency of eyewitness media use by job title	Journalist / Investigator	Manager / Editor	Senior Manager / Director
Several Times Per Week or More	83%	78%	62%
n = 209			

As Table 7 shows, 58 percent journalists and investigators see distressing content more than once a week. This falls to 45 percent for senior managers.

TABLE 7			
Frequency of encountering distressing eyewitness media by job title	Journalist / Investigator	Manager / Editor	Senior Manager / Director
Several Times Per Week or More	58%	49%	45%
n = 209			

While this may not necessarily be surprising (the role of the senior manager does, after all, encompass a range of varied responsibilities), it does indicate a potential lack of awareness in the amount of distressing eyewitness media that those work regularly with this content are seeing because the manager does not view what their staff member does.

## **How comfortable do staff feel in raising issues of vicarious trauma with their managers?**

In the survey we also asked respondents to rate their agreement with a range of statements on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 indicating high agreement). Here we examine the responses as they pertain to work culture in general and more specifically managerial awareness. We further explored workplace culture and managerial support in-depth in our interviews.

Our survey results demonstrate a noticeable difference between journalists on the one hand and human rights investigators and humanitarian professionals on the other. The picture that emerged was that the workplace culture and managerial awareness and willingness to put mechanisms in place to address vicarious trauma was more positive within the world of journalism than it was in human rights and humanitarian organisations. The pattern revealed in the survey was clearly reinforced and backed up in our interviews.

In our survey, we asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following two key questions:

1, "My workplace culture is such that I would feel comfortable asking for support in handling traumatic UGC."

2, "If I felt adversely affected by traumatic UGC encountered in the workplace, I would feel comfortable discussing my feelings with my manager."

The responses in Table 8 below illustrate how comfortable staff in different sectors would feel in approaching their managers if they felt adversely affected by traumatic eyewitness media. 56 percent of journalists said they would feel comfortable approaching their managers. This fell to 40 percent for human rights and humanitarian professionals.

In relation to workplace culture, again the human rights and humanitarian sectors came out worst. 60 percent of journalists felt that their workplace culture was such that they would feel comfortable in asking for help in handling traumatic UGC, a lower rate of human rights and humanitarian professionals (38 percent) responded positively.

TABLE 8		
<b>How comfortable would you feel asking for help after viewing distressing eyewitness media</b>	My workplace culture is such that I would feel comfortable asking for support in handling traumatic eyewitness media	I would feel comfortable discussing my feelings with my manager
<b>Journalists</b>	61%	56%
<b>Human Rights / Humanitarian Workers</b>	38%	40%
<b>n = 209</b>		

We analysed these results further and looked at the same responses only taking into account those people who had reported that they feel affected traumatically from viewing eyewitness media at work. We then split this category of respondents up further into those who felt that affect had been in their professional life (e.g. stress at work, inability to do their job), and those who felt that the affect had been on their personal life in some way (e.g. impact on relationships, changes in sleeping patterns and increased alcohol consumption).

TABLE 9	Do not feel affected by viewing distressing content		Feel affected by viewing distressing content	
	Personally	Professionally	Personally	Professionally
<b>% who would feel comfortable in their workplace culture asking for support in handling traumatic UGC</b>				
<b>Journalists</b>	65%	64%	52%	45%
<b>Human Rights / Humanitarian Workers</b>	35%	38%	41%	38%
<b>n = 209</b>				

As Table 9 illustrates, those who felt affected by viewing distressing content are more likely to view their workplace culture as not being conducive to asking for support in handling traumatic eyewitness media. Amongst journalists, 64 percent of those who felt professionally impacted by viewing traumatic eyewitness media would feel comfortable asking for support in their workplace culture. This fell to 45 percent for those who had felt affected professionally.

When it comes to seeking support from managers, the same pattern is evident. This is shown in Table 10.

TABLE 10	Do not feel affected by viewing distressing content		Feel affected by viewing distressing content	
	Personally	Professionally	Personally	Professionally
% who feel comfortable speaking about their feelings about traumatic eyewitness media with their manager				
<b>Journalists</b>	68%	61%	35%	30%
<b>Human Rights / Humanitarian Workers</b>	40%	42%	41%	33%
<b>n = 209</b>				

Only 30 percent of journalists surveyed who reported that viewing distressing content has affected them in their professional life stated that they would feel comfortable discussing this with their manager as compared with 61 percent of journalists who did not feel affected.

As compared to journalists, fewer human rights and humanitarian workers feel comfortable discussing with their manager - regardless of their experience with eyewitness media. We found that professionals who reported that traumatic eyewitness media has had an impact on their professional life are less likely to feel that they are able to raise issues with their manager (33 percent versus 42 percent).

One newsroom spoke about the situation of a staff member who displayed symptoms of vicarious trauma as a direct result of exposure to distressing eyewitness media:

“One person, it really got to them, looking at the constant bombings from Syria, kids maimed and injured, they’d probably clicked on too many grim things, and they couldn’t move from their desk, they were in shock, I literally had to peel them away. One of the things was that they didn’t want management to know because they thought that would be it, that they would never be given the opportunity again.”

These findings demonstrate that it is imperative that managers understand that it is precisely those staff members who have been negatively affected by viewing distressing eyewitness media who are the least likely to reach out to their managers for support.<sup>33</sup>

## Tough up or get out: the vicarious trauma taboo in human rights and humanitarian organisations

**In our in-depth interviews, almost without exception, human rights and humanitarian professionals reported that vicarious trauma and PTSD were not taken at all seriously by management.**

Interviews revealed that there was an “ingrained culture of “if you cannot handle the job then get out” (senior legal analyst working on conflict situations for a large intergovernmental organisation). Ironically, within a sector with a *raison d'être* to protect and promote the rights of all people, including the right to the highest standard of physical and *mental* health<sup>34</sup>, we were repeatedly told that: “Mental health issues are simply not talked about and not addressed - it’s taboo. It is basically “if you cannot handle it then you should not be here” (investigator working for a human rights NGO).<sup>35</sup> Another expert working for a different human rights NGO argued that the bravado culture in the sector is exemplified in a film made about a large human rights NGO which follows its emergency response staff who are “portrayed as heroes”. In the film, a senior manager is asked: “are you not affected by this?” They respond by saying: “No, we just get on with it.”<sup>36</sup>

One expert working for a large human rights NGO with over 30 years of experience told us that: “There has never been any acknowledgement of secondary trauma. It really bothers me that there is no support or even acknowledgement of how these things can affect you”. Another human rights lawyer working for a different NGO said: “There is a real stigma in our profession - you just cannot discuss this. You need to prove you can do the work and I would never talk about this at work to a manager or a colleague.”

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<sup>33</sup> As Beam and Spratt note in their study of management support for journalists suffering from trauma: “Creating an environment in which journalists feel safe to talk candidly about emotional distress appears to be an important step. If journalists believe that they jeopardize their careers by admitting that their work is taking an emotional toll, they may be less likely to deal with their problems effectively.” Randal A. Beam & Meg Spratt (2009) *Managing Vulnerability, Journalism Practice*, 3:4, 421-438 p. 433

<sup>34</sup> Article 12 of International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights enshrines the right to health and mental health. See: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx> Accessed 23rd November 2015

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the duty of care responsibilities that human rights NGOs have towards their staff and which flow from the human rights mandate of an NGO see: Griffin, E. “The Ethical Responsibilities of Human Rights NGOs”, *The International Journal of Non-for-Profit Law*, Vol. 15, Issue 2, December 2013

<sup>36</sup> *E-Team* (2014), Directed by: Katy Chevigny, Ross Kauffman. USA: Big Mouth Productions

We heard this repeatedly from professionals working with different human rights and humanitarian organisations. A senior legal adviser working with an NGO which investigates atrocities in a high intensity conflict who previously held a senior role with a large intergovernmental organisation investigating war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide told us that: "I have never had anyone come to me in 20 years and say that they are struggling with their work. People just don't talk about it."

As noted in Table 8 above, **only 38 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "My workplace culture is such that I would feel comfortable asking for support in handling traumatic UGC"**.

Similarly, **only 40 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals who responded to our survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "If I felt adversely affected by traumatic UGC encountered in the workplace, I would feel comfortable discussing my feelings with my manager"**. This compares to 56 percent of journalists.

Given the lack of attention and in some cases, the complete denial of secondary trauma as an issue in the human rights and humanitarian sectors, it is hardly surprising that the majority of interviewees told us that their organisations had minimal, or, in some cases, no mechanisms to prevent or mitigate vicarious trauma or support staff who experience mental health problems as a direct result of dealing with traumatic content at work. More specifically, the majority of people working in the human rights and humanitarian sectors who were interviewed and/or took part in our survey stated that they did not have access to confidential individual counselling.

**In our survey, 62 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals said that their organisation did not provide any form of counselling.** One legal adviser working on high intensity conflict situations for a large intergovernmental organisation told us that their organisation: "Has no counselling service. I find this shocking, just shocking given the material we work on".

Some human rights and humanitarian organisations do provide free counselling services and in-house information to assist staff, such as helpline numbers, but these services appear to be mainly targeted at individuals who go on field missions rather than staff working on traumatic eyewitness media content in offices. We also found that amongst the organisations that did provide some free counselling, staff had to wait a long time to access it and/or sessions were limited to a small number. For example, at one large human rights NGO, free counselling sessions were limited to six sessions which one human rights professional believed was "only enough to scratch the surface and open up the issues I had to deal with as a result of work. ... The level of my PTSD was such that I required a couple of years of counselling and antidepressants before I started to feel better."

**We heard again and again that in addition to the lack of pre-engagement training, there were no mechanisms in place to pre-empt, mitigate or treat vicarious trauma.** One human rights lawyer working for an NGO explained that: "There is counselling for people who go on difficult missions but nothing for those that work on UGC."

The 'tough up or get out' culture, coupled with a lack of support within human rights and humanitarian organisations has given rise to a situation where professionals suffer from vicarious trauma and/or develop PTSD as a direct result of their work often end up being seen as "a problem" (expert working for a human rights NGO), go on long-term sick leave, unpaid sabbaticals or ultimately resign from their jobs. A human rights lawyer working for an NGO explained that: "People suffer from vicarious trauma and burn out, they quit and someone else comes into the job and they then get burnt out and quit and the cycle goes on with nothing to support the mental health of staff."

An occupational therapist working at another large human rights NGO was quoted by one interviewee as saying that: "I have seen it time and time again - brilliant and dedicated people come into the organisation and it ruins them by pushing them to get the hard information and the reports out under extreme stress without caring for their workers."

During our interviews we asked human rights and humanitarian workers whether they would be comfortable asking their managers to give them different tasks if they felt that they were experiencing secondary trauma as a result of prolonged and frequent viewing of traumatic eyewitness media. One human rights professional told us that: "If I were to say that I want to be taken off the team and do something else for a while the management would not be supportive and in fact there is no one else to do the work."

**A number of human rights and humanitarian professionals told us that they felt unable to talk about mental health issues with their managers because they feared it would undermine their career progression.** A human rights lawyer working for an NGO said that:

"People will not go to managers and say they are not coping because it would jeopardise their career. It is a competitive field. I have personally felt times when I am unable to cope but I have not spoken out about it until it was too late because I was nervous about being seen as complaining and not up to the job."

An expert working for a different human rights NGO stated that: "I think that those that seem not to be affected tend to rise further up the ladder and their voices seem to be stronger in the organisation."

We did, however, find some limited examples of support being given to staff working for human rights NGOs. A human rights documentarian told us that:

“I told my supervisor about the fact that I was worrying about the effect that [viewing distressing eyewitness media] would have on me, and they very quickly got me support. They didn’t really know how to respond, but they responded quickly. I spoke with the human resources manager, and she shared with me resources, what my insurance provides in terms access to mental health professionals, and gave me a list of what I could do, and they told me to not watch as many videos.”

**Our hope is that this report will prompt managers of human rights and humanitarian organisations to recognise and put into place institutional processes and support systems to protect the mental health of their staff.**

## **Newsroom management: “The corporate world can just be a bit cack-handed at times”**

Research into how broadcasters used eyewitness media in their news output during 2013 and 2014 found that some newsroom managers were still denying the possible existence of vicarious trauma.<sup>37</sup> In interviews for this present study, not one newsroom manager made such claims (in contrast to those working in human rights and humanitarian organisations). **The fact that there is now little denial by newsroom managers that vicarious trauma is an issue, is clearly a positive step forward.**

This acknowledgement does not mean, however, that newsroom managers have identified specific ways to tackle the problem. Many managers are still struggling to know exactly what to do. When speaking of their immediate hierarchy, one senior newsroom manager explained: “The organisation has been quite proactive in some ways, they’ve looked at research done by Anthony Feinstein, and got in touch with people to talk to, but the corporate world can just be a bit cack-handed at times.” Good efforts made by some managers are not, therefore, necessarily translating into good results.

“I feel uncomfortable talking about trauma to the management because I don't want to appear as if I am not coping and I don't like to admit I have been changed mentally. I am in a vulnerable place in my career. The bosses say ‘impress us, impress us’, I feel like I cannot say no to looking at stuff because I want to do well in my career. I feel my career would be jeopardised if I raised this with my managers.”

Junior journalist working with a large news agency

Like their humanitarian and human rights counterparts, a number of junior journalists stated that they would be reluctant to raise mental health issues with their managers as it may have a

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<sup>37</sup> Wardle, Dubberley, Brown (2014) “Amateur Footage: A Global Study of User-Generated Content in TV and Online News Output”, Tow Center for Digital Journalism: A Tow/Knight Report

negative impact upon their career. One junior social media producer at a large news agency stated that: "I would be a bit worried about my career progression if I did say I don't want to work on a particular issue."

More senior journalists and managers acknowledged that journalists might feel unable to talk their managers. A senior journalist remarked that, "journalists who come in at a junior level probably don't feel they can say 'actually, I'm not comfortable with this.'" Another senior manager in a news organisation admitted that junior staff do ask themselves: "Will it have an impact on my career?" They went on to underline that it would not:

"It doesn't have an impact on your career, but people think it will, so just breaking that myth is important, and it rather depends on who your manager is, there's lots we can do about that, but it's quite deeply embedded, so people think that, if I'm weak, I won't be sent out on interesting stories."

The problem, then, is how to eradicate the perception that speaking about the impact of traumatic content will have a negative impact on your career. As a journalist specialising in the discovery of eyewitness media from the same organisation noted: "I know our line managers are aware of the issues, they say the door's are always open but as a journalist you don't want to be the one to raise your hand to say 'I can't do the job'." Breaking down this idea is a key role that managers need to find effective ways to deal with.

Whilst professionals within all sectors spoke of the fact that, be the perception real or not, raising issues of trauma or asking to be taken off a particular story or portfolio of work might jeopardise one's career, there was a marked difference between the human rights and humanitarian sector and the journalistic world. This may be attributed to the fact that journalism is an older profession. The culture of 'tough up or get out' was not so strikingly prevalent within the world of journalism where managers acknowledged that secondary trauma was a serious issue and were trying, albeit in an unstructured, non-institutionalised manner, to prevent, mitigate and support staff who were dealing with traumatic eyewitness media. For example, a senior online journalist acknowledged the duty of care and also the benefits of supporting junior staff: "The amount of stuff you're looking at as a journalist compared to the regular punter is just completely different and managers need to watch that because you don't want the young journalists of today being absolute wrecks in ten years because they've had to look at all this horrible stuff on the internet."

**Whilst we observed that there was no denial within news organisations that vicarious trauma exists, we found that most had no formal institutional systems in place to support their staff.** For example, a senior video content manager for a major news agency told us that: "They should know to talk to someone, and they should be able to turn around to their boss and say I don't want to look at that, I think that's perfectly legitimate, but we don't have those systems in place at the moment".

A lack of systems, coupled with a lack of awareness on the part of managers leads to further frustration amongst journalists who are simply trying to do their jobs. For example, one senior news agency producer lamented too many managers lacked awareness when they were attempting to verify video of the Houla massacre in Syria in May 2012:

"I found these horrendous pictures [of the Houla massacre] and I thought 'they're never going to run this', and they did. But it took too many people to look at it. I'd been looking at it for about an hour, and I asked someone to look at it, and all the managers came over, and it became really irritating. The managers wanted to look at it again and again, and I was forced into watching it again and again because of these managers. They should have said to me 'how many times have you looked at this? Go and get a cup of coffee'. But they're not aware, they're not used to dealing with UGC. If I'd been a manager, I'd have said 'you, get out of here, let me deal with this'."

Whilst we found very few examples of best practice within the human rights and humanitarian sector, we did observe some examples of good management practice within news organisations. We observed that where managers openly acknowledged that they themselves were negatively impacted by traumatic eyewitness media and took the time to regularly check whether junior staff were coping, a healthy and more open culture existed that enabled junior staff to feel they could ask for assistance where need be. One senior editor told us:

"I'm big on going up to somebody who's editing something traumatic and saying 'are you okay?' I make no secrets of the fact that there is stuff that gets under my skin, and I blub by example, as it were. If you think if somebody realises you're impacted by it, it might make you feel more approachable."

"Blubbing by example" and regular checks upon staff accompanied with the distribution of information on counselling services and helplines breaks the mental health taboo and facilitates a culture of openness. A junior social media producer reporting to the senior editor quoted above told us:

"There is a culture here that encourages us to seek help from our managers and/or the helpline or counsellors should we need it. It was a very pleasant surprise; this is the nicest newsroom I have been in by a long way. The other organisations made us feel like it would be a sign of weakness to admit that you are not coping. ... A number of managers check in with us from time to time and ask if we are drinking too much, smoking too much, eating too much, kicking the cat or whatever and that shows that they are very aware of the impact that this stuff can have on us."

Another example of best practice involves the periodic rotation of staff away from 'hard news'. A social media producer explained that: "The standard pattern is one week of hard news and one week of soft news and this is really good. You break from stuff like Syria, bombs and all that awful stuff. It really helps a lot."

Whilst there has been, therefore, a general improvement in awareness within newsrooms about the impact of distressing imagery, many challenges remain. There is a need to eradicate the stigma of approaching managers and the fear of being seen as too weak and to address workflows.

## 5. What the New Guy Doesn't Know: Pre-Engagement Teaching and Training

"The other week we had a guy who filmed a murder and posted it on Twitter, it's not beyond the realms of imagination that you have young trainees straight out of university looking at this stuff and being completely unprepared."

Social Media Journalist

Universities are failing, with very few exceptions, to warn their students and employees respectively that they are likely to encounter distressing imagery if they work with eyewitness media. This applies both to older and more recent graduates. We found that universities are not integrating teaching or even awareness-raising of vicarious trauma into the postgraduate degree curricula. This lack of attention to vicarious trauma is evident despite increasing awareness within all of the professional sectors examined that the work is often traumatic.

Furthermore, employers within all three sectors are failing in their duty of care to warn staff who will work with traumatic imagery about the possible negative impact of viewing of eyewitness media upon their mental health. The failure on the part of both universities and employers indicate that they are behind the mark in terms of developments in new technologies and how they professionals. One journalist, a recent university graduate, told us that: "when I got my first job, I hadn't really had any procedures given to me or processes taught to me as to how to deal with stuff. Not even verification training, that's all been self taught."

### University teaching: Could you give us the heads up?

Postgraduate university curricula designed to prepare young professionals for careers in journalism, human rights and humanitarian work are seemingly failing to keep pace with the professional environment into which their graduates will enter.

In research that examines the lack of attention to the practical aspects of human rights work in postgraduate human rights law degrees, Griffin notes that: "There was overwhelming consensus amongst graduates (many of whom hold key positions with international and

national NGOs, national human rights institutions and IGOs) that they would have liked to have more practice integrated into their degrees.”<sup>38</sup>

The same was apparent in our interviews with journalists. None of those interviewed had had any preparation whatsoever at university for working with traumatic imagery. As one newsroom’s social media editor, who left journalism school in 2006, explained: “I did a Masters in online journalism. ... I finished, nearly a decade ago. It seems crazy now. We were aware how Twitter could be useful, Facebook didn’t cross over into journalism. We just didn’t mention traumatic content. Definitely, now it should be considered.”

Another social media manager who graduated from journalism school more recently - in 2011 - explained: “I did a Masters degree in journalism, there was very little, if any at all, training around social media, let alone verifying, sourcing and looking at this kind of content. That was the formal part of my education, that was when you expected to get some training in this area.”

Other graduates, who believed that moving into the social media and news sphere meant that they would be able to find a professional niche, also did not receive any formal teaching or training. One journalist told us that: “Before I started working with UGC, so it’s about four to five years ago now, there was no training. The reason why I wanted to work with UGC was because it was in the vanguard of what was going on in the digital world at that time.”

Another social media journalist, who graduated even more recently, said: “They [at university] didn’t talk about what you might experience on social media when I was a student, and that was in 2012, only three years ago.”

**Our research suggests that many university curricula are not equipping graduates with the skills needed to enter the professional, digital world.**

## **Professional training: I didn’t get the heads up at university but surely my organisation will warn me?**

Universities might be forgiven for not fully preparing their students for work in the real world for they are academic institutions and not vocational training grounds. Vocational training, it could be argued, is the responsibility of the employer. We found, however, that employers across sectors who cannot be excused of not understanding the contemporary work environment, do little more than universities to ensure that staff joining their organisations are made aware of the potential traumatic impact upon staff of eyewitness media.

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38 Griffin, E., The Dilemmas of the Postgraduate International Human Rights Law Educator, Journal of Human Rights Practice (2014), p.16

For those who did receive training about the use of eyewitness media, formal training was almost always limited to issues related to copyright. One digital editor from a major international broadcaster told us that: “We did talk a lot about UGC, but we talked about copyright. We didn’t talk about dramatic footage, we didn’t talk about what our processes would be for getting it on air, I guess we thought we’d treat it like any other piece of footage that comes in the building - on its own merits, on its own value.”

A human rights investigator lamented the lack of training they received: “I had nothing before I started by way of an induction training on anything.” Another journalist was more emphatic: “I had absolutely no training on how to handle UGC or anything about the vicarious trauma that I might experience as a result. I was a very junior aspiring journalist when I joined and was given absolutely no warning about the kinds of traumatic images I would be viewing day in and out as a part of my work.”

There were, however, good examples of awareness building both at the interview and during the induction stage. This whole process was explained by a social media journalist at a social media news agency who had been through the process:

“During the interview I was warned it was tough, traumatic work and asked if I felt I could cope and be comfortable with this. I was also informed at interview stage that it really is tough going but that there would be support available including counsellors. During the induction process we were properly warned about what to expect and that some things we would view would be traumatic. I think that they did all they could, I am not really sure that there is any real way to prepare a person for watching the type of UGC that we do, particularly from places like Gaza and the Ukraine. But yes, they did their best to warn and prepare us and let us know clearly where to go should we need support.”

## Self-led training from the vanguard

Within those organisations where there is no formal structure, many professionals in the vanguard of developing the use of eyewitness media are starting to build some level of trauma awareness for newly recruited staff. This is, however, rarely formalised. “I make sure with my interns that the very first thing we do is to talk about secondary trauma”, one human rights documentarian told us. A senior producer at a new agency noted:

“When I was grounded in [using eyewitness media], there wasn’t any protocol to tell me [about traumatic content], I don’t feel that I wasn’t informed, but I was there at the beginning, so I developed that with my role. I was the second social media producer here, so the two of us talked. There were producers who had a bad reaction and it was then that we started thinking, hang on, we need to make sure we take care of this.”

A human rights analyst with an international NGO explained how their team, which was the first to use eyewitness media in human rights investigation in their organisation, started training others in the NGO: "It was verification training mainly. The main focus was verification, it was very basic at that time. I remember that we made an effort not to use very graphic footage in the training, while if I do the trainings now, I make the point of illustrating that part of the verification process to think about how you deal with traumatic imagery." None of this is, however, resulted in the institutional adoption of formal training for new employees within this organisation. The analyst continued to explain that:

"In the organisation, we have the core research and methodology training, where really new researchers take a five-day training, it's traditional - how do you do interviews, how do you do reports, that kind of stuff - and that includes topics like ethics. Dealing with graphic footage is not part of that training yet."

However, in the absence of formal structures those in the vanguard of eyewitness media, who have never had appropriate training themselves, are doing their very best to train new starters. But they are not necessarily aware of the need to include training about traumatic content. "I do loads of training about finding UGC, but I don't include trauma", highlighted one digital news editor who was one of the first two people to have a social media role in their organisation.

Building up more formal structures which raise awareness and understanding of the potential for vicarious trauma, how to identify it and what to do about it - both in university curricula and when new hires are inducted into organisations - needs to become common practice.

If universities are teaching students how to investigate and tell stories using eyewitness media, they should also be preparing them for what they may experience. This would not only build resilience, but it would also give people the heads up that viewing traumatic eyewitness media is part of the job and that it cannot be avoided. As one editor-in-chief at a broadcaster noted:

"Before it's happened, people should know it might happen to you - but also you are working in a profession where you have to report this stuff, so if this affects you, think about what you're getting into. We're a news bulletin, we report news. If you like sports, work in sports. So, examples where it has affected someone - you don't want to over-do it, but you want to do something".

Five years ago a failure to prepare staff may possibly be attributed to an inability upon the part of academics and professionals to keep up with fast moving technological developments. Today, however, the failure to give people the heads up and prepare them for what they may experience working with traumatic eyewitness media is impossible to excuse.

## 6. It's Not Just About the New Guy: What Training are Staff Getting Now?

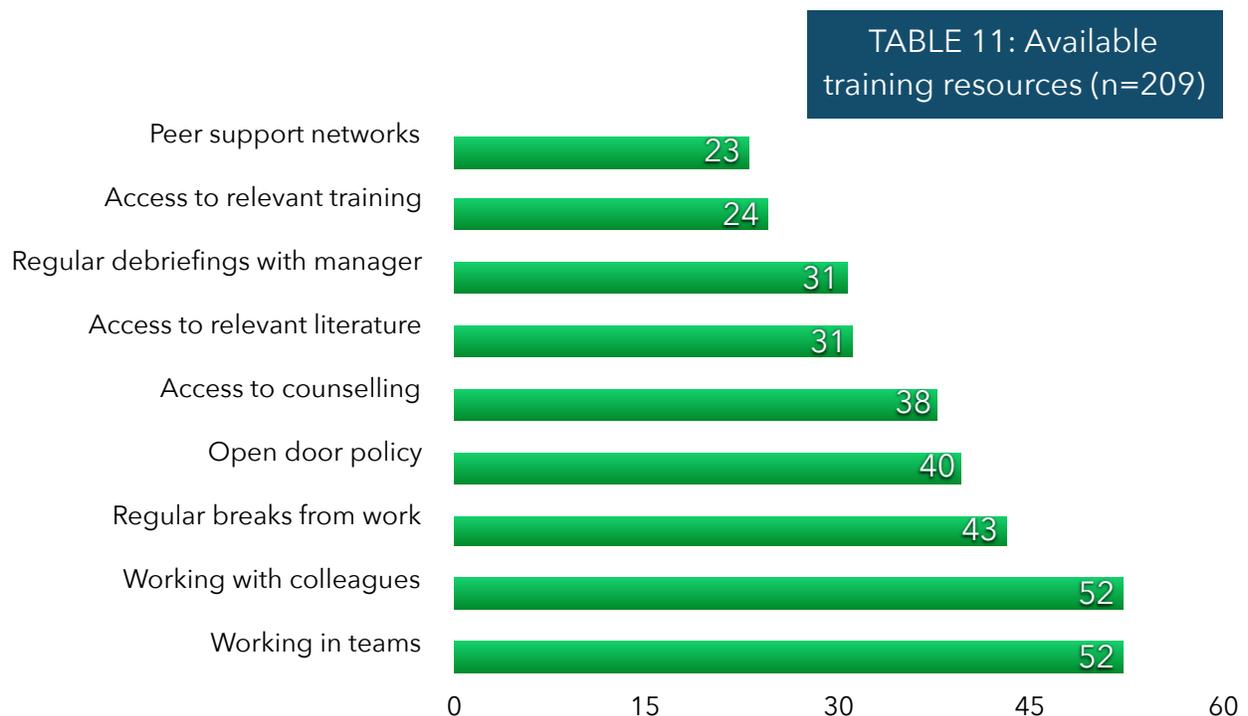
"People need to know that working as a journalist means that at some point in their career, whatever they're doing, something may get under their skin, get into their head and that's fine, and if it does, these are the things you can do, and these are the things you can do to get better, and even if you are diagnosed with PTSD, that's completely treatable."

Senior manager at a news organisation

As this senior manager highlights training and awareness-building regarding the potential impact of distressing eyewitness media is crucial for maintaining the mental health of staff dealing with traumatic content.

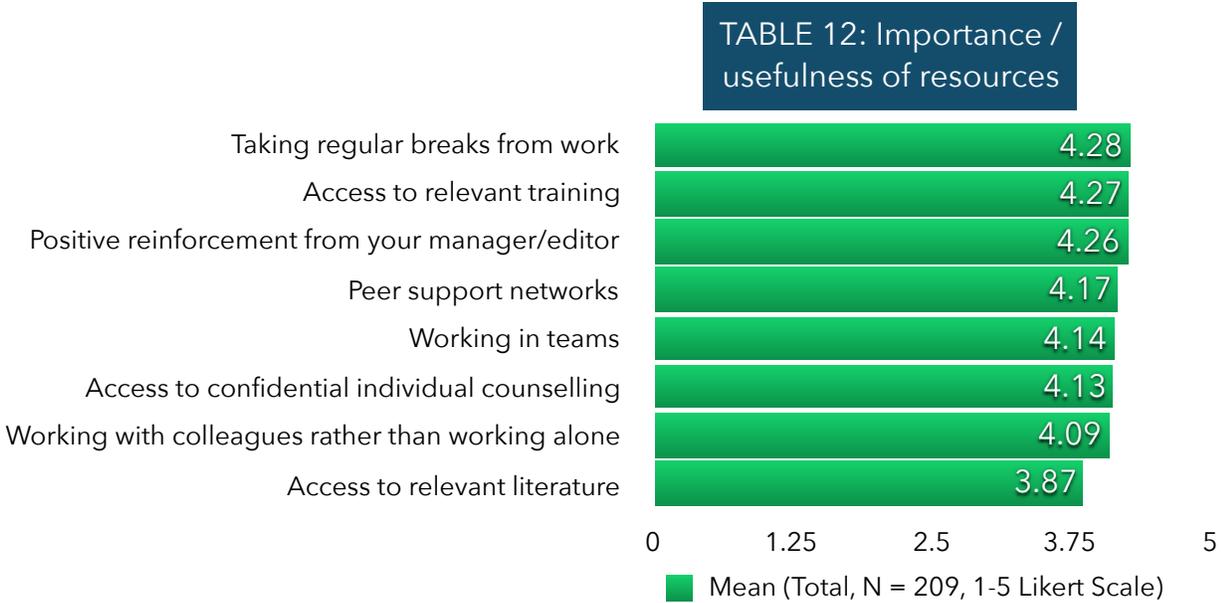
Our survey illustrates that within the vast majority of organisations, however, such assistance and awareness is simply not made available, not only to new recruits but also to staff who have been working for some time with eyewitness media.

An analysis of our responses to the survey which relate to the availability of training and resources specifically designed to help prevent or mitigate vicarious trauma demonstrate that very little is provided. This is shown in Table 11.



When asked about specific resources that are available to them from a list, 52 percent of respondents across sectors noted they were able to work in teams, or with colleagues on eyewitness media. This may, however, be an accidental result of the fact that most people by default work in teams, rather than a result of the intentional implementation of a strategy by management to prevent and mitigate vicarious trauma. The assumption that working with teams is not an intentional management strategy to mitigate vicarious trauma is backed up when one considers the much lower statistics on the availability of resources that are specifically targeted at mitigating vicarious trauma. For example, only 24 percent had access to vicarious trauma-related training, and a mere 23 percent had access to peer support networks.

When asked to rate the potential usefulness of the same list of resources (see Table 12), the three least available resources - access to training, managerial contact and support and peer support - were deemed to be amongst the four most useful resources to help mitigate vicarious trauma amongst those working with eyewitness media. Organisations are simply not providing their staff with the resources they need.

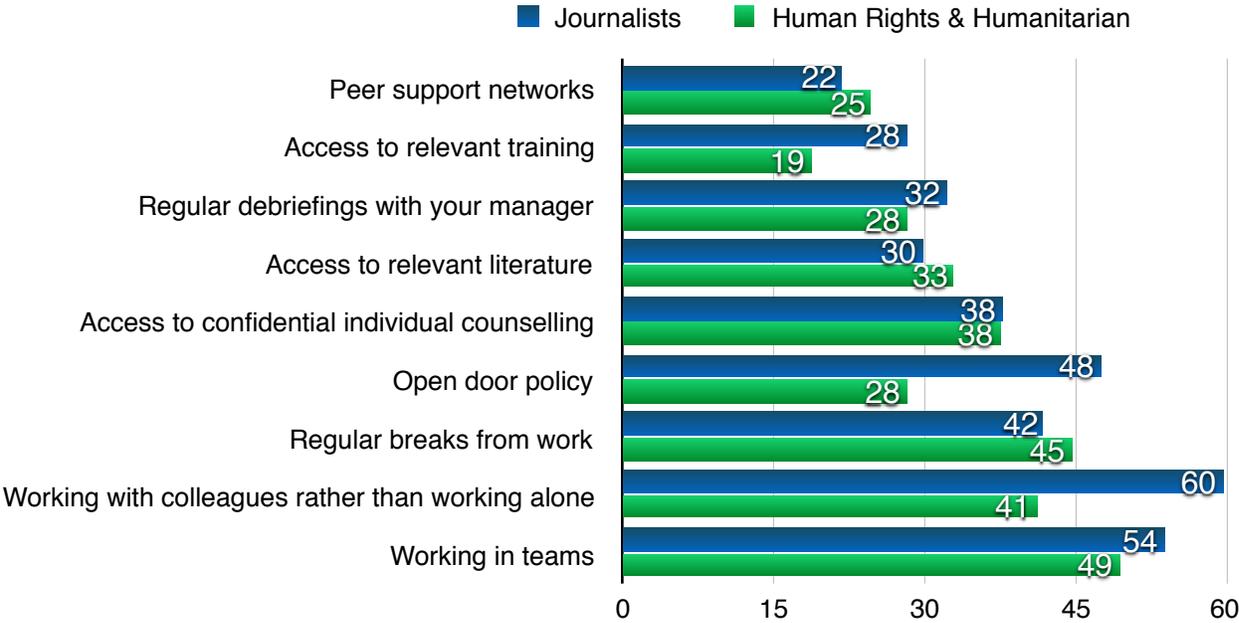


Disaggregated by profession (see Table 13), we see that not one single resource is available to more than 50 percent of human rights and humanitarian professionals. News organisations score much higher on manager accessibility - with 48 percent of respondents (in itself a low number) stating that there is an open door policy within their organisation. This compares to a miserable figure of 28 percent in human rights and humanitarian organisations.

Our statistics that illustrate the paucity of resources and training available to help prevent and mitigate vicarious trauma in those who work with eyewitness media were reinforced and given weight by experience of one social media editor who stated that: "We had a seven-week long training course on using content from the social web called the 'new media

school'. This training talked about verification techniques, searching for and discovering content, writing and rewriting content and so on. There was no training or discussion in the seven weeks about traumatic images”, they observed.

**TABLE 13: Comparison of available resources by profession (n=209) in %**



Within human rights and humanitarian organisations, where there is training that includes reference to trauma, the training almost always focuses on dealing with the survivors of human rights and humanitarian law violations and/or witnesses. Self care is neglected. As a senior lawyer with wide experience of investigating war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, told us: “In my ten-year career with international non-governmental organisations and international governmental organisations, I have had no training on secondary trauma. Nothing. We did get training on how to deal with traumatised victims but nothing on how to protect or avoid trauma in ourselves.”

A journalist explained that training needs to come before regular engagement with distressing content: “It was too late when I got advice. I had already been dealing with traumatic UGC on a regular basis. It wasn’t one of those things people think about, I don’t know why that is.”

Many of the challenges are often still excused by, and attributed to the fast-moving developments in technology and subsequent changes in workflows that have not been accepted by all organisations because they claim they simply cannot keep up. The lag in organisational responses to fast moving developments and the impact it has had on

changing workflows in human rights organisations was explained by one analyst who told us that: "Using digital content in investigations is still relatively new for a lot of people. It's still an afterthought and traditional research is just so front and centre that I think people just don't think so much about it." However, as noted in Chapter 2, the reality is that organisations are using the technologies, just not thinking about how it impacts on their staff.

This was echoed by a social media manager with a news organisation who told us that: "Considering how little training we do, training around how you handle UGC would be small. You couldn't do a day on UGC when some fundamental parts of how the newsroom works are not given attention. There needs to be someone who helps journalists transition from being print to being digital."

The commitment and support of senior managers is the key to achieving real substantive change. As one senior manager in a news organisation who has gained support from the organisational hierarchy to conduct training in handling distressing eyewitness media highlighted:

"In terms of training, we deliver trauma awareness sessions, we offer our services or are contacted by managers, we regularly do 90-minute lunchtime sessions for managers or staff or a mixture on trauma awareness. We tell people they may, in their work, come across distressing images, or have to deal with something that may be distressing, the impact is different on different people, it's about psycho-awareness, it may have no impact on you, it may impact you in several years, that kind of thing, don't panic, these are normal reactions, and it's about drumming in that those reactions, whatever they are, are normal."

One journalist working for a social media news agency remarked that one of the main beneficial elements to come out of ongoing training and on the job discussions was that it gave a collegial sense of secondary trauma being normal - that it was something that everyone can experience:

"We have also had shorter trainings from that helpline/counselling service come in and meet with all staff. I have been to one. The management was present and supportive. We were given practical information and advice on how to identify and deal with secondary trauma and a wider discussion of how this can impact one in the long term and what to look out for. And there was information about signs of escalation that things are affecting you and what to do about it. I felt it was useful and helpful because he talked about the fact that secondary trauma is normal and that most people who do this work will experience issues at some point. There is sense here that we all understand what we are dealing with in the office. Sessions like that work in that they remind us that we are all in the same situation."

The consequence of professionals who work with distressing eyewitness media not receiving access to the resources that they perceive would be useful is that many staff are suffering from a range of symptoms of vicarious trauma which could have been mitigated, or at least minimised. The positive side, however, is that there are institutional initiatives being taken, particularly in newsrooms. Such initiatives should be observed, learnt from and, where deemed useful and successful by staff, replicated by all organisations working with distressing imagery.

# 7. The Employer's Duty of Care to Staff Working on the Digital Frontline

The recognition that one is now likely to view more horror in the office as opposed to the field that came from individuals who have worked and seen traumatic events in both environments does not, however, necessarily translate to equal levels of support for the producer, human rights or humanitarian professional working with eyewitness media in the office.

One human right investigator notes that: "In our NGO there is counselling for people who go on difficult missions but nothing for those that work with UGC." Another human rights investigator who specialises in the verification of eyewitness media told us that: "We've had some very basic conversations, I see it more as my responsibility to bring up this conversation as well, don't only think about staff returning from the field, but start thinking about staff doing desk research."

We identify two main reasons for this lack of support. First, those who are working with traumatic eyewitness media may not feel willing or able to speak up about being negatively affected by the traumatic content that they view. In some cases this may be because they are junior and fear that it may undermine their career progression. Keats and Buchanan point to a "journalism culture" where "silencing fears or behaviours that may be perceived as weakness" is widespread.<sup>39</sup> It has been observed that this is also true in the humanitarian sector where: "The culture of humanitarian work often leads to staff denying or minimising the distress they are experiencing or resisting efforts at providing them support."<sup>40</sup> In other cases people do not seek out support because they experience feelings of guilt and believe that they have no right to be affected by traumatic content because it is "not happening to them". The positive association between guilt and work-related trauma is evident in academic literature.<sup>41</sup>

Second, we found that management often does not fully acknowledge the negative impact that viewing traumatic eyewitness media can have on the individual because they incorrectly assume that their staff are fine, safely tucked up in headquarters 'merely' looking at a computer screen. We found that this attitude was particularly prevalent in the human rights and humanitarian sectors.

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<sup>39</sup> Keats, P. a., & Buchanan, M. J. (2013). Covering trauma in Canadian journalism: Exploring the challenges. *Traumatology*, 19(3), 210-222. p. 212.

<sup>40</sup> Antares Foundation. (2012). *Managing stress in humanitarian workers: Guidelines for good practice*. Amsterdam. Retrieved from <https://www.antaresfoundation.org/FileLibrary/file6782.pdf>. p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Browne, T., Evangelini, M., & Greenberg, N. (2012). Trauma-related guilt and posttraumatic stress among journalists. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25(2), 207-210.

There is, however, growing awareness of the fact that attitudes must change. A human rights investigator in the vanguard of using eyewitness media for investigations of human rights and humanitarian law violations explained how they are trying to push for training and counselling within their organisation for staff working with traumatic eyewitness media. They note the difference in the levels of support available for desk-based and field investigators:

“I think people are open for it, but I haven’t pushed it yet. We have to have a bigger conversation and dedicate resources to it. This comes up in conversations about people returning from the field. There is an awareness that we have to support these folks, but I don’t think there’s anything with regards to working with social media content. So, we have to make this part of a bigger conversation.”

This human rights professional is not a senior manager pushing for change, rather they are an investigator in the vanguard of using eyewitness media. However, implementing change requires management support and the commitment of resources by organisations.

In one news organisation that is starting to implement strong mechanisms for staff working with eyewitness media, we found that a major catalyst for change was senior journalists and correspondents who had worked in the field admitting and speaking openly about trauma. This was a catalyst which prompted a change in attitudes. A senior manager in that organisation explained that some of the best known correspondents: “Have been amongst the most high profile to come out and say ‘I’ve had problems’. They’ll talk about how they dealt with it, how they maintain their resilience, what their coping mechanisms are, if they’ve been ill - they’ve been open about that.” The goal within this organisation is to ensure that vicarious trauma which results from viewing eyewitness media be taken as seriously as it is for correspondents working in the field. The senior manager spoke about how it was now commonplace for those staff members to receive training:

“Nobody even thinks about hostile environment training anymore, and I want to be in a position where trauma awareness is just part of what we do, and part of good practice that, as a manager. ... There’s always been a lot of support from the top of the organisation that this is important.”

**The need for senior managers support change, remove the myth that people in headquarters do not experience trauma and eradicate the stigma surrounding those that do is evident.** What, then, if that support that does not exist? One human rights professional who was not being supported by management, told us that:

**“If you are in the field you would get R&R [rest and recuperation] but that is not an option if you are in headquarters. We deal day in, day out with really traumatic images and situations but we have no counselling at all provided to us. The management does not have the experience to even grasp what we deal with.”**

Another human rights investigator lamented the fact that their large and well established NGO does not even provide the necessary support for those coming back from traumatic field missions. They told us that: "Our organisation cannot even support us in our field missions which are an old part of our work, it kind of follows that the management are not interested in supporting those that work on traumatic UGC."

**There is, therefore, a clear need for organisations to acknowledge that they have a duty of care that extends to both staff deployed in the field and those witnessing traumatic eyewitness media content in offices and that these both require equal levels of institutional support.**

In order to achieve this, senior management must first and foremost acknowledge that vicarious trauma is a real and serious issue and put processes in place to support all staff witnessing traumatic events, regardless of whether they are in the field or in headquarters.

In various industries some people have personalities that are well suited to work in the field, and some are more suited to working from headquarters.<sup>42</sup>

Within the context of journalism, many professionals understand their own personality type and have made conscious choices about where to work based upon this and other personal considerations. For example, a news agency editor emphasised their own very conscious choice: "There's that feeling that we're just desk-bound, and that's what it used to be, of course, it was 'I don't want to travel, I don't want to be in the frontline, because I've got kids, I want to be able to compartmentalise my work and my family life."

Staff who made the choice not to work in the field are, however, now regularly bombarded with horrific imagery previously reserved for those in the field.

Professionals that have experience of both working in the field and at headquarters clearly acknowledge the trauma that can result from viewing eyewitness media. The time has now come for institutional recognition of the fact that the frontline has expanded and that traumatic eyewitness media can have a devastating impact upon office-based staff.

Clearly, therefore, there is now a duty of care to ensure that office bound staff are cared for with the same rigour as is provided by some organisations to those in the field given that they are now regularly exposed to traumatic images on the new digital frontline.

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<sup>42</sup> As Feinstein et al. note: "Domestic journalists are, however, likely to differ in other ways from the intrepid war reporter. Driven less by sensation seeking and risk taking behaviour, war is not something they actively court." See: Feinstein, A., & Owen, J. (2013). Symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder in major news network journalists pre and post September 11. *Journal of Traumatic Stress Disorders & Treatment*, 2(2), 10-12. p. 2.

Ultimately, organisations in all three sectors examined need to take the duty of care seriously or else they may risk exposing themselves to legal action. In a November 2015 ruling in a case taken against the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) by its former employees, a Norwegian court found the NRC liable for the physical and psychological injuries sustained by its employees after being taken hostage in Kenya in 2012. In awarding the plaintiffs around USD500,000 in compensation, the court heavily criticised the NRC for failing in its duty of care to staff.<sup>43</sup> While the case relates to an event in the field, it is important to note that the ruling included compensation for psychological injury. There appears to be no reason to prevent a staff member who has experienced psychological trauma viewing eyewitness media at work from suing their organisation if they can demonstrate a clear failure on their employer's part to exercise a duty of care.

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<sup>43</sup> 'NRC kidnap ruling is 'wake-up' call for aid industry' <http://www.irinnews.org/printreport.aspx?reportid=102243> accessed November 27th 2015

# 8. Recommendations

## For journalists, human rights and humanitarian professionals

- Be aware that **you and your colleagues are at risk of vicarious trauma as a result of working with distressing eyewitness media content.**
- **Educate yourself about vicarious trauma and PTSD** and learn how to recognise symptoms, starting with the Dart Center's tips for working with traumatic imagery<sup>44</sup>.
- **Recognise that it is entirely normal human reaction to experience negative emotions as a direct consequence of viewing traumatic images eyewitness media content**, in particular when one views such images on a regular basis and for prolonged durations.
- **If you are experiencing negative emotions or feel that you are displaying symptoms of vicarious trauma do not feel guilty and/or ashamed.** Understand that you are only human. You are not alone in experiencing such feelings.
- **Be aware that working with distressing eyewitness media content in an office has the potential to be as traumatic as working in the field because you are likely to be viewing far more graphic and disturbing acts on a more frequent basis.**
- **If you believe that you are experiencing symptoms of vicarious trauma or any other mental health condition, talk to someone whom you trust about how you feel** - a family member, friend, colleague, manager or mental health professional. Never isolate yourself or feel ashamed of expressing how you feel. Do not feel ashamed or guilty about seeking professional counselling.
- **Develop healthy coping mechanisms in the office.** These can include (but are not limited to) regular breaks; getting out of the office periodically; taking time out to view positive images or reading light or inspirational literature. Where possible limit your exposure to traumatic eyewitness media - ask yourself and your colleagues and managers (where you feel comfortable to do so) if you really need to view a particular image that you might find distressing.

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<sup>44</sup> Working with Traumatic Imagery, The Dart Center: <http://dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery> accessed 30th November 2015

- When viewing traumatic eyewitness media, **minimise the sound, pause the video periodically and move away from your desk before completing the viewing.** If you know that the video ends with an execution or an extreme act of violence, ask yourself whether you really need to watch the whole video to gain the information that you need to do your job.
- Ensure that you **do not share distressing content with colleagues without warning them what they are about to be exposed to.** Unexpectedly viewing eyewitness media that is disturbing can cause additional distress and trauma.
- **Try to identify the specific types of traumatic eyewitness media that has a more disturbing impact upon you.** Where possible, let your colleagues and managers know that you find particular types of content (content featuring children, for instance) more traumatic.
- **Develop a personal care plan** and incorporate healthy coping mechanisms into your daily life.<sup>45</sup> Request that your organisation engages professional mental health experts to provide training and support on vicarious trauma.
- Where possible **ask managers and human resources personnel to disseminate information about the resources that are available and the policies** within your organisation to support staff working with traumatic eyewitness media.
- If you feel that your organisation is failing in its duty of care to prevent, mitigate or assist staff from vicarious trauma, **seek independent professional advice** from your union or a lawyer and document your experience.

## For managers of staff working with eyewitness media

- **Understand that vicarious trauma and PTSD can be caused by exposure to traumatic eyewitness media in headquarters.** PTSD is not only caused by exposure to distressing acts witnessed by staff deployed in the field. Managers need to ensure appropriate care is provided for of staff working in both environments.
- **Recognise that it is an entirely normal human reaction to experience negative emotions as a direct consequence of viewing traumatic eyewitness media.** In particular, when your staff view such images on a regular basis and for prolonged durations.

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<sup>45</sup> For more on self care plans in human rights and humanitarian work see, for example: Self-Care for Activists: Sustaining Your Most Valuable Resource <https://www.newtactics.org/conversation/self-care-activists-sustaining-your-most-valuable-resource> (accessed November 10th 2015) and, in journalism, the Dart Center: <http://dartcenter.org/topic/self-care> (accessed November 10th 2015)

- **Be aware that your staff who work in the office with distressing eyewitness media content may be more vulnerable to vicarious trauma than employees working in the field because they are likely to be viewing far more graphic and disturbing acts on a more frequent basis than staff in the field.**
- **Educate yourself about the content, frequency and duration of the disturbing eyewitness media your staff view if you do not already know.**
- **Pay particular attention to staff who may be more exposed to traumatic eyewitness media due to specific skill sets** (Arabic language skills, or digital skills, for instance). Ensure they receive particular attention to mitigate vicarious trauma.
- **Educate yourself about vicarious trauma and PTSD and learn how to recognise symptoms** that may manifest themselves in your staff, starting with the Dart Center's tips for working with traumatic imagery<sup>46</sup>. If you believe that a staff member is displaying symptoms of vicarious trauma rotate that staff member off hard news and provide them with support (e.g. talk to them, offer them free counselling or offer them paid leave).
- **Include in job descriptions, adverts and/or terms of reference a clear indication of the fact that a job can entail viewing traumatic eyewitness media content** and indicate the frequency with which they will be expected to view such content.
- **When interviewing and hiring new staff members ensure they are briefed and aware that they could potentially see traumatic eyewitness media content in the role.** Where possible verbally inform people at the interview stage of the specific types of content (talk them through real examples) that they are likely to be viewing and ask them if they feel able to view such content on a daily basis.
- **Develop technical workflows and recommendations to ensure staff do not share distressing content with colleagues without a warning.** Unexpectedly viewing eyewitness media that is disturbing can cause additional distress and trauma.
- **Include training on viewing traumatic imagery in induction sessions for all new staff,** including how to identify and deal with the symptoms of vicarious trauma and PTSD .
- **Hold regular team debriefings** for staff working with traumatic eyewitness media.
- **Review organisational policies,** including any health insurance plans offered to staff, to ensure that they pay attention to staff members who experience vicarious trauma as a result of viewing eyewitness media.

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<sup>46</sup> See Appendix and Working with Traumatic Imagery, The Dart Center: <http://dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery> accessed 30th November 2015

- **Ensure that your organisation provides free counselling for unlimited periods** to all staff that request it. Never make a staff member feel that they are weak or not up to the job if they approach you to discuss vicarious trauma.
- **Ensure that your organisation disseminates information about vicarious trauma and PTSD** to all staff and that helpline numbers and other resources are available and clearly visible on computers and in staff rest areas.
- **Make your office environment as comfortable as possible.** For example: ensure staff have access to natural light and that staff feel comfortable taking breaks when they feel it is necessary.
- **Recognise that taking steps to prevent, mitigate and support staff suffering from secondary trauma is an investment in your organisation as it will prevent high turnovers of staff and make your staff more productive.**

## For journalism managers

- Ensure that, **before introducing new social media newsgathering techniques into the newsrooms, ensure that the potential for viewing more distressing or traumatic content is taken into account.**
- Ensure **workflows for introducing video on to general servers includes warnings of traumatic content.**
- Ensure **staff rotation policies** are in place to ensure that staff are given breaks from viewing distressing or traumatic content during shifts. Also ensure that viewing social media is not left to one staff member during any given shift.

## For human rights / humanitarian managers

- **Ensure that your organisation has more than just one person working with traumatic eyewitness media and limit the frequency and volume of exposure of individual staff members to traumatic imagery.**
- **Recognise the increasingly important role that eyewitness media plays in the investigation of violations of international human rights and humanitarian law and engage technical experts to devise training programs for staff in order to enable them to properly verify, credit and properly use and protect those persons that capture eyewitness media.**

- **Ensure that the duty of care extends to the prevention, mitigation and treatment of any mental health issue affecting your staff** as a result of their work and understand that staff may have grounds for taking legal action against your organisation if they can demonstrate that the organisation has failed in its duty of care.

## For educators at academic institutions

- Ensure that students do not graduate without having gained an understanding of how human rights and humanitarian work can expose individuals to PTSD and/or secondary trauma.
- Create, in association with mental health experts, **modules and/or courses that teach students how to recognise, prevent and deal with PTSD and secondary trauma.**
- Ensure that alongside theoretical courses on journalism, human rights and humanitarian law and practice that curricula **include strong components on the practical aspects of the work, including how to recognise, prevent and treat vicarious trauma and PTSD.**

# Appendix

## Dart Center tip sheet: Working with traumatic imagery

### Working with Traumatic Imagery

#### A DART CENTRE EUROPE TIP SHEET

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**Photographs and video of horrifying, violent acts may provide essential documentation of human tragedy. But however compelling its news value, traumatic imagery needs to be handled with care, as it can place the wellbeing of those who work with it at risk.**

Imagery from war zones, crimes scenes and natural disasters is often gruesome and distressing. The proliferation of high-definition cameras over the last decade has significantly increased the volume and graphic nature of material streaming into newsrooms, from traditional journalistic sources and social media alike. Even when the events depicted are far away, journalists and forensic analysts, deeply immersed in a flood of explicit, violent and disturbing photos and video, may feel that it is seeping into their own personal headspace. Reactions such as disgust, anxiety and helplessness are not unusual; and the content may re-surface outside of work in the form of intrusive thoughts and disrupted sleep.

From research, we know exposure to limited amounts of traumatic imagery is unlikely to cause more than passing distress in most cases; media workers are a highly resilient group.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the dangers of what psychologists call secondary or vicarious traumatisation become significant in situations where the exposure is repeated<sup>2</sup> — the slow drip effect. Risk also rises when a news professional has a personal connection to the events at the scene — if, for instance, it involves injury to someone the journalist knows.

Exposure to gruesome imagery can be associated with distress.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in 2013, the American Psychiatric Association amended its guidelines on post-traumatic stress disorder to recognise that immersive work with traumatic imagery is a specific risk factor for journalists, police officers and others absorbing such images on a regular basis in their jobs.

#### Here are six practical things media workers can do to reduce the trauma load

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**1. Understand what you are dealing with.** Think of traumatic imagery as if it is radiation, a toxic substance that has a dose-dependent effect. Journalists and humanitarian workers, like nuclear workers, have a job to do; at the same time, they should take sensible steps to minimise unnecessary exposure. Frequency of viewing may be more of an issue than overall volume, so think about pacing your trauma-image load and ensuring down time.

**2. Eliminate needless repeat exposure.** Review your sorting and tagging procedures, and how you organise digital files and folders, among other procedures, to reduce unnecessary viewing. When verifying footage by cross-referencing images from a wide variety of sources, taking written notes of distinctive features may help to minimise how often you need to recheck against an original image. (And never pass the material onto a co-worker without some warning as to what the files contain.)

**3. Experiment with different ways of building some distance into how you view images.** Some people find concentrating on certain details, for instance clothes, and avoiding others (such as faces) helps. Consider applying a temporary matte/mask to distressing areas of the image. Film editors should avoid using the loop play function when trimming footage of violent attacks and point of death imagery; or use it very sparingly. Develop your own workarounds.

**4. Try adjusting the viewing environment.** Reducing the size of the window or adjusting the screen's brightness or resolution can lessen the perceived impact. Try turning the sound off when you can — it is often the most affecting part.

**5. Take frequent screen breaks.** Look at something pleasing, walk around, stretch or seek out contact with nature (such as greenery and fresh air etc.). All of these can all help dampen the body's distress responses. In particular, avoid working with distressing images just before going to sleep. It is more likely to populate your mental space. (And be careful with alcohol — it disrupts sleep and makes nightmares worse.)

**6. Craft your own self-care plan.** It can be tempting to work twice, three times, four times as hard when working on a story with big implications. But it's important to preserve a breathing space for you outside of work. Research shows that highly resilient individuals are more likely to exercise regularly<sup>4</sup>, maintain outside interests and enthusiasms, and to invest time in their social connections<sup>5</sup>, when challenged by trauma-related stress. (Journalists who incapacitate themselves through overwork are only undermining their own mission.)

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### Some additional tips for news editors and other managers

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**Every member of a team should be briefed on normal responses to trauma.** Team members should understand that different people cope differently, how the impact can accumulate over time, and how to recognise when they or their colleagues need to practice more active self-care. This applies to all workers including support and technical staff.

**Have clear guidelines on how graphic material is stored and distributed.** Feeds, files and internal communications related to traumatic imagery should be clearly signposted and distributed only to those who need the material. Nobody should be forced to watch video images that will never be broadcast.

**The environment matters.** If possible, workplaces that deal with violent imagery should have windows with a view of the outside; bringing in plants and other natural elements can also help to build in some separation from the violence in source footage.

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- 1 Newman, E., Simpson, R., & Handschuh, D. (2003). Trauma Exposure and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Photojournalists. *News Photographer*, 58(1), 4.
  - 2 Cohen, K., & Collens, P. (2013). The impact of trauma work on trauma workers: A metasynthesis on vicarious trauma and vicarious posttraumatic growth. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, And Policy*, 5(6), 570–580. doi:10.1037/a003038
  - 3 Feinstein, A., Audet, B., Waknine, E. (2014). Witnessing images of extreme violence: a psychological study of journalists in the newsroom. *JRSM Open*, 5(8) 1–7. doi: 10.1177/2054270414533323
  - 4 Childs, E., & de Wit, H. (2014). Regular exercise is associated with emotional resilience to acute stress in healthy adults. *Frontiers In Physiology*, 5161. doi:10.3389/fphys.2014.00161
  - 5 Eriksson, C. B., Lopes Cardozo, B., Foy, D. W., Sabin, M., Ager, A., Snider, L., & ... Simon, W. (2013). Predeployment mental health and trauma exposure of expatriate humanitarian aid workers: Risk and resilience factors. *Traumatology*, 19(1), 41–48. doi:10.1177/1534765612441978

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See more at: [dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery](http://dartcenter.org/content/working-with-traumatic-imagery)

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For more information visit the Dart Centre website: [dartcentre.org](http://dartcentre.org)



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