

Professor Stephen Jukes—written submission (FOJ0023)

LORDS SELECT COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND DIGITAL – THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

1. Submission by Professor Stephen Jukes, Faculty of Media & Communication, Bournemouth University; also chair of trustees of the Dart Centre Europe, the regional body carrying out work of the US-based charity Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma.¹ His research interests are informed by his professional practice as a journalist for more than 20 years with the international news agency Reuters where he was a foreign correspondent and Global Head of News. Since moving into the academic world in 2005, his research has focused on areas of conflict, trauma, emotion and objectivity in news. He is director of Bournemouth University's Centre for the Study of Conflict, Emotion and Social Justice.

2. This submission responds to the Committee's questions:

Do journalists have access to the training necessary to adapt to the digital world? And... What qualifications do professional journalists need?

3. *The following submission argues that journalists and journalism students would benefit from training to develop their emotional literacy to promote more responsible and ethical reporting of crises such as the coronavirus pandemic and to help rebuild trust in journalism. It specifically addresses the question of how a better understanding of trauma and the impact of emotionally charged content can help journalism adapt to today's digital environment.*

4. Professor Stephen Jukes is available to respond to questions or for further comment. Further information and background on his career and publications is available here:

<https://staffprofiles.bournemouth.ac.uk/display/sjukes#overview>

<https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/centres-institutes/centre-study-conflict-emotion-social-justice>

Introduction:

5. The corona virus pandemic poses a formidable challenge to journalism. This comes in many different forms, from the impact on the already pressured business of journalism to the proliferation of fake news and disinformation being spread across social media. Quite rightly, an increased focus has been applied to combatting fake news, increased fact-checking and improved media literacy in an attempt to educate the public and prevent the spread of disinformation and potential panic. This submission argues that it is also imperative to enhance the emotional literacy of journalists who are covering distressing traumatic news and interviewing those caught up in personal tragedy of the pandemic. Many will have been drafted in to cover such a story for the first time. The pandemic has highlighted the lack of training for journalists and journalism students in this area. The increased provision of training, through news organisations, professional bodies and

¹ The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma is a global charity based at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York. The Dart Center provides support for journalists suffering from stress incurred through coverage of traumatic news stories; it also provides best practice guidelines and resources for emotionally literate reporting by promoting better understanding of issues around trauma.

university courses, would lead to a more emotionally literate journalism that fosters ethical reporting of traumatic news events. At the same time, it would help build the resilience of journalists facing the demanding and emotionally draining workload of reporting on the crisis and safeguard their mental wellbeing.

Lack of trust:

6. Declining levels of trust in the news media in our digital environment have been well documented. The referendum on UK membership of the European Union and 2016 US election are clear examples of periods during which Anglo-American norms of fact-based and objective journalism were challenged. Trust in journalism fell as emotionally-driven political and social media narratives, including fake news, came to the fore. In the Covid-19 pandemic, initial surveys show that trust in journalism remains at a low ebb. A special report of the Edelman Trust Barometer, which surveyed 1,000 people in each of 10 countries including the UK and US, found a high reliance on major news organisations for information. Understandably, viewers are flocking to news bulletins of the BBC and other mainstream broadcasters as they fulfil their public service remit with practical information for the public. Viewer figures for the BBC News Channel are the highest since 2015 and are 70% above the average for 2019. But the survey showed that journalists themselves are the least trusted to tell the truth about the virus (while scientists are the most trusted).²

Crisis reporting and the need to adapt to the digital world:

7. This submission argues that enhanced emotional literacy and trauma awareness on the part of journalists would make a significant contribution to rebuilding trust and is imperative during times of crisis in which stories are highly emotive.
8. Examples from the recent past reveal a lack of empathic reporting and at times a failure to adapt to the real-time ethical challenges of the digital social media environment. This was graphically illustrated in 2019 when the 28-year-old Australian Brenton Tarrant shot dead 50 worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. He streamed his attack live, using a helmet-mounted GoPro camera; the footage was immediately reposted and spread rapidly across multiple social media platforms faster than it could be taken down. In their rush to cover the breaking story, several news organisations incorporated edited video from the killer into their online reports before a political outcry prompted them to remove the material and to issue apologies. The ethical dilemma of how journalism covers terrorism is ages old and recalls Margaret Thatcher's calls to starve terrorists of the 'oxygen of publicity.' What has changed in this digital environment is the speed with which editorial decisions need to be made and the sheer volume of at times distressing 'user-generated content' that is available through social media, whether that be from perpetrators of terror or citizens caught up in a crisis capturing events with their mobile phone camera. Injudicious use not only spreads hate and inflames racial tensions but can also induce fear in communities.
9. Many news organisations are in a fight for survival and incorporating user-generated content into their own output, usually through their web sites and social media channels, performs several important functions. It allows them to cover breaking news they would otherwise have missed, either because their reporters were not on the spot at the time (for example the 2017 Westminster Bridge and

² <https://www.edelman.com/research/edelman-trust-covid-19-demonstrates-essential-role-of-private-sector>

2019 London Bridge terror attacks in the United Kingdom) or because of a remote location (for example the 2019 flooding disaster in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi). News organisations also know from today's sophisticated audience metrics how popular user-generated content is and the appeal of images across a diversity of subjects ranging from celebrity glamour to grisly horror.

10. However, indiscriminate use of such content can risk spreading fear and panic in a population. The need for an emotionally literate journalism that is responsible, ethical and compassionate applies to a wide range of stories whether they focus on terror, natural disaster, conflict or, as is now the case, a global pandemic.

Why trauma aware reporting is important:

11. Journalists are witnessing harrowing scenes of patients suffering in the pandemic, of families in mourning and of exhausted medical staff. We have seen examples of compelling journalism, the best of it based on empathic, emotionally-literate interviewing which is grounded in a clear understanding of trauma. Typically, journalistic codes of conduct stress the importance of behaving sensitively towards vulnerable contributors and sources, but they do nothing to define what that entails in practical terms. For some journalists, this may come instinctively. But working responsibly and effectively with the grief of others is a complex area that other trauma-facing professionals – for example, police family liaison officers – receive extensive training in. Currently, within journalism there is little formal training available on empathic interviewing skills, how to deal with public health emergencies or widespread social disruption and chaos. Instead, journalists learn by experience, in other words from actual or potential mistakes made in real world situations.
12. Victims and survivors of trauma will often welcome attentive and accurate reporting. This gives them a chance for their story to be heard and, potentially, to contribute to a wider public discussion of, for example, their experience of the pandemic. But journalists owe a special duty of care to people who have had their lives turned upside down by tragedy.
13. In the case of covering the pandemic, an emotionally literate reporting would, for example, focus on the human impact of the disease while avoiding the objectification of groups of people as 'infectors' or transmitters of Covid-19. That is not to say that journalism loses sight of its public service remit to disseminate important public health messages or mission to hold authority to account. It is rather to argue that the 'human' side of the story needs careful consideration, showing interview subjects respect and recognising that people may be under significant stress as measures to contain the disease disrupt normal life, lead to isolation and fear. Someone diagnosed as being positive with the virus may be suffering from severe anxiety and be cut off from their closest family.
14. The other side of the coin is the mental wellbeing of the journalist.³ Many of those covering the pandemic will never have covered a story involving such suffering and one that might touch on their own families. Even those who are experienced in reporting conflict will have probably been working far from home for a short period of time, while, in this case, they will be covering illness and death in their own country and local community. In addition, journalists covering the pandemic may be worried about their own personal safety if they are continually in contact with the community and medical/ emergency workers.

³ See also: <https://gijn.org/2020/03/24/how-journalists-can-deal-with-trauma-while-reporting-on-covid-19/>

15. Although it is slowly changing, journalism has traditionally been viewed as a macho profession, in which the discussion of stress suffered through work can be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Stress is normal in journalists reporting on distressing news stories and studies have showed a generally high level of resilience. But repeated exposure to traumatic news does risk more serious emotional impact, such a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it is important to recognise that the current pandemic is likely to require an intense period of news reporting stretching over several months which can risk burnout and mental exhaustion. This stress will not be limited to reporters in the field or conducting interviews remotely from home but will also take in those in a newsroom editing footage and pictures.
16. Some progress has been made over the past few years. The BBC and news agencies such as Reuters introduced programmes to shield their journalists from trauma in the run-up to the 2003 Gulf War but newspapers have been slower to take measures and there has been little formal training on how to report on and interview victims and survivors of trauma. The BBC does now have a training course on interviewing vulnerable people⁴ and the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma has developed a number of best practice guidelines for the reporting and handling of distressing material. During the pandemic, it has hosted a number of webinars offering practical guidance on covering the story.⁵ At university level, many UK courses have integrated some elements of trauma awareness into curricula although often not systematically.

Recommendations:

17. This submission argues that much more needs to be done and makes the following recommendations:
 - i. The news industry should introduce comprehensive training for reporters, editors and producers in emotional literacy and trauma awareness, including the experience of victims, ethical responsibilities and effective reporting techniques. No news organisation would expect journalists to cover a football match without knowledge of the rules of play or to report financial markets without an understanding of stocks and other financial instruments. Yet reporters and editors routinely make important news judgments without training on stories of conflict and natural disaster without a clear understanding of the impact on individuals and communities. During this pandemic crisis, these stories are taking up almost the entire length of a typical news bulletin and dominating newspaper print and online editions.
 - ii. It is equally important that journalists be made aware of the potential for traumatic stories to have an impact on themselves in ways that may not just impair their mental wellbeing but also their judgment and ability to report effectively and sensitively.
 - iii. This awareness needs to extend to those journalists in the newsroom, or during the pandemic working from home, who are handling graphic user-generated content. These journalists have to sift through videos for

⁴ The senior BBC journalist Jo Healey, who has specialised in sensitive human-interest stories, developed a series of training courses for BBC journalists focusing on interviewing skills. Her 2019 book, *Trauma Reporting: A Journalist's Guide to Covering Sensitive Stories*, sets out in detail best practice that draws on the experience of seasoned journalists.

⁵ See: <https://dartcenter.org/events/2020/03/reporting-and-covid-19-webinar-series-journalists>

newsworthy items and are constantly exposed to distressing material. This has been called the 'digital frontline' of journalism.⁶

- iv. These strands of training should also be integrated into the many university degree courses in journalism through which the next generation of news professionals is being educated. Some courses do include such content, particularly in the context of ethics tuition. However, the issues are not always covered systematically. The main accreditation bodies, the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) and National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), can play a role by highlighting the importance of such content in a consistent fashion.
18. If journalists can be provided with evidence-based information about the impact of emotional stories, they will report on victims and survivors with greater care and understanding. This will make for higher quality journalism that is more insightful and informs its audiences better.

17 April 2020

⁶ A survey by Eyewitness Media in 2015 of journalists working with user-generated content concluded that the newsroom was now the new 'digital frontline.' The study states: "Office-bound staff who used to be somewhat shielded from viewing atrocities are now bombarded day in and day out with horrifically graphic material 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."