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# Teaching vicarious trauma in the journalism classroom: An examination of educational provision in UK Universities.

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## *Abstract*

The connections between vicarious trauma and the viewing of violent User-Generated Content are becoming an increasingly important topic in journalism. As more journalist work begins to rely, or at least incorporate UGC, the risks to journalists have been shown to increase. This can lead to short, unpleasant careers, and in some cases, serious, long lasting mental health risks. Yet while this discussion is beginning to unfold in the newsroom, universities are lagging behind in their understanding of the topic. This paper, through content analysis of undergraduate course materials, and through interviews with lecturers and journalists, found that almost no course in the UK is teaching the risks of vicarious trauma or UGC. It was found that while some educators wish to make more of the topic, a number of institutional factors, such as lack of training and time, worries over duty of care, and available resources make this a difficult, if not impossible task. The paper recommends a new emphasis is placed on vicarious trauma, coupled with training and interdepartmental support.

**Key Words:** PTSD, Journalism, Social Media, Education, Training, User Generated Content

## ***Introduction***

Developments in cross-media convergence over the last fifteen years have put extra pressure on news journalists to be more than just good reporters, with development of new information and communication technologies hiking ‘the demand for new skills, knowledge, and understanding’ (Hermida, 2014: 636). An increasing reliance on instantaneous, cost saving digital tools has however created conditions which may leave journalists vulnerable to experiencing secondary trauma from the

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comfort of their offices. This is shifting the risks of trauma away from reporters at the murder scene or the photojournalist in a war zone - risks which themselves took decades for the journalism industry to acknowledge - and towards vicarious trauma in desk-based journalism. While war correspondents returning from Syria are expected to feel distressed, and are now offered support and help (Himmelstein and Faithorn, 2002), those journalists based in the office trawling social media may well be carrying out tasks equally traumatising, yet they continue to be overlooked, with little acknowledgement of the risks of vicarious trauma.

Journalism undergraduate courses across the UK now face the task of teaching students to not only understand the laws and ethics behind newsgathering, but also to be familiar with social media networks and numerous communication tools – in many cases to take on the very desk based jobs that may lead them to exposure to vicarious trauma. Thus, this study aims to determine the amount of trauma training provided by universities in the UK, as well as to examine what role university educators’ attitudes towards vicarious trauma play in the picture. Through an examination of the emphasis journalism courses in the UK place on vicarious trauma and PTSD, as well as the attitudes of university staff towards the topic, potential gaps in the system will be identified, followed by a discussion of the obstacles to teaching vicarious trauma during journalism courses. In addition, the research will conclude that journalism courses are not sufficiently preparing students for the risks of vicarious trauma found in the industry.

### ***Defining Vicarious Trauma and PTSD in Journalism***

Post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD is one of the most frequently discussed mental health issues in journalism and media studies. PTSD was first recognised in studies of Vietnam War veterans which revealed that a particular ‘pattern of psychological and physical symptoms could emerge from the experience of an extremely traumatic or stressful event’ such as war, rape or natural disaster (Dubberley *et al.*, 2015: 9; Friedman, 2016). Although initially controversial, media professionals and journalists became familiarised with the disorder after several studies pointed to its prevalence among war correspondents and photojournalists, as well as other journalists who covered manmade or natural disasters. Many of them were found to display ‘symptoms of PTSD similar to firefighters and other first responders’ (Keats & Buchanan, 2009: 163). Teegen & Grotwinkel’s (2001) study estimated that around 13% of European and American journalists suffer from PTSD and a further 15% suffer from partial PTSD.

Since it was first identified, the definition of PTSD, its symptoms and stressors, has been revised on several occasions and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fourth edition (DSM-IV) broadened the definition of PTSD making it no longer obligatory for a person to ‘directly experience a life-threatening event to count as trauma-exposed’ (McNally & Breslau, 2008: 282). This definition of vicarious trauma was originally applied to the work of social workers, therapists, and nurses, yet it proved to be a valuable piece of research for media industries too. This was the first step towards acknowledging that journalists can develop PTSD from, for instance, interviewing victims of rape and domestic violence or covering the aftermath of disasters. The inclusion of media workers into the discussion about vicarious trauma encouraged further conversations about trauma and mental health in both newsrooms and classrooms. Yet, while the majority of studies support the view that war correspondents and local news journalists can develop PTSD, vicarious PTSD remains a topic of heated discussion.

With ‘trauma at the heart of the news’ (Backholm, 2012: 9) and the levels of PTSD identified by Teegen and Grotwinkel (2001), and more recently Backholm (2012) who observed as many as 28.6% of journalists studied as showing signs of PTSD, it is fair to expect media industries and journalists themselves to take trauma risks into consideration. Yet, reporters are often expected to learn, without training, how to manage their emotions; a skill sometimes referred to as ‘professional detachment’. Thus, Simpson and Boggs (1999) argue results in the traumatic experiences of journalists are frequently being turned into anecdotes, reinforcing the idea that journalists stay unaffected by what they witness. This practice though ‘might in itself be an emotional reaction.’ (ibid.). The numbing or avoidance response is one of the main symptoms of PTSD - alongside flashbacks and increased arousal - and to mistake it for professional detachment only increases the risk of delayed emotional reactions (McCann and Pearlman, 1990; Keats and Buchanan, 2009; Santos, 2009: 61; Busso et al., 2014). These risks were further highlighted in one of the first studies that linked journalism with vicarious trauma. Freinkel et al. (1994) revealed professional detachment as an impractical self-defence mechanism. The results of their study, which aimed to examine the mental health of eighteen journalists who had witnessed an execution in San Quentin Prison gas chamber in California, highlighted the prevalence of short-term PTSD symptoms comparable to that of the victims of a natural disaster; in this case the Oakland/Berkeley firestorm. While it was considered to be common sense that being a target of violence is a traumatic experience, the news that PTSD symptoms can develop from a relatively harmless act of witnessing violence was a revelation. It shifted the course of the discussion about trauma in journalism into the direction of local news staff.

Picking up where Freinkel et al. (1994) left off, several studies focused their research on the vulnerability of specific fields of journalism and selected groups of media workers. Run over longer periods of time they have provided more concrete data as a result. Simpson and Boggs (1999), for example, conducted a survey which required journalists, photographers and editors working at several influential American newspapers to reflect on how frequently they witness work-related violent events. The study supports the view that it would be impossible for news staff to suffer no emotional consequences from encountering violence; finding that 68% of the responders, indeed, would find some stories emotionally challenging and 70% would feel 'stressed out' after covering traumatic events. The survey also highlighted a positive correlation between the length of journalistic experience and the severity of trauma symptoms, suggesting that novice journalists are not the most at risk from vicarious trauma. Other studies have concluded that it is not the years of experience, but rather the intensity of exposure to traumatic assignments that dictates the well-being of journalists (See Pyevich et al., 2003; Browne et al., 2012). It might be possible then to suggest that although experienced journalists may endure more trauma, all journalists who cover violence are at risk of developing vicarious PTSD.

That almost two thirds of journalists feel either *not at all prepared* or *ill prepared* for their first trauma assignment, become all the more concerning, points to lack of sufficient training (Simpson and Boggs 1999). Likewise, Newman et al. (2003) addressed the failure to prepare journalists for covering disasters, crimes or violence, highlighting poor management support in newsrooms. They discovered that out of 875 photojournalists who took part in their research, 98% had encountered trauma yet only 11% agreed that their employers had warned them 'that gathering news might be hazardous to mental health'.

*The Effect of User-Generated Content and Workflows in the Newsrooms on Journalists*

Given the changing nature of the newsroom since the studies outlined above were conducted, there emerges a pertinent need to examine the risks of vicarious trauma in relation to validating, editing and sanitising violent eyewitness media or User-Generated Content (UGC) (Feinstein et al., 2014: 1). Eyewitness media, or UGC, consists of videos and photos either found on social media networks, such as Twitter or Youtube, or submitted directly to newsrooms by ‘citizen journalists’ and members of public who witnessed an act of violence. This type of content has become ‘a prominent source of information for news organisations’ over the past few years (ibid.).

Several post-9/11 studies found a correlation between vicarious trauma and watching violent imagery on television. Galea and Resnick (2005) estimated that, while the New Yorkers directly affected by the World Trade Centre attacks were most likely to develop a long-term mental injury, a relatively large number of Americans not directly affected by the event also developed symptoms of PTSD. Yet the study, which intrigued the media and other researchers, failed to provide any clear explanation for its results. Marshall et al. (2007), who argued that ‘being confronted with a traumatic event through the media rarely results in PTSD’ because there is no perception of serious injury to the media viewer, interpreted the proximity of the attacks as the factor which allowed cases of PTSD to spread in communities outside of New York. The horror of 9/11 was unlike anything that US citizens had experienced and it left a number of people feeling terrified of potential future attacks. However, many other studies of the period focused on the link found between the time spent watching the coverage of 9/11 and the severity of PTSD symptoms developed as a result (Ahern et al., 2002; Bernstein, 2007). These findings, which were ‘vigorously debated post 9/11’ (Feinstein et al., 2014: 1), have recently resurfaced in relation to User-Generated Content and the new kind of journalism created by social media. In our increasingly media-saturated society, where violent, ‘breaking’ news is documented and consumed 24/7 and often in video form, these findings hold much more value. A recent study has attracted great interest when it proposed that the relatively innocent act of viewing graphic images on social media could cause vicarious trauma, with more than 20% of research participants scoring high on clinical measures of PTSD (Wending, BBC, 2015).

This raises concerns for newsroom staff, some of whom are now tasked with ‘sifting through massive volumes of eyewitness media - that is, raw, unedited, authentic footage’ usually of graphic or violent nature (Dubberley et al., 2015: 4). This job is generally undertaken with insufficient training, and in increasing volumes. If in late 2008 about 33% of journalists indicated that social media networks are ‘very important’ or ‘important’ to their work (Lariscy et al., 2009), now almost half of them spend 4-6 hours per day on social media and consider it to be of vital importance to their daily work (Dubberley et al., 2015: 5). Likewise, according to Feinstein et al. (2004), 40.9% and 46.1% of journalists reported daily and weekly exposure to violent imagery, respectively. The study was also the first of its kind to suggest that it is not duration but rather frequency of exposure to graphic images that is ‘more emotionally distressing to journalists working with User Generated Content’ and eyewitness media.

Fittingly, Dubberley et al. (2015) believe that staff working at an organisation’s headquarters are exposed to ‘more horror on a daily basis compared to their counterparts deployed in the field’, primarily due to the immediate nature of eyewitness media and the attention it demands. Traditional ways of newsgathering used by war correspondents or local reporters differ notably from the workflow in newsrooms. Whereas journalists working from the field risk being wounded and can potentially witness gruesome scenes, User-Generated Content is frequently pre-edited in a way which takes the viewer straight to the worst, most intense moment of the violence depicted. Furthermore, newsroom staff of influential media outlets like the BBC or The New York Times are in charge of verifying the graphic material - a long and often burdensome manual process which involves going through a video frame by frame (Dubberley, 2015). In addition, since every newsroom journalist usually has access to each and every graphic image or video, the lack of warnings and miscommunication frequently result into unwilled viewings of graphic pictures and unnecessary distress it brings (Dubberley, 2015; Eyewitness Media Hub, 2015).

While DSM-IV states that exposure through electronic media cannot qualify as a traumatic event (Busso et al., 2014), Friedman (2016) writes that the repeated exposure as part of one's professional responsibilities counts as one. Journalists and editors who 'witness disturbing images for prolonged period of times' (ibid.) meet the stressor criterion needed to be diagnosed with work-related PTSD. Furthermore, Dubberley et al. (2015) discovered that 40% of newsroom staff admit that viewing distressing eyewitness media either 'has had a negative impact on their personal lives' or, where there was no management support available, forced them to take sick leave or resign altogether. One in four journalists report 'prior contact with a psychiatrist' (Feinstein et al., 2014: 3), with a large number of others silently suffering from a 'virtual survivor guilt' - a feeling that leading a safe and 'privileged' life is equivalent to betraying the victims of violence and their colleagues in the field (Muck Rack, 2012; Dubberley et al. 2015). Given these alarming, and significant statistics, questions may be raised as to the training given to journalists, and journalism students, who are often being taught the benefits of digital journalism, and indeed tend to embrace the technology throughout their studies.

### ***Teaching about Vicarious Trauma and Journalism in Higher Education***

Melki et al. (2013) established that the majority of universities in the US, 75% out of 103 interviewed, do not teach trauma journalism, which given the numbers above suggests they are placing soon-to-be journalists into a potentially vulnerable position. Despite this, Duncan and Newton (2010) write that there exists a presumption that journalism graduates arrive at newsrooms suitably prepared by their university courses to deal with trauma and, whether this presumption is correct or not, it places certain level of responsibility on universities. Their research demonstrated that it is common for inexperienced journalists to cover traumatic events, with the expectation that the correct interviewing techniques and coping strategies will be 'learnt by doing' (ibid.). The pressure to self-learn, together with the lack of some critical skills, frequently lead to mishandled interviews and overlooked stories. As a result, such experiences can generate a strong 'sense of inadequacy or even failure' (ibid.) among novice journalists who - in comparison with their older colleagues - are significantly more dissatisfied in their jobs (Beam and Spratt, 2009).

In terms of time and space needed to debate and reflect on the complicated and multi-layered topic of trauma, the university classroom has considerable advantages over the restless media industry. Although it remains uncommon for the US and European universities to introduce programmes dedicated to trauma, there are several exceptions. Beam and Spratt (2009) mention influential educational organisations like the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, which was first established

at the University of Washington in 1999, as well as several smaller initiatives. The *Journalism and Trauma* module, for instance, was initiated at the same university in 1994 in order to inform students about trauma and teach them ‘how to interview and write about victims without’ causing them further harm (Maxson, 1999: 1). The course shares many aspects with the *Victims and Media Program* launched at the Michigan State University several years prior to that, which hopes to assist media students ‘in reporting on victims of violence and catastrophe with the sensitivity, dignity and respect’ they deserve (Beam and Spratt, 2009: 422). The response of the graduates who completed these courses has been overwhelmingly positive, suggesting that they have increased awareness about the issue of trauma and improving interviewing skills (Maxson, 1999: 8). However, despite these success stories the focus is predominantly on training ethical and competent professionals. Rather, modern workflows demand modernised educational programmes which could trauma-related issues more comprehensively to include topics such as working with eyewitness media, dealing with vicarious PTSD and self-care (Melki et al., 2013: 67).

As with most trauma journalism modules or programmes, trauma is discussed primarily through the legal and ethical frameworks, with the emphasis put on how to gather and report stories unobtrusively rather than how to protect one’s mental health (Dworznic and Grubb, 2007; Melki et al., 2013). There are programmes which strive to teach trauma journalism differently, such as the *Newsgathering and Ethics* module at Indiana University where students are tasked with writing a literature review on the topic of trauma in journalism ‘in order to familiarize themselves with effects of gathering the news’ (Dworznic and Grubb, 2007: 194). According to Duncan and Newton (2010), the topic is approached, when it is taught, in this manner mainly due to journalism educators’ confusion over the most appropriate and effective ways to prepare students to deal with work-related trauma. While the majority of teachers are willing to help and have their students’ best interests in mind, the topic of trauma is seen as too specialised, abstract and complicated. Some scholars, especially if they had relatively little journalistic experience, fail to recognise trauma as a crucial part of the job and consider it to be unworthy of a stand-alone module (Keats and Buchanan, 2009: 170). Moreover, there are no standardised guidelines available for educators, which can make it difficult to carry out a pastoral role and provide sufficient training. For instance, during a role-play of a traumatic event, the tutor may need to subject students to emotional distress – ‘a position at odds with the institution’s duty of care to students’ (Duncan and Newton, 2010: 444). Trauma is a topic too delicate to tolerate mistakes and so requires a certain level of trust between the educators and their students.

It is clear that teaching about current workflows in newsrooms and the risks of vicarious trauma associated with using User-Generated Content would not guarantee absolute protection from developing vicarious trauma and PTSD, just as training for police and fire services offers no guaranteed protection. However, according to Dubberley et al. (2015) and Eyewitness Media Hub (2015), students could benefit from learning about coping mechanisms as an alternative to the more frequently used excessive alcohol or drug consumption and professional detachment. Such training, it has been suggested, could also benefit their future colleagues, as those with training have been shown to be able to respond helpfully to emotional reactions among their peers (Keats and Buchanan, 2009: 169).

The journalist is a critical link 'between the unfolding incident and the public' (Backholm, 2012: 41), and so raising 'a generation of professional zombies; reporters that are numb, suffering and emotionally scarred' would be a major disservice to the public that relies on their work (Carvin, 2015a). To see whether journalism graduates in the UK are prepared to enter the newsrooms with proper training on how to avoid or alleviate the impact of traumatic disorders, this study attempted to investigate how much emphasis undergraduate journalism courses and educators in the UK place on vicarious trauma caused by exposure to User-Generated Content.

### ***Methodology***

This research analyses journalism-related university curricula in the UK through a mixed methods approach. Firstly, a detailed content analysis was conducted in order to ascertain the extent to which vicarious trauma education features in UK universities. The content description of 63 journalism-related courses from of a total 61 universities were inspected with an examination of the specifications of the courses, the names and descriptions of all modules, coupled with reading specifications and prospects available for potential students. Any supplementary course introduction materials, such as videos were taken into account. The content analysis aimed to find key terms or mentions of trauma. The key terms chosen for this study were; *Trauma* - vicarious or otherwise; *PTSD*; and *User-Generated Content*. Additional attention was given to modules which may have lent themselves to discussions on trauma, such as modules on terrorism, citizen journalism, social media, laws and ethics. While care was taken to examine the curricula of all journalism undergraduate courses in the UK, a lack of central listing meant a manual process of visiting each university website individually. It is possible therefore, that one or several journalism courses have been unintentionally omitted during the analysis. This shortcoming is countered by the inclusion of several analogous courses that

were included in the research, such as *Journalism Studies*; *Broadcast Journalism*; *Journalism and the News Gathering*; and *Media and Communications*. Despite these limitations, the authors deem that a sufficient number of courses were analysed in order to make significant claims about the nature of journalism courses in UK universities.

Interviews were used to supplement the content analysis data. Conducted face-to-face or via the phone, they took a semi-structured approach. A total of seven interviews were undertaken, chosen because of their position either as someone who develops journalism curricula, or who works with recent graduates. The interviewees included one broadcast journalist, three course leaders, one head of a department, a senior lecturer and a professor of journalism. The interviews with the journalists added a professional, hands-on, perspective into a discussion about education, creating a more balanced and well-rounded mix of opinions. The educators all live in the UK, while the journalist is currently based in Istanbul, Turkey.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

As emphasised in the preceding sections, journalism is changing rapidly. Current journalism students will require a varied skillset and proficiency in new media technologies to effectively gather and share information and ideas. This has led to journalism educators being torn between what is practical to include in a three-year undergraduate course that needs to reflect both theory and practice.

Considering that trauma in journalism is a relatively recent and an under-researched subject, the study anticipated that it would most likely be taught - instead of a stand-alone module - as a part of *Social Media* or *Media Law and Ethics* modules. Therefore, the analysis took note of every mention of either trauma, vicarious trauma, PTSD or eyewitness media, as well as paying attention to hints as to the well-being of journalists. The results, however, revealed a significant gap in journalism education in the UK.

The content analysis failed to find a single trauma-focused program or module. It also found no concrete mentions of trauma, vicarious trauma, PTSD or eyewitness media in course descriptions, structure or specification of the 63 courses analysed (See Table 1). Fewer than 1% of courses included information remotely related to the topic of trauma, let alone vicarious trauma. Only one course - *Journalism and Media* at Birkbeck University - had a reference to the risks faced by war correspondents and to the graphic content's effect on audiences in the description of its *Media and Conflict* module; '[The module] begins by looking at professional war reporting, detailing the dangers

and constraints that war correspondents encounter... It analyses how audiences respond to distant suffering, takes stock of the changes technological development have wrought' (Bbk, n.d.). The words *dangers* and *distant suffering* are subject to interpretation and, while there is definite potential for discussions on PTSD to be included in the module, the module's description suggests that the topic of vicarious PTSD among journalists is neglected. The *Reporting Risks and Conflict* module at Northumbria University, which mainly debates legal and ethical issues around conflict coverage, also hints at the topic, stating: 'alternative journalism and conflict reporting: what role does new media play?' While User-Generated Content is likely to be a part of the conversation, the lecturer's exact approach to the topic is unknown. Two other courses offered further hints as to the teaching of vicarious trauma. The first is the Journalism course at Liverpool John Moores University has an entire module dedicated to new media entitled *User Generated Content*; and the second is *Scare Stories? Journalism and the Framing of Risk* at the University of Chester also sounds promising. However, the lack of course descriptions made it impossible to determine their relevance to the study.

[Table 1 about here]

In many instances, the description of the modules available was either brief or missing altogether. As a result, the study frequently struggled to establish if vicarious trauma was absent from the curriculum or was simply not mentioned in the course structure. To compensate for this gap, the analysis took into account modules which could potentially introduce students to the issues of trauma and PTSD. For example, Media Law and Ethics, taught by 76% (n=48) of universities in the UK - either as two separate modules or a joint one - with a total of 73 programs. Furthermore, the analysis counted a total of five modules on conflict in journalism and six terrorism-related modules. For instance, the *9/11 and the War on Terror* module at the University of Derby could serve as a platform for teaching about the risks of working with eyewitness media or viewing graphic content, as well as reflecting upon the rise of PTSD cases as a consequence of post-9/11 television coverage.

The content analysis spotted an array of modules with the potential for including the topic of vicarious trauma into an already existing discussion. For example, the Media and Communication course at Leicester University runs a *New Media and Everyday Life* module which covers a variety of social media related topics, such as *Network Society* or *Intersection of New Media with Privacy*, but neglects the potential dangers associated with new media. Similarly, the *East and West: Terror, Power and New Journalism* module at the University of Roehampton which 'explores the role the media has

played in reporting on the aftermath' of 9/11 (Studentzone, n.d.), focuses exclusively on the way in which audiences have been affected by the event and its coverage. In this and several other examples, conflict and trauma are discussed primarily through the lens of journalists' ethical responsibilities towards their audiences.

While the needs of the audience are also important, the growing body of evidence of vicarious trauma among journalists suggests that universities are not meeting the needs of their students by failing to address these issues. It was universally agreed between interviewees that certain areas of journalism are closely tied with trauma; however, trauma was viewed predominantly as an issue of war correspondence and foreign reporting, with great doubts expressed over the seriousness of vicarious trauma caused by User-Generated Content and its necessity in university curricula. For instance, Barling referred to 'a different order of priority and impact' (interview, 2016), implying that vicarious trauma limited to the newsroom is of a less critical nature in comparison to the one experienced in the field. Other interviewees echoed the same notion:

'PTSD can result from direct experience of a traumatic event, but is less likely to come about as a result of 'second-hand trauma'... Also, most reporters will only deal with a small amount of trauma of any kind in their work, unless they work in conflict zones, in which case they have professional specialist training and counselling.'  
(Hooper, interview, 2016)

Several researchers have already challenged the idea that war correspondents are the most frequent witnesses of traumatic scenes. Dubberley et al. (2015) concluded that news staff are exposed to 'more horror on a daily basis' than their colleagues in conflict zones. Similarly, somewhat in contradiction with his previous statement, Hooper acknowledged that vicarious trauma affects reporters and is, in fact, most likely to occur because 'it's rare to actually be on the scene of a traumatic event but common to speak to victims' of violence (interview, 2016). This view, however, disregards the potentially traumatic nature of User-Generated Content and the processes of verification. Most interviewees were reluctant to draw links between working with images and videos and PTSD.

Interviewees with more direct contact with trauma and vicarious trauma were more likely to see this as an issue that may need to be addressed in the classroom. Lambert raised the issues surrounding the

verification process, providing his acquaintance's story as an example of documented cases of vicarious trauma:

‘If the journalistic organisation like BBC, ITN, Associated Press is going to say: ‘ISIS have sent a video of someone being killed’, then someone from the organisation has to verify that the video actually does show that... There [is] a small group of people who [are] on a kind of rota, who [are] assigned that responsibility of looking at that footage... [My acquaintance working there] has not as yet taken any time off or had any need for counselling, but some of his colleagues have’ (Lambert, interview, 2016).

With few exceptions, presently, sessions on vicarious trauma represent a meagre part of trauma journalism education. And while during the course of the interviews it was established that nearly all of journalism courses dealt with by the interviewees introduced students to the topic of trauma to an extent, the approach to teaching, and its focus, remains questionable. The interviews confirmed the conclusions of Melki et al. (2013) that the primary concern of educators still lies with journalistic ethics and integrity. One course features trauma in its *Media Regulation and Law* module, while two others discuss trauma as part of their sessions on ethics. Rather than talking about self-care, the focus in trauma education remains predominantly on how to take ‘a sensitive approach and [keep] within the regulations’ (Hooper, interview, 2016), as well as ‘how to handle vulnerable or traumatised sources and witnesses’ (Brewster, interview, 2016). This approach neglects the topic of vicarious PTSD and leaves journalism graduates potentially unprepared for the risks of working in the modern newsroom. Furthermore, it presents a rather stark contradiction. Senior Lecturer Mike Jempson (interview, 2016) raised concerns about responsible distribution of graphic content. He said that journalists regularly fail to provide adequate warnings to the viewers about graphic ‘images of war, death, torture, mutilation and other forms of abuse/violence’. He went on to state that ‘it is also a responsibility, in my view, for journalists to consider the potential consequences of traumatising (some of) their audiences, and even re-traumatising victims by reproducing material and images’. Yet the need to raise these warnings, or concerns over the traumatising effects of the very same images on the journalist were barely acknowledged by any of the other interviewees.

Several researchers, such as Simpson and Boggs (1999), found that the majority of journalists are underprepared for their first trauma-involving assignment, yet the interviews highlighted that some courses are taking changes in the right direction. According to Hooper, students at the *Journalism Law, Ethics and Regulations* module are warned about potential traumatic reactions before they are

sent to cover court cases as ‘this is usually the first time they could be affected’ (Hooper, interview, 2016). Likewise, students are advised to choose which cases to attend with great caution, taking into account any previous encounters with trauma which they may have had. The latter indicated that educators are starting to recognise the power of personal trauma in triggering symptoms of PTSD and they are teaching journalism students to reflect on the matter. At the University of the West of England (UWE), both the second year *Media Regulation & Law* module and the *MA Media Law & Ethics* module also introduce the topic of PTSD. Mike Jempson notes that ‘part of the aim of the course is to inject some emotional intelligence into the practice of journalism. Students may be required to write and talk about and examine their own responses to personal tragedy’, said Jempson (interview, 2016) whose teaching is influenced by his work with MediaWise ([www.mediawise.org.uk](http://www.mediawise.org.uk)).

Furthermore, several interviewees said that their universities invite guest lecturers - former foreign correspondents or reporters and camera operators who work in war zones - to share their experiences of dealing with violent scenes, again UWE offers a good example here, they invite war correspondents as guest speakers for their annual ‘master classes’ (Jempson, interview, 2016). While these practices are helpful for raising general awareness among students it does not specifically speak to the notion of vicarious PTSD related to User-Generated Content. Dubberley (interview, 2016) believes that to improve the situation, all universities need to introduce compulsory classes ‘on the impact of dealing with traumatic imagery’ - a topic which should be taught briefly in every module or as a stand-alone module in itself. Some journalism courses are ahead of the rest, with Brewster (interview, 2016) emphasising that students at Kingston University are already being taught about how to handle User-Generated Content ‘and the possible effects of overexposure to traumatic content’. This topic is also presented by Lambert in the second-year theory class at the University for the Creative Arts. As journalism students rely on User-Generated Content even before they graduate, it is important that they are warned about the potential risks, particularly when researching their university projects.

Some interviewees, however, did not share Dubberley’s point of view, arguing that either universities or educators are not yet ready to teach vicarious trauma or trauma in general beyond a light handed approach. Hooper suggested that a stand-alone module would need to be very creative in its structure and approach to be successful among journalism students. ‘I think they would find it interesting for a session or two but they would need for it to lead on to a practical application rather than just a

discussion... So techniques on how to deal with trauma', noted Hooper (interview, 2016). This concurs with the frequent view of educators that trauma cannot be taught, which in turn leads to a lack of innovation. For instance, Barling expressed a view that 'trauma can only be dealt with once it has been experienced', saying: 'You can raise awareness of some of the problems associated with working in difficult arenas, but trauma is such a personalised experience that there is very little you can teach to prevent it' said Barling (interview, 2016).

Indeed, trauma is of an unpredictable nature and it would be too ambitious to assume that a handful of lectures can equip students with all the skills needed to remain unaffected by what they might witness. To dismiss vicarious trauma in journalism entirely would be somewhat negligent. In addition, it may fuel 'macho culture', as some educators continue to believe that students who pursue a career in 'hard news' journalism or foreign reporting are naturally mentally tougher than their peers. It is anticipated that they have independently 'developed a sense of what to expect in the job to be able to cope', explained Hooper (interview, 2016). He added that they assumed they did not require further assistance before joining their jobs. Consequently, many students - most of whom use social media eagerly - remain unaware of the dangers associated with overexposure to traumatic User-Generated Content. 'Maybe it's your dream to work at a foreign news desk, but you're not suited for it and, actually, the trauma side of it would make it really hard for you. It's only right that you know that before you go and join a news organisation and do stories that could be traumatic' suggests Dubberley (interview, 2016).

### ***Institutional barriers to vicarious trauma education***

Several reasons were proposed during the course of the interviews to justify the current state of trauma education. It was common for educators, according to Hooper (interview, 2016), to believe that advanced trauma education should be organised 'in the professional environment, rather than on a university journalism degree'. Hooper stated that, while training makes up a significant part of a journalism course, the course nonetheless remains first and foremost theoretical. Likewise, Barling presumes that news organisations and other employers would have proper 'support systems in place to respond if an employee is exposed to traumatic events' (interview, 2016). Barling also notes educators (interview, 2016), 'think that once a journalist is employed, the employer has a duty of care to take every precaution to avoid experiences which lead to trauma, and then to handle journalists sensitively once they return from difficult assignments'. This is in stark contrast to the assumptions highlighted

earlier, in which news organisations assume the opposite scenario to be correct – they often expected that journalism graduates have received sufficient training at universities and are merely honing the necessary skills ‘by doing’ their job (Duncan and Newton, 2010). Consequently, as previous studies have shown, there develops a systematic failure to prepare students and then staff for the hazards of journalistic work. Yet it is not recklessness that prevents educators from placing more emphasis on trauma in journalism education - the problem lies with low competence in the topic and/or the lack of resources necessary to create lessons that students would find stimulating, beneficial and do not cause greater harm. Hooper says ( interview, 2016):

‘One reason that I don’t think [the topic of trauma] fits on this course beyond a session or maybe two is that we are not professional trauma counsellors – there is no point concentrating on it if we are unable to offer techniques to avoid or deal with the effects of trauma’.

Educators are experts in their field, yet complexities associated with trauma education may demand a number of alternative skills. Whereas it was earlier suggested that good intuition and high emotional intelligence would be enough for educators to teach trauma journalism effectively and competently, educators wish to hold themselves and their teaching to higher standards. Dubberley suggests that assistance from the ‘right people from a psychology department’ would be required in order to sufficiently address the issue (interview, 2016). This would require a much strong, cross-curricular, cross-departmental, and in some cases cross-school working environment.

The suggestion that university classrooms have advantages over newsrooms, in terms of the time and space they can dedicate to discussing trauma, was also questioned during the interviews. Hooper (interview, 2016) considered ‘limited time on the schedule’ to be one of the chief factors responsible for the poor state of trauma education. The UK’s fast-paced Journalism courses prioritise practicality and thus - considering how vicarious trauma is perceived - it is not terribly surprising that fitting the topic into an already busy schedule has proved to be problematic. Furthermore, Lambert suggested that the lack of academic resources is another pressing issue in need of fixing. As vicarious PTSD and User-Generated Content remain fairly new and under-researched topics, the amount of relevant literature available in libraries leaves much to be desired. Consequently, Lambert believed that students may struggle with completing academic work or - more generally - reflecting on the topic without books and journals to assist them. ‘[The topic] does not seem to be in the textbooks. When the

students write an essay, obviously they take something from the lecture, but they also draw a lot on textbooks. So maybe it is something that is not really popping up in textbooks yet' (Lambert, interview, 2016).

During the course of the interviews, it became clear that the lack of time, resources and training are all serious barriers to including trauma education into journalism courses on par with the modules on law and ethics. On the brighter side, they demonstrated that the attitudes of some of the educators towards vicarious trauma are gradually changing towards seeing it as an important part of journalism education. At one university the students are increasingly encouraged, albeit within the institutional limitations outlined above, to consider 'what happens to them when they're doing their jobs', instead of thinking exclusively about the ways in which their work affects the world, stated the course leader (anon, interview, 2016).

### *Conclusions*

The university curriculum represents the sum of skills and themes considered by educators to be the most necessary and influential in that particular field. When examined on mass, curricula structures can highlight both priorities and its gaps. While the authors acknowledge that a content analysis of prospectus' coupled with interviews might not show the complete picture, the curricula in this study points to a significant shortage of education about vicarious trauma on journalism course in UK universities, with only seemingly only a small number of lectures dedicated to the subject. The interviews conducted to supplement the analysis demonstrate that in comparison to PTSD of war correspondents or field reporters, vicarious PTSD is viewed as inferior and less worthy of curricula time. This is despite the increasing body of literature demonstrating that vicarious PTSD is becoming a pressing issue in journalism with User-Generated Content becoming a more prominent newsgathering tool and with the rapid change of the workflows in newsrooms taking place.

While the interviews, with some notable exceptions, reflected an overall lack of emphasis on the subject, they also made it apparent that despite educators' eagerness to include the issue of vicarious trauma into journalism curriculum, they still have a number a number of obstacles to overcome. Some of the challenges are substantial and would need years to be revised, such as the lack of adequate training for the university staff and addressing the limited guidance about approaching the topic, as well as the professional detachment mentality that prevails in the industry. However, while issues such as a shortage of textbooks could be resolved with relative ease, the teaching of vicarious trauma

is most hindered by the self-perceived skills of staff. Academic staff worry that they are not sufficiently capable of speaking about the issues of vicarious trauma in an appropriate and non-harming way, and this cautious approach results in only brief mentions of the topic, or the subject being neglected altogether.

This study argues for the importance of university education about vicarious PTSD and emphasises the idea that universities in the UK need to adapt to the needs of a new kind of journalism that increasingly relies upon digital tools and User-Generated Content. Since many news editors still fail to see the benefit in adequately training their news staff about trauma (Keats and Buchanan, 2009), this paper argues that it falls to academic institutions to fill this gap in their students' knowledge. Measures should also be introduced to assuage journalism students' misconceptions about counselling services, as journalists remain far behind other first-responder groups in terms of dealing with the consequences of witnessing work-related violence. Journalists are likely to find themselves increasingly exposed to mass volumes of traumatic User-Generated Content and eyewitness media, and thus the need for coping mechanism and education on the subject is essential to avoid burnout and short, unhappy careers.

While the study highlighted several possible teaching methods, such as familiarising journalism students with coping strategies and helping them to reflect on their experiences with personal trauma, the key conclusion and recommendation is twofold. Firstly, better communication between the newsroom and the academy is needed to ensure that essential education does not fall between the cracks. Secondly there is a need for the creation of guidelines on how to teach vicarious trauma in the university to give confidence and support to educators, and to establish a mandate for better integrated teaching across faculties, bringing in experts from other fields to support journalism education.

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Table 1: Overview of Undergraduate journalism course in UK, and mentions of violence, conflict, trauma or PTSD in courses. All courses are BA, and run for 3 – 4 years.

Institution	City	Course Title	Module with potential to discuss PTSD
City University	London	Journalism (BA)	Media law and ethics; New Media Challenges, Reporting Conflict
Loughborough University		Communications and Media Studies (BSc)	'Victimology' and 'Women and Crime: Victims, Offenders and Survivors'; Digital Media and Society; Media Panics
Cardiff U.	Cardiff	Journalism and Communications (BA)	---
King's College	London	Digital Culture (BA)	---
Lancaster University	Lancaster	Media and Cultural Studies (BA)	---

The University of Nottingham		International Media and Communications Studies (BA)	Terror, Violence and Society
Birmingham City University	Birmingham	Media and Communication (Journalism) (BA)	Interactive Cultures, Media Law and Regulation
University of East Anglia		Media Studies (Ba)	----
University of Leeds	Leeds	Broadcast Journalism (BA)	'Citizen Media', 'War and Media'
University of Leeds	Leeds	Communications and Media (BA)	'Citizen Media', 'War and Media'
University of Sussex	Sussex	Journalism (BA)	----
The University of Sheffield	Sheffield	Journalism Studies (BA)	----
University of Leicester	Leicester	Media and Communication (BA)	Reporting Panics, Risks and Fear
University of Stirling		Journalism Studies (BA)	'Terrorism in the Media'
Brunel University London	London	Journalism (BA)	---
University of Kent	Medway	Journalism and the News Industry (BA)	----
University of Liverpool	Liverpool	Communication and Media (BA)	Media and War; Ethics of Media
Middlesex University	London	Journalism (BA)	Global Journalism
Middlesex University	London	Journalism and Media (BA)	-----
London College of Communication	London	Journalism (BA)	-----

Falmouth University	Penryn, Cornwall	Journalism (BA)	Specialist Correspondent (Students pick two specialisms from: Culture; Crime & Courts; Foreign; Fashion; Science & Technology; Environment; Health & Social care)
University of Portsmouth		Journalism (BA)	----
University of Roehampton	London	Journalism (BA)	----
Goldsmiths, Uni of London	London	Journalism (BA)	----
University of Lincoln	Lincoln	Journalism (BA)	-----
Southampton Solent Uni	Southampton	Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Central Lancashire	Preston	Journalism (BA)	'Social Media'
London South Bank Uni	London	Journalism (BA)	----
University of Gloucestershire	Cheltenham	Journalism (BA)	----
London Metropolitan Uni	London	Journalism (BA)	----
Robert Gordon Uni	Aberdeen	Journalism (BA)	----
Kingston University London	London	Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Winchester		Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of the West of England	Bristol	Journalism (BA)	Media Regulation & Law module and our MA Media Law & Ethics module.
Uni of Brighton	Brighton	Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Derby	Derby	Journalism (BA)	Conflicting Images: News and the Media; 9/11 and the War on Terror

Uni of Bedfordshire		Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Sunderland		Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Worcester		Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Huddersfield		Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Chester		Journalism (BA)	'Scare Stories? Journalism and the Framing of Risk'
University of South Wales		Journalism (BA)	----
Teesside Uni		Journalism (BA)	----
Bournemouth Uni		Multimedia Journalism (BA)	----
Northumbria Uni of Newcastle		Journalism (BA)	----
Liverpool John Moores Uni		Journalism (BA)	'User Generated Content'
Birkbeck	London	Journalism and Media (BA)	'Crime and Media', 'Media and Conflict'
Anglia Ruskin Uni		Journalism (Multimedia) (BA)	----
Staffordshire Uni		Journalism (BA)	'Conflict and Journalism'
Uni of the West of Scotland		Journalism (BA)	----
Uni for the Creative Arts		Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Northampton		Multimedia Journalism (BA)	----
Uni of Sunderland		Broadcast Journalism (BA)	----

University of Westminster		Journalism (BA)	----
Leeds Beckett University		Journalism (BA)	----
University of Essex		Multimedia Journalism (BA)	----
Coverntry University		Journalism	----
De Montfort University		Journalism	----
Glasgow Caledonian University		Multimedia Journalism (BA)	----
University of Salford		Journalism (BA)	'War Reporting'
University of St Mark and St John		Journalism (BA)	----
Canterbury Christ Church Uni		Multimedia Journalism (BA)	----
Sheffield Hallam University		Journalism (BA)	----