

**Trauma-Informed Journalism Initiative  
Final Report — Michener Awards Foundation  
Submitted by Matthew Pearson  
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**Project Scope**

In my proposal to the Michener Awards Foundation, I outlined three goals:

1. Develop a teaching module to be used by journalism instructors across Canada to help students at the undergraduate and graduate levels better understand trauma; how it can affect those we cover; and the potential impact of covering trauma on ourselves as working journalists
2. Create a similar online resource for Canadian newsrooms to help editors and producers train and support staff and freelance journalists, including reporters, photographers, videographers, and editors, assigned to cover traumatic events
3. Organize a multi-disciplinary symposium at Carleton University for journalism students to hear from experts on trauma, and interact with journalists who have covered traumatic events with an aim to establishing best practices for approaching the coverage of such events, both domestically and internationally

**Research and development**

The winter term at Carleton University began on January 8.

My work began with a series of interviews with current and former journalists, trauma experts, risk-assessment advisors, and journalism educators. I wanted to ensure the resources I would ultimately create would respond to gaps and needs identified by those with direct experience.

I convened focus groups in the following newsrooms: Ottawa Citizen, Montreal Gazette, National Post, Toronto Star, Hamilton Spectator, London Free Press, The Globe and Mail, Winnipeg Free Press, CBC Montreal, CBC Ottawa, CBC Toronto and CBC Winnipeg.

As per the recommendation I received from the Michener judges, I also connected with Cliff Lonsdale of the Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma — and he's been hugely supportive of this initiative.

Given my residency at Carleton, I convened a focus group with senior-year journalism students, who collectively provided crucial insights into the program and the need for more trauma awareness.

In total, more than 150 current and former journalists were consulted as part of this project.

### **The Trauma-Informed Journalism teaching module**

The conversations outlined above were intended to provide a clear understanding of what is currently available to journalism students and working journalists; where training and support have fallen short; and what might be created to fill the gaps.

To deepen my own knowledge on and understanding of trauma, I also completed a six-day course in Trauma Counselling for Front-line Workers at the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre in Toronto.

The teaching module consists of the following:

- Definitions of trauma and vicarious trauma
- Risks associated with reporting on trauma
- Considerations of how to respectfully approach vulnerable interview subjects and difficult assignments
- Suggestions on how to write the trauma story
- Tips for dealing with photos and videos
- Resources for self-care and further reading

Based on my experience, the lecture lasts about an hour, and was typically followed by a short discussion. On several occasions, the lesson was extended to 90 minutes to include a short group exercise, which students responded to with enthusiasm. Given the gravity of the topic, I encouraged instructors to give students advance notice so they are able to prepare themselves.

In preparing the classroom presentation, I made a conscious decision not to show any graphic images or footage, nor offer any gory descriptions of situations I've seen or been told about. Teaching people to be more trauma-informed doesn't require barraging them with images in hopes they'll become desensitized — my goal is for them to become more sensitive, not less.

I also make it clear that being sensitive to someone's trauma is not a pass on a difficult interview or assignment. The question isn't "do we or don't we?" The question I want them think about is "How do we?"

Instructors are also provided with a list of suggested resources.

## Trauma-Informed Journalism Symposium

The symposium was held at Carleton on Saturday, March 3, 2018. Close to 100 people signed up in advance and, of those, more than half attended the day-long conference.

There were four sessions:

- Trauma 101: Led by registered psychotherapist Lauren Scarsella, this informative session set the context for the day by answering one question: What must every journalist know about trauma?
- Trauma Survivors Talkback: This panel discussion allowed three individuals with lived experience as survivors of traumatic incidents to speak about the good, bad, and ugly of media coverage.
- When Trauma Follows You Home: This panel discussion featured three veteran journalists who reflected on the personal challenges and consequences of reporting on traumatic incidents.
- Self-Care for Journalists: Led by registered psychotherapist Amanda Carver, this informative session provided participants with tools to cultivate self-care and make it a regular part of their lives.

CBC Radio's Ottawa Morning interviewed me about the symposium on March 2:  
<http://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/ottawa-morning/segment/15523668>

Edited clips featuring the highlights from each session will be packaged and published online by Cliff Lonsdale of the Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma's website.

The symposium would not have been possible without the generous financial support of Carleton's School of Journalism and Communication; the Faculty of Public Affairs; Unifor; CWA Canada; Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma; Mental Health Commission of Canada; National NewsMedia Council; and The Westin Ottawa.

Feedback during and after the symposium was positive. Here are two examples from participant evaluations:

*One of the best conferences I've been to. Maybe the best organized and certainly one of the most informative. This should be a mandatory event for all J-school students. I had planned to work on homework for portions of the day, but ended up staying for every session because they were so engaging. Much appreciation for your work in putting it on (and keeping it free!).*

*This was probably one of the most helpful sessions I've been to in my time at Carleton.*

## **Outreach at Carleton and beyond**

During the term at Carleton, I delivered a guest lecture to 11 different classes, reaching more than 450 undergraduate and graduate students. Carleton has also committed to including the Trauma-Informed Journalism Initiative teaching module in mandatory undergraduate and graduate-level reporting courses, which means within a few years, all journalism students who graduate from Carleton will have been exposed to the material.

Because of the Fellowship's focus on journalism education, it was important to me, however, to share the resources with a wider community beyond Carleton.

As of May 1, here's what that looks like:

Algonquin College, Ottawa

— Spoke to approximately 30 students in program coordinator Joe Banks' class

Centennial College, Toronto

— Delivered a lecture and shared resources with instructors Tim Doyle, Ellin Bessner, Mary Vallis and Sydney Loney

University of British Columbia, Vancouver

— Met with Graduate School of Journalism director Alfred Hermida and discussed including the module in the program's first-year foundational course, as well as in the internship placement preparatory course; also shared material with instructor Kathryn Gretsinger

Mount Royal University/Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, Calgary

— Delivered a guest lecture to a group of 20 people, which included journalism instructors, students, and Calgary-based working journalists. I also shared the resources I've created.

Red River College, Winnipeg

— Met and shared resources with full-time journalism instructors James Turner and Joanne Kelly

University of King's College, Halifax

— Met and shared resources with full-time journalism instructors Tim Currie, Pauline Dakin and Terra Tailleir

Canadian Association of Journalists conference, Toronto (May 4)

— Invited to present my research findings, resources, and best practices at the CAJ's annual conference

Unifor media council conference, Kelowna, B.C. (May 12)

- Invited to present my research findings, resources, and best practices at the Unifor media council's annual conference

I also hope to visit journalism schools at Ryerson University in Toronto and Concordia University in Montreal in early May.

## **Feedback**

Many people I've met this term have offered encouraging words about the initiative. Here are portions of two emails I received, as examples:

"The subject of reporting on trauma is an incredibly important — even vital — topic, and one that has hardly been discussed in my four years of journalism education. It's a topic my fellow classmates and I have missed out on. Many of us end up reporting in the field through internships, going to talk to victims of disaster and loss, before we've even really discussed how to report on trauma effectively. The discussion was very helpful."

—*Fourth-year journalism student at Carleton*

"Thank you for doing this work. Since our conversation I've spoken to three different interns who've either said they've never been talked to about on-the-job trauma, or, in the case of the one girl, she received a pamphlet. I think you're really doing some important work.

What's also interesting is that stuff I've told you, I've never told anyone. Hindsight is an amazing thing, I don't think I knew how much that kind of trauma affected me and my work until I was able to look back on it and talk about it with someone who gets it."

—*Journalist with 10 years experience*

## **Next steps**

Although I return to my full-time position at the Ottawa Citizen on May 14, my passion for helping journalism schools and newsrooms become more trauma-informed will live on.

One idea I'd like to pursue in the coming months is the creation of a national peer-support program to train journalists to support each other before, during, and after traumatic incidents. Such strategies have been effectively used in Australia and the United States, and I hope to apply those successful models across Canada.

The peer-support network, as well as trauma-informed training for newsroom managers on how to effectively debrief staff, is a better use of resources than the online portal I originally envisaged. In numerous focus groups, journalists told me they didn't want to be referred to another website — they wanted meaningful in-person training and the support of other journalists who understand the myriad challenges a person faces in collecting, packaging, and reporting difficult stories.

## **Acknowledgements**

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