

Visuals of Trauma in Journalism and the Mixing of Methods - Symptomatology of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Trauma Narratives

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ABSTRACT: The paradox of documenting history through gruesome visuals depicting the prominence of stories intrigues media researchers. In East Africa, the topic has been captured in a variety of media frames, but particularly in scholarly work. Using a mixed methods approach this paper examines the relationship between violent visuals and trauma among journalists. It argues that in East Africa, trauma and related psychological effects thrive amid rigid newsroom structures devoid of concrete intervention mechanisms. The scarcity of trauma mitigations is not just an issue in journalism, but in society, as issues of mental health and other deprivations become common. This paper focuses on examining the phenomenon of trauma among journalists who have been exposed to trauma in the line of duty. Using symptomatology of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and real-life narratives as quantitative and qualitative methods, the preliminary results suggest that whereas journalists in East Africa experience adverse effects after exposure to traumatic visuals, there are no potential mitigation strategies in newsrooms to deal with the Trauma Effects. Findings indicate that as the frequency of exposure to violent visuals is intensified so do PTSD symptoms significantly increase among journalists. The study is hinged on the background that the criterion for news production is constructed from the idea that ‘if visuals of violence, conflict, and death are involved, then the story gets top priority. Data collected from Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda exposes the dire need for alternative strategies for mitigation. The results further predict a correlation between psychological effects and trauma journalism. These findings are relevant for trauma journalists and provide key pointers for mitigation in newsrooms and among journalists.

KEYWORDS: visuals and trauma, trauma journalism, symptomatology of PTSD, real-life narratives, East African journalists

Introduction

Visuals of Trauma in Journalism

In journalism practice, visual storytelling is at the heart of a good story. Each narrative cascades with an image that gives depth, meaning and interpretation. The image aids in building perception and providing context to the story. More so, images are vital in telling horrific stories. In March 1911, Authur Brisbane’s quote: ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ (Wikipedia 2023), appeared in the New York Standard. This adage quote is real to the everyday experience of visual rhetors—journalists who cover traumatic events (Frosh 2014). The quote was used in the Syracuse Advertising for Men’s Club banquet to discuss journalism and publicity. Visual images hold the power to transcend language barriers, providing a passage for communication to global audiences. The common ethical dimensions utilized in the media production of visual images align with John Stuart Mill’s idea of consequentialism, that action is right or wrong depending upon its consequences, such as its effects on society (Mackay and Janacek 2000).

In the media production, visual rhetors use photographs, videos, and infographics, to evoke emotions and provide a more immediate and visceral understanding of a story compared to text alone. The role of visuals in journalism is significant in today’s fast paced digital age, where telling a story relies on the drawing attention from the dramatic visuals. Through visuals, rhetors aim to draw interest from audiences with shorter attention spans, making it essential to capture and retain attention quickly. Compelling visuals not only grab

attention, but also enhance the retention of information, making the news more accessible and memorable (Mackay and Janacek 2000). In the complex and intense world of reporting traumatic events, visuals enhance the depth and context of the story, thereby providing an ability to convey complex information effectively. According to Oliviera (2002) rendering is essential in visual processing and enhances the production of subtle real-world effects captured in the images. In a mediated technological space that characterizes the production of stories, visuals provide a nuanced perspective that complements written narratives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the events being reported.

In trauma journalism, visual storytelling is vital for its ability to enhance communication, evoke emotional responses, and provide a richer, more engaging experience for the audience in an era where information is constantly competing for attention (Masse 2011). In this paper, narratives of visual rhetors who capture traumatic visuals represent many unknown silent voices of journalists living under the weight of trauma. The journalists in East Africa are hard hit, owing to disadvantaged conditions they are subdued to during and after witnessing intense violent images in the course of their work (Radoli 2023). Most of the visual rhetors may never receive the much-needed professional psycho-social support. In the production of graphic images, it is possible to record atrocities against humanity and bring action to perpetrators. Such reporting is essential for the media to perform its responsibility to society, and to the interest of the public.

However, the production exposes journalists to traumatic untold experiences (Seely 2017). In most cases, journalists look for certain elements, newness, timeliness, relevance, human interest, conflict, scandal, and oddity among others as their lead storylines. In 1965, Norwegian researchers Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Ruge described these elements as news values (Galtung and Ruge 1975) that determine the worthiness of a news story. The values provide the criteria for selecting items to be prioritized in the news menu. Other news values include: relevance, topicality, composition, expectation, worth, and external forces.

A Review of Literature

The Work of Visuals in Journalism

Visual evidence serves as a powerful tool in enacting the reality of an event. Visual documentation enables historical witnessing through the capturing of photographic images as they are iconic representations of moments, bearing witness to the impact of trauma. Visuals further present a contextual understanding that enables audiences to better understand complexities and nuances of a traumatic event. In addition, the visuals register the geographical and cultural context to convey the comprehensive aspects of a story. While there are several constructive aspects of using visuals in journalistic work, traumatic visual producers are constantly confronted by negative impacts. On one hand, an emotional toll of covering traumatic events can strain personal relationships, as journalists may find it challenging to separate their work from their personal lives. On the other, the psychological effects may further exacerbate personal well-being (Panabaker et al. 1996; Pederson 2014). Many journalists covering traumatic events may struggle to cope with the emotional weight of their experiences, affecting their overall well-being and quality of life. The chronic stress associated with covering traumatic further contributes to physical health issues, such as headaches, fatigue, and digestive problems (Brewin et al. 2010). Studies show that after an exposure to traumatic visuals, there are evident mental health concerns including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and burnout (Feinstein et al. 2014; Seely 2017; Papadopoulos et al. 2022). Moreover, journalists grapple with ethical dilemmas related to the use of graphic content, balancing the public's right to know with the potential harm resulting from explicit visuals. In addition, repeated exposure to trauma may lead to desensitization, potentially affecting the journalist's ability to empathize or emotionally engage with the subjects of their stories.

The Agency of Trauma

In the context of journalism, trauma refers to the psychological and emotional impact experienced by individuals exposed to traumatic events, as well as the challenges faced by journalists reporting on such events. In the newsroom practice, it's rare to find the topic of trauma among journalists being discussed openly. However, over the past decades, research on trauma and journalism is gaining ground and demanding that newsrooms and media institutions take steps to address the mental health of journalists covering traumatic events. For instance, the Dart Centre for Trauma in Journalism recognizes the nexus between psychological trauma and journalism practice. The existing interconnection between news and trauma is intractable. The Dart Centre (2023) highlights that human condition, and the news are both centered on trauma. Viewers of the news content are initially introduced to what a traumatic occurrence signifies by the way it is described. The center determines that the experience of trauma can occur on a personal level to the journalists, to their loved ones and families, to their country and their neighborhood, and to the entirety of the world. According to (Seely 2017; Keats 2010; Bendelow 1993) journalists, like healthcare crisis responders, are the first to arrive at the scene of the tragedy to capture the story in its rawness. The journalists speak to eyewitnesses and capture images that depict the heart of the matter. Even though the drastic effect of covering trauma is tangible, East African newsrooms and media councils are yet to establish a framework for addressing trauma as an occupational hazard in journalists' work. A few newsrooms in the region have recognized the need to address the issue, but still, a lot needs to be done. For example, the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) has in the past organized workshops and counseling for journalists immediately after an occurrence of a traumatic news event. These are normally one-off events. In another instance, during fieldwork interviews in Uganda, a psychologist was taken aback to imagine the traumatic exposure that journalists must go through every day in the line of duty. *"I have never thought of journalists as victims of trauma, I have never talked to any of them. I don't know of any journalist who has sought treatment"*, she declared.

The Psychological Phenomenon of Traumatic Visuals

Visuals of trauma in journalism depict gory images that characterize the media production of news images streaming from crime, terror and violent nature. Trauma is diagnosed as a psychologically induced disease whose symptoms result from unbearable emotional reactions to traumatic events. According to Herman (1992), in instances of trauma, if patients can verbalize the traumatic incident kept in unconscious memory, symptoms could be reduced. Whereas early theorists viewed trauma as physical, where the traumatized person would display a wound, psychological trauma is a relatively contemporary concept. Exposures of trauma among journalists is experienced as:

Vicarious Trauma: Journalists internalize emotions and experiences of those directly affected by the traumatic events they cover. Consequently, vicarious, or secondary *trauma* is an indirect exposure to trauma and can also be regarded as a PTSD trigger. This form of trauma occurs because of working with victims. It could be common for professionals on the frontline like caregivers, police, military personnel, and journalists to suffer from vicarious trauma. Louth et al. (2019) describe vicarious trauma as a 'ticking timebomb' that demands immediate and continuing attention. In their study on cumulative fatigue and trauma among front-line service workers, they concluded that responding correctly to the effects of vicarious trauma with a strength-based resilience mechanism would counter the dire effects of secondary trauma. From this viewpoint, it can be argued that visual rhetors are frequently exposed to vicarious trauma in the line of duty. Oncologists, therapists, social workers, and physicians have all been the subject of research into *secondary and vicarious trauma* (Simon et al. 2006; McCann & Pearlman 1990; Figley 2003). For instance, when studying vicarious traumatization in social workers, McCann & Pearlman

(1990) defined the condition as having unpleasant feelings, sights, and thoughts accompanying working with trauma patients (McCann & Pearlman 1990,13). For example, journalists working in combat and violent conflict situations might be exposed to vicarious trauma in the form of “actual or threatened death” (Seely 2017).

Individual and Collective Trauma: Individual trauma is a traumatic incident that occurs to a single person, whereas communal or collective trauma occurs in society (Mucci 2013). In his description, a person suffers internal aspects of trauma while collective trauma affects many people and thereby alters their history and memory. Aspects of individual trauma could be seen in experiences of rape, torture, and emotional injuries from domestic abuse that a person suffers alone. Whereas collective trauma is traced in atrocities like genocide, slavery, or even colonialism that alters not only how people process and perceive trauma, but also what they do with our memories of it as they move on. This work is focused on the mental trauma that journalists may experience after exposure to traumatic events. This inference reads into James Berger and Gildersleeve’s expose that trauma as a concept occurs with the repression of a traumatic experience (Gildersleeve 2014,3 and Berger 1997,571). The traumatic experience that causes psychological injury “cannot be immediately assimilated” (Gildersleeve 2014, 3) and may recur as bodily symptoms or worry (Berger 1997,571). Additionally, Carruth (1995) contends that trauma memory develops because of an unprocessed traumatic experience. Collective trauma has an impact on people differently based on their own circumstances and other variables.

Trauma Narratives: They refer to structured and often therapeutic storytelling that individuals, especially those who have experienced trauma, use to make sense of and communicate their traumatic experiences. Trauma narratives play a crucial role in the healing process, allowing individuals to process and express the emotional and psychological impact of traumatic events. In the context of journalism, it also involves how journalists approach and tell the stories of those who have experienced trauma. Soesilo (2014) provides that people are driven to make sense of their experiences and derive meaning through crafting narratives. He argues that the effectiveness of expressive writing is explained by how a mentally fragmented or less structured mental representation becomes more integrated and cohesive during the creative process of narrating.

Sense-Making in Narratives of Trauma

Crafting a narrative helps individuals make sense of the chaos and confusion surrounding traumatic events, allowing them to organize their thoughts and memories. Telling one’s story can be a coping mechanism, empowering individuals by giving them a sense of control over their narrative (Goldstein 2009; Labov 1967). Constructing narratives to convey traumatic experiences is a delicate and complex task for journalists. It involves not only accurately representing the facts but also respecting the emotional and psychological impact of the events on those involved. Journalists construct narratives to convey traumatic experiences. Journalists strive to humanize the individuals affected by trauma, emphasizing their experiences, emotions, and resilience. Incorporating personal stories and testimonies helps readers or viewers connect with the human side of the story, fostering empathy. To improve the craft of persuasion, practitioners of visual rhetoric employ visual materials such as written text, spoken speech, images, and hybrid visual representations in addition to newly developed technologies like graphics (Lee 2022). Visual rhetoric is a communication technique that involves the various ways communicators, also known as rhetors, organize and package their message. It typically has a deeper meaning than it does in the literal sense. In most cases, the arrangement of visual elements conveys the message being conveyed. Visual rhetoric focuses on using visuals to convey meaning that is cultural, historical, and contextual (Lee 2022).

Methodology

This paper utilized a mixed methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative research techniques (Creswell 2003; Ayiro 2023). Qualitative data was derived from in-depth interviews with journalists and select psychological experts. While the quantitative data was realized through the PTSD Symptomatology - Revised Impact of Events Scale (IES-R) survey. The mixed methods approach utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods design or the two-phase model (Creswell 2012). First, quantitative data was analyzed followed by qualitative data that elaborated the quantitative results. The data collection and fieldwork took approximately three months, in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda for in-depth interviews. The survey was administered online.

The target population for surveys was 60 journalists (at least 20 from each of the three East African countries) randomly selected from a population of trauma journalists (*those who have covered or are covering trauma events*). A chronological review of key traumatic stories was done, with specific focus on events that had occurred during the *2013 Westgate* mall terror attack in Nairobi, Kenya, the *Ugandan 2021 elections*, and *a revisit of the 1994 Rwandan genocide*. Participants in the study were not necessarily those who reported on the highlighted events but had engaged in different contexts of coverage of trauma events including veteran journalists. These story contexts informed images depicting traumatic events in the news media. The events were selected for their intensity and the amount of coverage they generated from the media. Those who were not covering the trauma beat were excluded from the study. The Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table was used to determine a sample that suggests an optimal size, given the population size, a specific margin of error, and desired confidence level. A confidence level of 95% and a margin error of 5% was considered as constructed from the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) table as below:

Table 1. Sample Size Using Krejcie & Morgan Table

<i>Population Size</i>	<i>Confidence Level</i>	<i>Degree of Accuracy/Margin Error</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>
60	95.0%	0.5%	52

Source: Krejcie & Morgan (1970)

Symptomatology of PTSD Scale – Survey

The Revised Impact of Events Scale (IES-R) for PTSD Symptomatology survey is a tool for measuring quantitative data. The measurement assesses the effects of trauma and applies statistical evaluation to determine the prevalence of trauma. The scale has a list of up to 20 questions that are synchronous with the APA (2013)'s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - DSM-V. The scale also incorporates criteria for PTSD, as well as the 2013 APA revised list of characteristics of trauma effects (APA 2013). The checklist is a self-assessment procedure that requires participants to respond to questions that evaluate the frequency of various physical and psychological symptoms as recognized in APA (Papadopoulou et al. 2022). The 2013, American Psychiatric Association (APA) guideline, states that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) manifests when a person witnesses a traumatic event. The common symptoms associated with: (1) interference (this occurs when the person experiences memories of the trauma event, in unexpected intervals), (2) the person avoids memories related to the trauma event, (3) the person experiences mood swings, (4) there are evident physical reactions like sweating, shivering, arousal or reactivity (APA 2013). Several studies that deal with trauma effects have applied the PTSD symptomatology survey to measure the trauma inflicted on participants (Backholm and Björkqvist 2012b; Smith, Drevo, and Newman 2018). The Revised Impacts of Events Scale Survey meets the medical categorization of trauma and is utilized in

PTSD diagnostics. However, in this paper, the objective is to evidence exposure to trauma, and not to make a clinical diagnosis. Other researchers have used a combination of interviews and measures of the impacts of events. For, instance, the Impact of Event Scale and the Beck Depression Index, to determine the long-term prevalence of PTSD among corresponds on the front line (Feinstein 2002; Seely 2017). The PTSD symptomatology survey with journalists examines the relationship between covering traumatic and the resultant psychological trauma effects. The survey determines the relationship between personal exposure to trauma and occupational trauma experiences. Quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed and synthesized through triangulation.

In-depth Interviews

For the qualitative data, twenty-four (24) journalists, with 8 participants from each country, were selected to elucidate responses from the survey. Further in-depth interviews were done with 6 psychological experts purposively selected from the three countries to shed light on the trauma phenomenon and suggest mitigations. Studies show that fewer than 20 participants are sufficient for in-depth analysis (Crouch and McKenzie 2006). Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that between 5b to 25 participants are sufficient for a qualitative in-depth interview. Furthermore, the number of journalists reporting traumatic events is dismal owing to related risks. There are studies that show that triangulating quantitative data with qualitative data in research about journalists' experiences helps to "authorize tales of journalistic witnessing" (Rentschler 2009, 107). Question guides for in-depth interviews with journalists and psycho-social experts were utilised.

Quantitative Analysis: A symptomatology of PTSD measurements online survey was designed and applied in line with the research objectives. The data analysis is presented descriptively and mathematically giving sequences of the Psychological Trauma Effects (PTE). The interpretation examines how one variable's value is affected by another. The model looks at the psychological effects of journalists' trauma events since the variables have a negative correlation. For example, an increased frequency of exposure to trauma events exacerbates the psychological effects. Henceforth, a reduction of exposure mitigates the effects. In this paper, the model was used to test statistical correlations between one dependent variable (trauma effects) and one independent variable (exposure to traumatic events). The prevalence of psychological effects (PSTD) was obtained in both samples. See the analytical frame in table 4 below:

Table 2. Quantitative Data Frame

Symptoms	Psychological Impact
Intrusive Thoughts	Flashbacks: 44% of journalists surveyed experienced vivid and distressing memories of the traumatic event, feeling as though they are reliving it. Nightmares: 22% recorded having recurrent and distressing dreams related to the traumatic event may occur, contributing to sleep disturbances.
Avoidance and numbing	Avoidance: 60% actively avoided reminders of the traumatic event, such as places, people, or activities associated with the experience. Emotional Numbing: 40% experienced a sense of emotional numbing or detachment, where individuals may struggle to experience positive emotions.
Hyperarousal	Irritability: 76.55% experienced heightened irritability, angry outbursts, or difficulty managing anger. While 23.5% did not experience irritable symptoms. Hypervigilance: Those who had a heightened state of alertness, with individuals being easily startled or constantly on the lookout for potential threats. Difficulty Concentrating: After the trauma 53.3% of the journalist's had trouble concentrating and focusing on tasks was impaired, affecting daily functioning.46.7% did not experience the symptoms.

Negative Changes in Mood and Cognition	<p>Negative Thoughts: 27% recorded experiencing feelings of shame and guilt during and after coverage of traumatic events. The journalists developed persistent negative beliefs about themselves, others, or the world.</p> <p>Memory Issues: 55.6% had trouble falling asleep, while 44.4% did not experience sleep disturbances.</p>
Duration and Impairment	<p>Duration: On average 30% indicated that symptoms of the traumatic event lasted for three months after exposure. 70% recalled the traumatic event every time they thought of the event. APA (2013) provides that to be diagnosed with PTSD, symptoms persist for at least one month and cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.</p> <p>Delayed Onset: In some cases, symptoms may not appear immediately after the traumatic event but can manifest months or even years later.</p>
Psycho-Social Intervention	70% indicated they would not turn to mental health experts, while 30% showed prominence in seeking mental health and psycho-social support

Source: Author (2023)

Qualitative Data Analysis: The analysis of qualitative data from in-depth interviews was done descriptively. The in-depth interviews were transcribed, and their analysis follow Marsh and White's (2006) steps that included: Identification of visual rhetors, gathering of data through in-depth interviews with journalists, recording and transcription, thematic categorization, interpretation of meanings, analysis and presentation of findings, making conclusions. The results show the following themes:

Cyclic Coverage of Traumatic Stories: The four stages create multiple exposures to complex and vicarious trauma to those who were not in the field, therefore escalating the levels of exposure:

There are some people who cover events, and you just find them crying and for TV it's worse, you must go through four processes. The four layers increased exposure therefore transferring and exacerbating trauma. And when the story airs and then you must follow those four layers of the same thing that you wish you would never see, and you are the same person who must edit (Journalist Kenya April 2023).

Absence of Psycho-Social Mechanism: There were narrations of extreme cases of out-of-body experiences especially for journalists from a historical context of trauma like Rwanda:

Whenever I read stories of people's disappearances, I remember my brother who disappeared during the genocide, we were hiding in the camps. He left one morning and never returned, and his body was never found. The stories during the national commemoration of the genocide every year affect me very much. I see him in his youthful age, in the same clothes. He was about 25 years old. I always see the image of him at that age, joking with me, and in a blink, he disappears. There is no closure, you feel like they are coming back (Journalist Rwanda March 2023).

Manifestation of Trauma: The newsroom is depicted as a crisis center churning one traumatic story after the other. However, journalists on this beat said they have a personal obligation to fight social injustices.

I got very traumatized by a story I did in 2009, this was in Goma in the DRC. I met a woman who had been raped by a very young man. And for her to have borne the story in such a vulnerable way, you know I carried her story with me, and over the years I have never forgotten. There was a time when I was constantly in contact with her, but we lost touch. As a storyteller, you never forget the faces of the victims. Then there were no systems in place to deal with trauma. When the trauma was manifesting itself, I would have nightmares, I would get very triggered when I watched stories on sexual violence. There are times you feel so weepy. You really do not know what to do and where to go (Journalist Kenya May 2023).

Individual and Structural Silences: In the context of East African journalists, no journalists can willingly take that risk, as most journalists who report on trauma stories work as freelancers.

When I returned to the newsroom my boss asked me if I saw that story anywhere. He did not think about the risk I had put in my life but was eager to get the story. I am lucky that most of

the time when I come from the field I don't edit, I just tell my boss. I got this and that maybe if he wants me to add on something, I keep myself busy, to protect myself. When you are in the field you see many things. You see the way you were treated, and the people you met along the way (Journalist Uganda, March 2023).

Psycho-Social Interventions: Through re-telling experiences of covering trauma-relieved memories, the manifestation of trauma experiences.

Talking about it not keeping quiet, talking about it with someone you trust, a therapist that you can call and talk to. In complex trauma get treatment and visit a psycho-social expert. Get a professional prescription for medication to help calm down. This is associated with stress and depression. Get treatment for anxieties or phobias that come up because of PTSD to relieve these symptoms (Psychologist Uganda, April 2023).

Discussion

The study found that journalists require strong support systems, both within newsrooms and externally, to cope with the emotional challenges of their work. Developing healthy coping mechanisms, such as seeking therapy, taking breaks, and engaging in self-care, is essential for journalists exposed to traumatic events. Recognizing and addressing the potential effects of exposure to traumatic events is crucial for maintaining the well-being of journalists and ensuring ethical and responsible journalism practices. News organizations in East Africa needed to play a vital role in providing resources and support to journalists dealing with the emotional challenges of their profession. Journalists who report on traumatic events may experience indirect trauma due to their exposure to distressing scenes, stories, and the emotional aftermath of such events. The findings confirm viewpoints that journalists like other first response workers may develop vicarious or secondary trauma, by empathetically internalizing the experiences of those directly affected by the events they cover (Louth 2011; Bendelow 1993). The results attest that in the process of news production of traumatic events, journalists are re-traumatized, through exposure, personal connections to similar experiences, and if the coverage is graphic and emotionally charged. The crisis that is trauma journalism calls for attention to *first*, create an awareness of the phenomenon and *secondly* to develop possible mitigations within newsrooms in East Africa to support trauma journalists. Literature evidenced that constructing trauma narratives aims to encourage public discourse and awareness about issues related to trauma (Caruth 1995, Caruth 1996; Goldstein 2009; Soesilo 2014). Well-constructed narratives can motivate readers or viewers to advocate for change or support initiatives related to trauma and its aftermath. To this end, this paper utilized a mixed methods approach that triangulates symptomatology measurements of post-traumatic stress disorder and narratives from qualitative interviews with journalists. The overall outcomes indicate a significant correlation between journalism and psychology, inviting further research on the topic, particularly in African contexts.

Conclusion

Literature and data regarding journalists' personal and work-related exposure to PTSD depict a prevalence of trauma among journalists in East Africa. The findings elucidate the psychological gravity of experiences and narrations from journalists acquiring PTSD symptoms. The outcomes from the study give an impetus toward recommendations for newsrooms in East Africa to develop procedures and structures to support trauma journalists. These results could inform policy and practice within developing countries to adopt alternative methods in addressing negative traumatic.

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