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Covering Pulse: Understanding the Lived Experience of Journalists Who Covered a Mass Shooting

Theodore G. Petersen and Shyla Soundararajan
Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Florida, USA

When 49 people were gunned down in an Orlando nightclub in 2016, journalists from all over Central Florida went toward the nightclub, not away from it. This study explores the lived experience of 18 journalists who covered the Pulse nightclub shooting. Participants came from a variety of news outlets—print, television, and radio—and from a variety of positions—reporters, photographers, and editors. Participants described the chaotic environment and the ethical issues they faced. This paper sheds light on how journalists handle situations like the Pulse shooting and the need to monitor the mental health of those who were on the frontlines covering it. Keywords: Journalism, Shooting, Mental Health, Ethics

It seemed like every police officer in the state passed the Central Florida TV news reporter during the 3 a.m. drive down Interstate 4 toward the Pulse nightclub shooting scene. After he found a parking spot but before he started his reporting, the reporter saw two men at the outskirt of the scene. They were crying. The reporter approached them with no camera, no microphone. He asked if they'd like to pray with him. Then he left them to begin his coverage of what was at that time the worst mass shooting in U.S. history.

And that wasn't the only compelling story we heard from journalists. A photographer at a TV news station received a call from his boss at 3 a.m. on the last day of his vacation. The journalist made his way to the Orange Avenue about 3:45 a.m. to a scene that was bloody, chaotic, and devastating. As he set up his gear, he heard his name being called. He turned and noticed the grown child of a family friend, dressed in SWAT gear. The "baby-faced" deputy carried an M4 rifle and searched cars. A print reporter was just three months into her new position as a breaking news reporter. She heard about the Pulse shooting on Twitter, while she was relaxing after a long day of covering the killing of pop singer Christina Grimmie. When she arrived, the scene was still active. She got as close to the club as possible when a police car pulled up. They held her at gunpoint until she pleaded with them that she was a media person. They were looking for a possible second shooter.

The Pulse nightclub, self-described as the "hottest gay bar" in Orlando, was hosting Latin night on Saturday, June 11, 2016. About 300 customers were at the club on that warm night (Ellis, Fantz, Karimi, & McLaughlin, 2016). At 2:02 a.m., a sound that seemed like bursting of firecrackers to some and music beats to others deafened the ears of those inside (Alvarez & Perez-Pena, 2016). At 2:45 a.m., a producer at a news station received a chilling call from the gunman himself, pledging his allegiance to ISIS (Miller, 2016). According to *Los Angeles Times*, the Pulse shooting was the worst in the modern history (1984-2016)—49 people killed and 53 injured (Los Angeles Times, 2016), until it was surpassed by 2017 Las Vegas shooting, where 58 people were killed and 527 were wounded at a country music festival on the Las Vegas strip (Crosby et al., 2017).

The purpose of this project is to understand the lived experiences of 18 Central Florida journalists as they covered the Pulse nightclub shooting. Our hope is that by shedding light on their experiences—logistics, ethics, and mental and emotional health—news organizations will be better prepared to cover a tragedy and care for their journalists and journalism schools will be able to provide better education about the difficulties of the work.

Overview of the Pulse Nightclub Shooting

To understand what the journalists went through, it's important to understand the timeline of events. Unlike many mass shootings, this turned into a hostage situation lasting more than four hours. Many of the journalists covered this tragedy as it unfolded. The *Orlando Sentinel* published a concise timeline of what happened in that club (Lotan, Minshew, Lafferty, & Gibson, 2016).

- 2:02 a.m., Sunday, June 12, 2016—Shooter Omar Mateen, 29, of Fort Pierce, Florida, walked into Pulse with two guns—a semiautomatic rifle and a handgun—and started shooting.
- 2:08 a.m.—Police officers entered the club to rescue victims and stop the shooter, but Mateen went into a bathroom with hostages (Cherney, Hayes, & Harris, 2016). The situation shifted from active shooter to a hostage situation.
- 2:35 a.m.—Mateen called 911 and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.
- 2:45 a.m.—Mateen called a TV news station and said he did it for ISIS.
- 2:48 a.m.—Mateen spoke to a crisis negotiator for the first of three conversations.
- 4:21 a.m.—Police removed an air-conditioning unit from a dressing room to allow people to escape.
- 4:29 a.m.—Rescued victims tell police that Mateen put bomb vests on hostages.
- 5:02 a.m.—Law enforcement detonated an explosive, providing access to the club.
- 5:14 a.m.—Mateen emerged from the club.
- 5:14 a.m.—Video taken by a nearby witness reveals several gunshots.
- 5:53 a.m.—Nearly four hours after the first gunshot, Orlando Police tweeted that the shooter is dead.

Of the 18 journalists interviewed, eight were working when this was an active hostage situation. Six of those were at the scene before the club was breached. The journalists who covered this story heavily saw and heard things they wish they never had.

Covering Terrorism and Violence

Previous studies dealing with terrorism and journalism have focused on the media's coverage of terrorism, concepts of framing and representation, symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism, newsroom culture, ethical dilemmas, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Covering violence is a large part of journalism—from local crime to global terrorism. Through all of this, journalists are expected to be resilient, stoic, and machinelike (Boylan, 2001). Often the public is skeptical of the press's coverage of tragedies. On one hand, journalists have a humanitarian temptation to help people in need. But professional demands and the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics instruct them to be objective, unbiased, and detached observers to meet the demand for an accurate presentation of reality (Backholm & Idas, 2015; Kim, 2012; Kim & Kelly, 2010).

A qualitative study of journalists who covered war in Sri Lanka found the news coverage "theatrical," accompanied by sound effects, disturbing photographs of dead bodies and dramatic editing (Rao & Weerasinghe, 2011). In photojournalism, privacy, sanctity of grief, pictures of the dead, bloody and nude victims, and digital manipulation of pictures and videos are some of the aspects that could make readers uncomfortable (Kim & Kelly, 2010).

Journalists also face an accusation of exploiting others' tragedies to advance their careers. Though it is a journalist's duty to gather accurate information and one of the ways to do it is interviewing victims, viewers see journalists as "desperate" and "vultures" (Farhi, 2015; Mortensen, 2015).

Much research has gone into studying the relationship between media and terrorism. While mass media is considered a "watchdog" for democracy and "the fourth estate," they are also seen as enablers for activities like terrorism (Nelson & Scott, 1992, as cited in Orzeaţă, 2016). Terrorist groups seek a platform to propagate their motives in dramatic ways, and media provide the dais as they look for events to cover (Iqbal, 2015; Shoshani & Slone, 2008). By airing the information about attacks, media fulfill the attackers' objectives—to induce fear (Iqbal, 2015; Orzeaţă, 2016; Slone, 2000). With 24-hour news broadcasts, live reporting, and social media, journalists face intense pressure to get breaking news out first (Deuze & Yeshua, 2009).

Work-related trauma has a huge impact on the lives of journalists. Studies have shown that British, Canadian, and Mexican journalists have suffered from PTSD after their coverage (Browne, Evangeli, & Greenberg, 2012; Feinstein, 2012; Keats & Buchanan, 2013). At times, journalists may feel forced to take assignments against their will for fear of losing their jobs (Keats & Buchanan, 2013). Keats and Buchannan's 2013 ethnographic study discovered that Canadian journalists who covered trauma showed lower job satisfaction, early retirement, and substance abuse. Newsroom culture limits them from doing what they want in some cases and pushes them to do things that they do not want in others, thus leading to PTSD (Ustad Figenschou, & Thorbjørnsrud, 2017).

Feinstein's study (2012) suggests the seriousness of issues happening to journalists in Mexico. Feinstein found that exposure to ethical dilemmas may cause long-term psychological impairment. It also revealed that one-third of those who participated in the study stopped working because of threats from the cartels, and in fact, they showed more signs of PTSD, psychological trauma, and depression. Not just reporters on-scene, but even editors and other staff in the newsroom who weren't on ground-zero experienced Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) (Feinstein, 2012). Backholm (2015) found that in many cases the audience experiences STS passed on from the reporter and from images and videos of the incident repeatedly played in mass media. Dahmen, Abdenour, McIntyre, & Noga-Styrom (2017) survey of journalists found that many think the news industry does a good job of reporting on mass shootings, but that the coverage has become "routine." Most of the journalists surveyed had not covered mass shootings.

Covering terrorism is profitable for the news industry (Rao & Weerasinghe, 2011). In times of terror attacks and war, journalists make use of the situation to stage their performance (Liebes & Kampf, 2017). Journalists are forced to cover these attacks because their organizations often compete for breaking the news first, capturing the most dramatic pictures, and airing the hardest-to-get voices (Liebes & Kampf, 2017). Also, journalists feel that they have a pressure to report what audiences would want or like and not necessarily what may be right but disagreeable to viewers (Rao & Weerasinghe, 2011).

Scholars have done framing analyses of violence coverage. Shahin (2016) studied the frames used in two tragedies only 48 hours apart—the Boston Marathon bombings and West Fertilizer explosion in Texas, arguing that the bombing gained more coverage because there was someone to blame. "Othering" the perpetrator is a common frame (Chuang & Roemer, 2013; Chuang, 2012; Chong, 2008). Framing analysis in a study that looked into Virginia Tech shooting incident revealed that the perpetrator's ethnicity and generalized criminal culpability to his ethnic group were the main frames used (Park, Holody, & Zhang, 2012).

While previous literature has focused on the content produced during mass shootings or focused on one newsroom during a crisis, this study prioritizes the individual journalists'

voices and perspectives. Instead of focusing on the content produced, industry-wide surveys, or case studies on one newsroom, this study aims to understand the lived experience of journalists from several news organizations as they covered a mass murder. Our research aimed to answer three questions:

1. What did journalists DO during the coverage?
2. How did journalists FEEL during and after the coverage?
3. How does this experience affect them?

The idea for this project came in a communication graduate course on qualitative methods—the first author, a professor of communication, was teaching, and the second author, a student in a master's program in strategic communication, was in the course. During the course, the Pulse shooting happened. During class discussion, we stumbled upon the idea of studying what journalists experience as they cover something like the Pulse shooting. While neither of us are journalists, the first author has worked in journalism and has been teaching and studying journalism for more than six years at the time but was never involved in covering tragic events. The second author grew up in India and studied communication in the United States. Our goal is to shed light on the experience of journalists and bring awareness to mental health for journalists covering traumatic events.

Method

This qualitative study follows the tradition of phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). Pauly (1991) argues that the goal of qualitative research is "to become wise in the ways of others" (p. 23). That was our goal in this study—to understand what it was like to be those Central Florida journalists during that historic mass shooting.

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, we contacted TV, radio, and print news organizations in Central Florida through emails to the news directors or directly to the journalists. All participants were working for a Central Florida news organization at the time of the Pulse shooting and all wrote, produced, or contributed photographs for stories about the shooting. Participants were contacted in one of three ways: in some cases, the news director organized the interviews; in some, the request was forwarded throughout the newsroom; in some, we contacted individual journalists directly.

Eighteen journalists agreed to participate. We collected data through in-depth interviews conducted by the principal researcher. Our interview protocol included open-ended questions like a recap of their career as a journalist, description of their role in covering the shooting, ethical dilemmas they faced, how they coped with stress and trauma, the usage of social media, triggers that reminded them of the incident, and newsroom support. See Table 1 for a summary of the participants. Despite the variety of roles for each journalist, the 18 interviews were sufficient to reach "data saturation" (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Our intense focus on one event and its aftermath led to similar themes supported by different stories.

The participants chose the location of each interview. Thirteen were done in newsroom conference rooms, three at restaurants or coffee shops, and two in the researcher's office. Each participant signed an informed consent form and agreed to have their interviews recorded and transcribed. All participants were promised confidentiality. Interviews lasted about an hour, ranging from 36 minutes to an hour and eight minutes. We divided the transcription duties and reviewed each other's transcripts for accuracy.

Each researcher coded all 18 interviews, looking for stories and moments where meaning was created. Our approach was atheoretical and followed the tradition of phenomenology, where we tried to understand the essence of the participants' experiences and

the meaning they derived from those experiences. Examples of codes include "emotional release," "coping mechanism," "keeping adrenaline in check." We searched for surprises, analogies, repetitions, and other meaningful moments (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The researchers independently coded interviews and developed themes in effort to increase internal validity. The researchers met to discuss the possible themes. Themes were whittled and combined from 10 or 15 possible themes to the five overarching themes presented in this study.

No	Media	Position	Years in industry	Time beginning work on June 12
1	TV	Producer	1	3:30 a.m.
2	Print	Reporter	10	3:45 a.m.
3	Print	Photographer	30	9 a.m.
4	Print	Editor	21	3 a.m.
5	Print	Columnist	16	9 a.m.
6	TV	Reporter	8	Noon
7	TV	Photographer	38	3:45 a.m.
8	TV	Anchor/reporter	6	3:15 a.m.
9	Print	Reporter	18	9 a.m.
10	Print	Reporter	30	Next day
11	Radio	Reporter	10	9:30a.m.
12	Radio	Reporter/Producer	3	10 a.m.
13	Radio	News Director	15	7 a.m.
14	Print	Reporter	6	8 a.m.
15	TV	Chief Photographer	14	4:30 a.m.
16	TV	Anchor	19	5 a.m.
17	TV	Reporter/Anchor	23	3:30 a.m.
18	Print	Reporter	21	Next day

Results

The Pulse nightclub massacre was the biggest story most of these journalists had covered. While some were involved in covering the Columbia disaster or were working during the 9/11 attacks, no one had been this close to such an important event. Almost all participants said they were not prepared to cover an event like this. When the police breached the club around 5 a.m., the reporters did not know if the explosion was set off by the shooter or by the police. The situation was chaotic and electric. While each participant experienced the Pulse shooting in different ways, several themes emerged.

Covering a Massacre: "No one is prepared for this"

While reporters are often used to covering tragic events like homicides, car accidents, and fires, the situation at Pulse was unfolding before their eyes. The chaos and uncertainty was like something they had never experienced and for which they could never be prepared. This section provides details about what these reporters saw upon arriving to the scene.

One reporter said a trip that should normally take five minutes took 45. The police presence was overwhelming. The scene itself was unsettled. Early in the morning, police stopped a print reporter as she was trying to make sense of the scene around her. The police, in full SWAT gear with guns drawn, told her to put her hands up. She shouted, "I'm with the media, please!" She said, "I remember I almost peed my pants."

The reporters on scene before the shooter was killed felt like they were in danger. One TV reporter said he felt like he was in the middle of the action:

> I remember the chaos, and I remember thinking that we don't know if this individual is dead yet or in custody. And we don't know whether or not we are in the same danger that the people inside the club were in. And I don't wear a bulletproof vest.

For a while, police and media were reporting the possibility of a second gunman. The Orlando Regional Medical Center, the hospital many victims were taken to, was on lockdown because of an altercation. The unofficial and inaccurate story was that there was a second gunman at the hospital.

The breaching of the club created such a loud sound that reporters thought a bomb went off. One TV reporter was finishing a live, on-air report when the club was breached: "As I am on live TV at 5 a.m., I am finishing up my reporting, it was like 30-40 seconds into talking, and the bomb blew up behind me, which was about… you know 300 meters behind me." That reporter said it was important that he only describe the things he knew—he heard an explosion, he saw bomb-sniffing dogs—but he had to be careful not to speculate.

The chaos carried over much of the coverage. One print editor was so new to her position that she didn't have login access to the website. One public radio station was playing NPR's Prairie Home Companion during the worst shooting on American soil.

The severity of the situation slowly sunk in on the reporters as the tragedy unfolded. A club shooting, many said, is sadly not really news. One TV producer said, "We deal with shootings on the weekend—people get drunk and shoot each other in Orlando. It's just what happens." One TV photographer who got called out on what should have been his last day of vacation told his wife that night, "I got to go to shooting and there better be a lot of dead mother fuckers." Knowing what he now knows, he said, "I regretted saying that so bad."

Even the reporters who were on scene when the situation was still an active shooter and who saw the massive police presence were shocked when Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer said, "It is with great sadness that I share we have not 20 but 50 casualties." Several participants commented on the audible gasp the pool of journalists let out. One TV reporter at the press conference was surprised at the reaction: "You heard a gasp come from veteran news gatherers, people who've done this forever… just let out a gasp because you really could not believe that something like that could happen."

Rookies and veterans, photographers and writers, reporters and editors were all caught off guard. The stress of the job of daily journalism didn't prepare them. Their journalism degrees or coaching from editors didn't get them ready. But when the story broke, their instincts kicked in to help them navigate the chaos.

Verifying Information: "You could tell who had been in it and who hadn't"

Journalists pride themselves on verifying facts before publishing or airing them. In 2011 National Public Radio infamously reported the Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was killed in a shooting (Shepard, 2011). It turned out, of course, that she survived her injuries. No news organization or reporter wants to publish incorrect information. The following section describes journalists' struggles with verifying information.

A situation like the Pulse shooting is a strong reminder of how reliant journalists are on government officials for information. Casualties, injuries, and details about the shooter all came from government sources. Verifying information that wasn't from an official source was difficult. One print reporter said she didn't believe the first people she interviewed based on her experience of witnesses exaggerating. She said, "You're questioning it a little bit, but police weren't saying anything to us." Several reporters said you have to verify sources on a gut-level in a situation like this—do these sources seem credible? One TV reporter said seeing blood on clothing was enough verification for him: Since some people hadn't been able to change clothes, he could see the blood on their clothes. "I wouldn't say [verification] was a need," he said. "But you could tell who had been in [the night club] and who hadn't."

A print reporter said he verified more after the stories had been published. Once the names of the victims were released, he used social media to check and see that the source was in fact friends with the victim.

Journalism is a discipline of verification, according to the American Press Institute (n.d.). This means that journalists must exercise caution, patience, and diligence with their facts. But during a breaking news story like the Pulse shooting, journalists weren't always able to exercise that discipline. Some played it safe, reporting only what official sources told them. Others went with their "gut," making judgment calls on the spot. Not only are these journalist hearing, seeing, and reporting terrible facts, they must also wrestle with how or whether to verify those facts.

Being a Vulture: "We are all a bunch of vultures"

Journalists covering someone else's tragedy often get labeled as vultures, willing to prey on victims at their lowest moment. We asked every participant a question about being a vulture, but many brought up the idea before the question. They are aware of the image and for the most part want to combat it. Interestingly, they often pointed fingers—print and radio journalists said the TV reporters are the worst, local TV reporters said the national media does most of that. No doubt, the camera and microphone appear more intrusive and aggressive than a notepad and a digital recorder.

Often, the reporters justified their "vulture" actions in one of two ways—we have to do our jobs or we're here to tell a story. The emphasis on doing a job shifts responsibility from the individual reporter higher up the chain of command. A TV photographer said TV reporters deal with being called vultures regularly, but they can't let that stop them from doing their work:

> It's our job. It's our responsibility—it's our duty—to make sure we can tell you what happened as truthfully and as accurately as we can... But in short, we get, us outdoor cats, we get [accused of behaving like a vulture] a lot.

Many journalists in this study argued that their focus was on telling someone's story. The idea of the story becomes the ultimate goal—an intrinsic good in and of itself. One said, "You balance [not being a vulture] with 'I need to get this story.'"

One print reporter said she recognized that her emphasis on getting and telling the story needed to be sincere. As she sent message after message to Facebook friends of a victim, she realized that she wasn't the only one sending this message and that her claim that she wanted to tell his story didn't ring true:

> I was sending them all messages, you know, private messages. "Hi, I'm a reporter. I apologize for reaching out to you in this way. I just I really want to be able to tell his story and let people know that he's more than just a victim." And then I'm looking, and I'm seeing other reporters using the same lie, almost word-for-word. I'm like, oh my god, this is just embarrassing. We are all a bunch of vultures. We are just all a bunch of vultures trying to get the story.

A print editor responded to the idea of being a vulture in a powerful way—in a way that the rest of the journalists probably feel, even if they didn't respond this way. Her newspaper did investigative reporting to figure out if the police could have done anything differently. She said that her responsibility isn't to her boss—that she just has to follow orders. She said her responsibility isn't just to the story—as if that story itself is intrinsically valuable. She said her work serves a purpose—"And if another [law enforcement] agency can learn something about what happened, maybe it won't happen again." She's not questioning the integrity of the police, but the public needs to know what happened:

> The officers in charge were keeping their guys safe or trying to keep the people safe. I don't ever question that. But what we do want to do is make sure if other decisions could have been made to prevent further loss of life this time, maybe they could do that next time.

For this editor, being a vulture and telling the entire story is about generating awareness around the issue represented in the story. There is a greater good to be served.

Sanitized Coverage: "We need to see it—a little more horror"

No doubt, this shooting was horrific. The stories these reporters were told and then published were harrowing and horrifying. One print reporter said a source told her the initial gunfire lasted about the length of an entire song. Several journalists relayed the story of the cellphones lighting up—the police were inside the club, bodies strewn, power off, and the only lights were the missed calls and unread text messages. The journalists, outside the club, saw and talked to the people sending those texts and making those calls, hoping beyond hope to connect to their loved one. The story was awful. The coverage, however, was clean. This section describes journalists' differing views on covering violence.

Throughout the breaking news, viewers and readers saw very little blood. For many of the journalists we interviewed, that was on purpose. One TV photographer said he will not capture a dead body on tape—it's company policy and his personal policy. When the body comes out, he said, "the camera's pointed at the ground. Take your hat off."

A TV reporter and a TV anchor said they thought about their own children as they were relaying details. The anchor would tell viewers, "You might want to tell your kids to leave the room right now." The reporter said he knows children watch TV without parental supervision. His concern is the impact that his story might have on those children: "Giving out numbers is a lot different than giving out details."

But not everyone agreed. One print reporter said the coverage was too sanitized, that by not showing the horror journalists are not prompting the change that might need to come:

> Because we need to see it. We need to see it—a little more horror. We need to see and recognize that there were beasts among us, honestly. We need to see the lion do what he does to the antelope, so that we can understand that nature is amazing, you know…and it's also tragic.

How much should the viewers see and know about a mass shooting? How do we balance that with the right to privacy or the protection of a grieving family? None of these journalists wants to tell readers how they should feel; however, they do see themselves as arbiters of the facts. Whether by withholding details or distributing them, these journalists are thoughtful about and take ownership of those decisions.

Mental Health and the News Industry: "But they were really helping me"

The journalism industry has a cliché of a whisky-drinking, grizzled reporter who has seen it all and is never fazed by it. Those characters can be found in newsrooms all across the country. One TV reporter said traumatic events shouldn't bother good journalists. "If you are a strong person going in," he said, "you'll be a strong person coming out." He continued, "But you just have to separate yourself from any stories that you're telling." Several participants in this study, however, said they thought their employers could have provided mental health resources better and stronger. One said she hoped to see college journalism programs teach more coping skills. This section explores the potential mental health effects of covering a mass shooting and how the reporters think about that.

At a radio station, it wasn't until they hosted a program talking about PTSD and Pulse survivors that the news director realized maybe some members of her staff are going through that. Because the news director was dealing with her own emotional issues related to Pulse, she took longer than she'd like to recognize the need:

> I look at all the symptoms of PTSD. I look at the newsroom, and I immediately walked to HR, and I went, "[That PTSD specialist] needs to come now. We have all the symptoms here." And I felt bad that it took me so long.

Several participants talked about how their coverage of Pulse affected them weeks and months after the story ended. One TV anchor would find herself driving for two or three hours. She simply couldn't get herself to go home. She would blank out while on the phone or at home. She couldn't escape Pulse because people recognized her and wanted to talk to her. She became emotional retelling this story:

> I would just sit, and I just let them talk. And they would just talk, talk, and talk and cry. We would embrace and that helped me a lot. Because that let me know that I wasn't alone. It let me know that I wasn't alone [crying] and so, [silence] you know… they thought I was helping them, but they were really helping me.

One print editor was open in the newsroom about her use of therapy. She said another reporter "pulled me aside and said, 'Are you really doing that?' I said, 'Yeah.' And so I think that gave her permission to go do that."

One TV producer said she was standing on a street downtown with a friend when an ambulance drove past. She said, "God, that is so loud! Gee, why are they so loud?" Her friend responded, "The ambulance wasn't turned on, it just drove past, the lights weren't on, there was no noise." The reporter said in the interview: "Somehow my brain connected the noise to

what I heard all night long and all morning long and all day long. It just brought me back there. I don't know why."

Several participants admitted that they probably should consider finding a mental health professional to work through these emotions. A few even seemed to be in denial. The producer who heard the ambulance noise when the sirens were not on said: "I haven't ever thought about seeing a counselor. I've never had any mental health issues, and I didn't want this to be the start of it, even though it was so traumatic. It's like a I'm-going-to-be-strong type of thing."

Some reporters said they cope with this type of tragedy by simply compartmentalizing. A few said they drank more alcohol during this time and one started smoking again. Some tried to focus on things they found uplifting, like the city's support of the gay community or the opportunity to tell positive stories. Two of the newsrooms brought in golden retriever puppies to release stress—and these were a big hit. One reporter said, "That was like the only time that people had taken a stop, like stop and smile and enjoyed themselves for a minute."

But for others, the support provided by the news organization was too little, too late. Either there was no debriefing or opportunity to discuss the resources the organization provided, or the gestures felt disingenuous or an afterthought. The stress that this put on them professionally was often increased by concerns at home—one newly married couple struggled, a father with a two-month old child wasn't helpful, dinner plans with boyfriends or girlfriends were cancelled. Many of the journalists in this study said they cried or broke down once they were "off duty." They all seemed to recognize that you need to have empathy and even emote at times, but to do this job well, you must keep your emotions in check.

While these journalists may not have the ability to assess their own mental health, it became clear during the interviews that not all of them had completely dealt with what they saw and heard that day. Colleagues play an important role in checking in, but editors, supervisors, and newsroom management clearly have a responsibility to care for their employees and have significant power to increase mental health care for journalists.

Conclusion

Communication scholar James W. Carey (1989) described a ritual model of communication: "Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 23). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that the mass media does not work like a mirror, providing a true reflection. Rather, the content of the mass media is influenced in several ways on several levels, as described in their theories of Influence on Mass Media Content. In short, mass media content is influenced at the individual level, routine level, organization level, extramedia level, and ideological level.

Like Dahmen et al. (2017) found in their survey of reporters, the participants in this study demonstrated those influences. What happened that day and what was in the newspaper are not the same thing. The reporters elevate a person's *story*, but that's not the same thing as the person's *experience*. Participants showed the impact of the individual level on how news is made. The reporter who turned the camera off when a victim's family member broke down or the photographer who refused to capture footage of dead bodies influenced how the story was told. Reporters with children thought of their kids as they created this content.

The reporters who went to work as soon as they heard about the shooting or the ones who approached the Pulse massacre like they were covering a city council meeting or football game show the routine-level influence on their coverage.

The TV crew that earned an Emmy for their breaking news coverage that day because they were "banging on all eight cylinders that morning," the reporters who scrambled to report a story outside of their beat, and the radio team that struggled as they covered a major breaking news story for the first time show the organizational-level influences.

The TV anchor who is trying to balance her need to keep telling this story with the public's wishes to move on or the newsrooms that are smaller and less capable because of the economic realities of the industry show the extramedia-level of influence.

The ideological-level of influence showed up in the reporter who decided he's not going to make jokes about sexual orientation, in the ones who recognized that this wasn't random, but was an attack on a particular group of people, and the ones who wanted to call this "radical Islamic terrorism" before the authorities did or before their editors would let them.

The job of journalist is stressful—not only because journalists are near the front of the action of these dramatic events, but also because it is their job to "produce" and "maintain" reality (Carey, 1989, p. 23) and they are supposed to do that objectively. These reporters each made individual decisions that shaped our understanding of an event like Pulse. And for those of us who weren't there, the reporters' representations provide the *only* way we can understand that event.

That stress takes a toll. The newsroom culture, at least as described by these participants, is slowly shifting to value and care for the mental health of journalists—too slowly, according to some participants. This paper sheds light on how journalists handle situations like the Pulse shooting and the need to monitor the mental health of those who were on the frontlines covering it.

Implications

This research points to several steps the journalism industry and journalism educators should take. First, newsroom leaders can be more open about the mental health dangers associated with the job. By talking about it more, the stigma of seeking help might fade. Second, desk editors and mid-level managers can play a role in monitoring the mental health of the reporters—they know the employees better as closer managers and have closer knowledge of the type of reporting the employee has done. Third, journalism educators should talk more about the mental health challenges in the field of journalism. By bringing in journalists who have covered these kinds of events or by partnering with psychology programs, educators might give students appropriate expectations and coping skills that would benefit them later.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study contributes to our understanding of reporters' experiences with covering traumatic events, it has some limitations. First, the broad approach to gathering participants weakened the strength of the conclusions. Instead of having journalists from print, television, and radio and editors, reporters, producers, and photographers, a study focusing on only print reporters or television photographers, for example, might have produced stronger results. Also, allowing participants to review the results and contribute to the analysis might have strengthened the study and enriched the findings.

Future research on this area might include other types of traumatic events, like natural disasters or terrorist attacks. Also researchers could explore the differences in how covering these events affects different types of journalists—print, radio, photographers and editors, for example. Scholars may also look for examples of news organizations that are providing more mental health support. What outcomes on things like performance and job satisfaction does an increased awareness of mental health provide?

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Author Note

Theodore G. Petersen is an associate professor of communication at the Florida Institute of Technology. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: tpetersen@fit.edu.

Shyla Soundararajan earned her Master of Science degree in Global Strategic Communication from the Florida Institute of Technology.

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